

The Sermon in the Column

Frame and Bias in Beatrice de Graaf's NRC Writing, 2025–2026

J. Konstapel, Leiden, 23 September 2026

1. What is there

Beatrice de Graaf is a serious historian. She won the Arenberg Prize for Fighting Terror after Napoleon. She published in *Past & Present* this year. Her work on terrorism has a humane core: she treats perpetrators as people with beliefs, not as monsters. With TerInfo she built teaching material that helps teachers discuss attacks in class. She is not a security hawk by reflex. In 2025 she warned in *Trouw* that calling antifascism terrorism creates a theatre of fear.

So the question here is not whether she is competent. She is. The question is what frame her NRC column carries into a secular, liberal newspaper. And whether readers can see that frame.

2. The corpus

Her Utrecht publication list gives 31 NRC pieces between January 2025 and September 2026. Twenty are solo columns. Nine are co-written with Rik Peels. Two are co-written with Stefan Paas. That makes 11 of 31, or 35 percent, co-authored with partners from the Christian academic world.

Peels is a Vrije Universiteit philosopher who works on extreme beliefs. De Graaf wrote a chapter in his edited Oxford volume on that subject in 2025. Paas is professor of missiology and public theology at the VU and at the Theological University Utrecht, and was chosen Theologian of the Fatherland in 2018. Missiology is the study of how the faith is spread. That is a legitimate discipline. It is also a clear orientation.

3. Finding one: the “classical” virtues are seven

The Peels series ran from October 2025 to March 2026. It argued that politics needs a framework, and that the framework is the virtues. A summary by Adapt! describes the series as arguing that public debate could benefit from a return of the classical virtues.

The titles tell another story. There are columns on temperance, courage, justice and prudence. Those are the four classical virtues of Plato and the Stoics. But there are also columns on hope and on love. Those are theological virtues. They

come from Paul, and were fixed into a scheme of seven by Ambrose and Aquinas. The series became a book by De Graaf and Peels titled *De zeven deugden*.

Seven is not classical. Seven is Christian. Three of the seven have no place in Greek ethics. Faith, hope and love are gifts of grace in the Thomist scheme, not acquired habits.

This is the clearest bias in the corpus. A confessional moral order is presented under a neutral label. The NRC reader receives Aquinas and is told it is Aristotle. The March 2026 column even makes the claim explicit in its title: politics needs a framework, and that framework is the virtues. Which virtues, and from which tradition, is left unnamed.

4. Finding two: the column as sermon

Several titles share one rhetorical form. “We are more corrupt than we think.” “Not as democratic as we ourselves think.” “Spiritual resilience.” “Courageous science.” “Hope is the hardest virtue.”

The form has three steps. First a hidden moral fault in a collective “we.” Then a call to conversion. Then hope. That is the structure of a Reformed sermon: sin, repentance, grace.

The new book shows the same form. Paas says its epilogue contains the sentence that we are more Christian than we think. Compare the February 2026 column: we are more corrupt than we think. Same grammar, same “we,” same revelation of a hidden state.

De Graaf names the anthropology behind it herself. In the *Reformatisch Dagblad* she said that Christianity carries a very deep notion of human brokenness, and that the idea that every person is driven by power and self-love is thoroughly Christian. That is Augustine and Calvin, and she says so openly in a Christian paper. In NRC the same anthropology appears as plain historical wisdom.

This matters for the reader. The NRC “we” includes humanists, Muslims, Remonstrants, and people who hold that humans are not broken. They are addressed as a congregation they never joined.

5. Finding three: two audiences, one voice

Her venues split in two. On one side: NRC, Volkskrant, Trouw, Historisch Nieuwsblad, De Groene. On the other: Nederlands Dagblad, Reformatorisch Dagblad, Wapenveld, the EO podcast, Christen Democratische Verkenningen, Philosophia Reformata, Radix. She also wrote twice for the Wetenschappelijk Instituut of the ChristenUnie, in 2018 and 2025.

Nothing is wrong with writing for both. The point is transparency. In the Christian press the religious grounding is explicit. In NRC it is implicit. The reader of one channel does not see the other.

Her Utrecht register of ancillary activities lists eight positions. These include advisory roles at the AIV, the KNAW and NWO, and the chair of the Radicalisation Awareness Network Academic Board. The EO podcast is not on that list. The rules may not require it if it is unpaid. But an NRC reader cannot know that the columnist co-hosts a public broadcaster's Christian history series. That series has just become a book whose thesis runs through the columns.

6. Finding four: crisis as lens and as grant

A second frame is crisis. Titles speak of crisis, resilience, danger and war. In 2026 she co-signed a Trouw piece with the Adapt! team: everything is called a crisis nowadays, so try to study that.

Adapt! is her consortium. It received a Gravitation grant of 23 million euros from NWO to research the capacities societies need to deal with crises. She is its principal applicant and scientific director.

This is not a hidden interest. Adapt! is part of her university job and is publicly announced. But it shapes the lens. A researcher funded to study crises sees crises. A column that keeps the public in a crisis frame also keeps the research agenda relevant. The frame and the funding reinforce each other. No one needs to intend this for it to work.

The same holds for security. She co-wrote in the Volkskrant that Europe must dare to name its enemies. Early in her career she co-wrote a chapter titled “Framing the Exception: Securitization in the Netherlands.” She knows better than most how naming a threat moves an issue out of normal politics. In her geopolitical columns she practises what she once analysed.

7. Finding five: what is absent

Bias also shows in what does not appear. The titles and summaries available do not foreground the Dutch tolerant lineage. Arminius, Episcopius, Grotius and

Spinoza argued for freedom of conscience against Dordrecht. Grotius built international law on reason, “even if God did not exist.” That lineage is at least as Dutch as Calvin's. And it is closer to her own field of international relations.

