Reformed Antisocinianism in Northern Germany: Ludwig Crocius’
Antisocinismus Contractus of 1639

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Socinianism: “sulcken schrikkelsjcken ende grouwelicken qua-
edt” [this terrible and dreadful evil]

No single movement has been as controversial in seventeenth-century
Europe as Socinianism, named after the Italians Lelio (1525-62) and Fausto
Sozzini (1539-1604). In the eyes of established Christendom this radical-
liberal strand of Protestantism was an unprecedented theological and socio-
political menace. This was not only the case in Poland, where until their
expulsion in 1658 the Socinians had their spiritual and administrative
center in Raków, but also, and especially, in those countries where
Socinianism was favorably received: in Germany, in the Dutch Republic,
and in England.

Socinians (they called themselves “Brothers” or “Christians”, and after
1650 “Unitarians” or “Polish brethren”) were strongly rationalistic. Faith
should be consistent with reason; believing was a matter of assensus
(consent) rather than fiducia (trust); although the Holy Scriptures
contained truths that were supra rationem (beyond reason), these were not
contra rationem (contrary to reason). Dogmas of which the biblical
foundation was considered doubtful were rejected, i.e. those of the Trinity,
the divinity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, original sin, unfree will,
expiation, infant baptism, God’s foreknowledge (praescientia) and
predestination (praedestinatio), a life in Hell after death, and the
resurrection of the dead; capital punishment and military service were not
accepted. Nevertheless, Socinianism was more than a protest movement: its
members aimed for a serious, rational and ethical daily practice of their
faith. On the basis of an optimistic anthropology it was considered possible
to observe Christ’s commandments and in this way, taking Him as an
example, to attain salvation.

Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans and Catholics all contributed in equal
measure to the mythologization of Socinianism as an ideological pest
undermining Christendom and public morality. In this “beast with seven
heads from Revelation” people saw a return of the old heresy of Arianism,
Photinianism and “servetianism”; “atheists” they were, “Turks” who called the dogma of the Trinity a three-headed monster and a fabrication from the Devil. There was also a public side to this: as long as confession of the Trinity was seen as one of the foundations of society in the corpus christianum (as in the Middle Ages: “one society, one religion”), the authorities were considered bound, sometimes with an explicit appeal to the old imperial laws against heresy, to suppress any form of antitrinitarianism. In this view, Socinians were not only guilty (theologically) of blasphemy, but also (socially) of a breach of the peace. Suffice it here to remind the reader of the pyres on which in 1553 in Geneva the antitrinitarian Michael Servet, and Socinian books in Leiden, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Leeuwarden in the following century, were publicly burned. There is also the well-known tragedy of the German theologian Conradus Vorstius (1569-1622), who had been appointed to the post vacated by Arminius in Leiden (1610-12); Vorstius, accused of Socinianism, was exiled by the States-General under pressure of none other than the English King James.

The seriousness of the Socinian threat was linked to the success of antitrinitarian propaganda. Socinian book production, for instance, blossomed, especially in the Dutch Republic; so many Polish Socinians took refuge from persecution there that “all of Raków seemed to have swum to Amsterdam.” In the internationally oriented and tolerant Amsterdam (called “Vrijburg” [Freetown] or “Eleutheropolis” by Socinians) the famous Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum was even published from 1665, a series of folios including Fausto Sozzini’s Opera omnia and writings of such heavyweights as Johann Crell, Johann Schlichting, Samuel Przypkovius and Johann Ludwig Wolzogen. In the seventeenth century more than 300 Socinian works were published in the Republic alone. Among the readers were many radical Mennonites and Remonstrants.

From the beginning, Socinianism also found fruitful soil in Germany. The Raków Catechism (1605), originally written in Polish, first appeared in a German translation (after only three years) and only later in Latin (1609). Prominent Socinians were the Germans Valentin Schmalz (1572-1622), Christoph Osterodt (†1611), Johann Völkel (†1618), Johann Crell (1590-1633), and Stegman, Sr. and Jr. Of the universities, it was especially the Academy in Altdorf (under Ernst Soner, 1572-1612) that proved to be a hotbed of crypto-Socinians (1605-16); other German centers were Danzig and Elbing. To date, little research has been carried out into Socinian propaganda in Germany, unlike that which occurred in the Republic, which was its neighbor and with which it shared a more or less similar intellectual history.
Antisocinianism: the Example of Bremen

Far more is known about anti-Socinianism: the seventeenth century reverberated with it. Between 1600 and 1800 more than 700 antisocinian works appeared in Germany, originating mostly in the Lutheran camp. In the Dutch Republic more than 400 saw the light, mainly written by Calvinist authors, but also by Remonstrants. The latter (among whom, for instance, Hugo Grotius) were keen to draw attention to their