The book's thesis has the same gap. It asks why we find equality self-evident, and answers that two thousand years of Christianity shaped our ideas about power, sex, money, nature, equality and war. That is Tom Holland's *Dominion* thesis. It is defensible. But it is one reading. Jonathan Israel reads the same values as a victory of the Radical Enlightenment over the churches. An NRC reader gets only the first reading.

8. The human layer

Who is affected? First the NRC reader who wants a historian and receives a moral programme without its label. Second the citizens outside the Christian “we”: the secular majority, Dutch Muslims, the heirs of the Remonstrants. They hear that their values are borrowed Christian capital. Third the politicians she addresses. They are told that good politics works from love and hope. That is a pastoral demand. It moves politics from interests and procedures toward the state of the soul.

And there is De Graaf herself. She is a Distinguished Professor, the voice of a 23-million-euro consortium, an AIV member and a columnist. Each role lends authority to the others. That concentration is new in Dutch public life. It asks for more transparency than a single role would.

9. Conclusion

The bias is not in her facts. It is in the frame. Four elements recur: a confessional virtue scheme labelled classical; a sermon form addressed to a universal “we”; a crisis and security lens aligned with her research funding; and a single genealogy of Dutch values. Together they place a Reformed moral anthropology at the centre of a secular newspaper, without a label.

Two simple steps would help. A disclosure line under the column naming her co-authors' orientation and the EO series. And, from NRC, room for the other lineage: Grotius next to Calvin, Israel next to Holland.

Annotated references

Universiteit Utrecht (2026). Publications – Prof. dr. Beatrice de Graaf. uu.nl/staff/BAdeGraaf/Publications

Why read? The primary data for this essay. It lists every NRC column with date and co-author, plus the Christian venues next to the secular ones.

Reading advice: Sort the 2025–2026 “popularising publications” by co-author and by venue. The pattern appears without further analysis.

Universiteit Utrecht (2026). Ancillary activities – Prof. dr. Beatrice de Graaf. uu.nl/staff/BAdeGraaf/AncillaryActivities

Why read? Shows what is formally disclosed. Compare it with the EO podcast and the Christian-press output on the publications page.

De Graaf, B. & Peels, R. (2026). *De zeven deugden: Samenleven in tijden van polarisatie, radicalisering en oorlogsdreiging*. Prometheus.

Why read? The book version of the NRC series. Check which virtues are called classical and which are theological.

Reading advice: Read the chapters on hope and love first; that is where the theological grounding is visible.

De Graaf, B., Paas, S. & Boogerd, D. (2026). *De ongelooflijke geschiedenis: Hoe het christendom onze cultuur vormde*. Prometheus.

Why read? The thesis behind the columns in full: Western values as Christian heritage.

Reading advice: Start with the epilogue, then read the equality chapter next to Israel (below).

Reformatorisch Dagblad (2026). “Beatrice de Graaf, Stefan Paas en David Boogerd schrijven over de zuurdesem in de westerse geschiedenis.” rd.nl

Why read? Here De Graaf states her anthropology of human brokenness in her own words. It is the key to the sermon structure of the columns.

Nederlands Dagblad (2026). “Nieuw boek over ‘de ongelooflijke geschiedenis’: waarom christenen zich niet hoeven te schamen.” nd.nl

Why read? Shows how the Christian press receives the book: as vindication. Useful to see which audience the thesis serves.

Universiteit Utrecht (2024). “Gravitation grant for multidisciplinary team to investigate adaptability of societies in crises.” uu.nl

Why read? Documents the scale and purpose of Adapt!, the funding behind the crisis lens.

De Graaf, B. & Frissen, R. (2012). “Framing the Exception: Securitization in the Netherlands.” In G. Molier & A. Ellian (eds.), *The State of Exception and Militant Democracy in a Time of Terror*. Republic of Letters.

Why read? De Graaf's own analysis of how naming threats moves issues out of normal politics. The best tool to read her geopolitical columns with.

Buzan, B., Wæver, O. & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner.

Why read? The founding text of securitisation theory, the Copenhagen School.

Reading advice: Chapter 2 is enough to recognise the speech act of “naming the enemy.”

Holland, T. (2019). *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*. Little, Brown.

Why read? The international source of the “we are more Christian than we think” thesis. Reads well and makes the strongest case for it.

Israel, J. (2001). *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750*. Oxford University Press.

Why read? The main counter-reading. Equality and tolerance as the work of Spinoza and his circle, against the churches.

Reading advice: The chapters on the Dutch Republic, then compare with Holland on the same values.

Israel, J. (1995). *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477–1806*. Oxford University Press.

Why read? Sets Dordrecht 1619 against the Arminian and Grotian lineage. Shows that Dutch tolerance has more than one root.

MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After Virtue*. University of Notre Dame Press.

Why read? The source of the modern virtue revival. MacIntyre is open about ending with Aquinas and St Benedict. That openness is what the NRC series lacks.

Taylor, C. (2007). *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press.

Why read? The most careful account of how Christian and secular frames coexist today. It helps to read the columns without either defending or dismissing faith.

Reading advice: The introduction and chapter 15, “The Immanent Frame.”

Furedi, F. (1997). *Culture of Fear*. Cassell.

Why read? An early analysis of how a permanent crisis frame shapes public life and expert authority. Useful next to the Adapt! agenda.

Konstapel, J. (2026). “The Long Reformation” / “Waarom de Deugden van De Graaf en Peels 400 Jaar Oud Zijn.” *constable.blog*, 30 May 2026.

Why read? The earlier piece that traces the virtue series back through Kuyper to Dordrecht. This essay adds the corpus data and the crisis-funding frame.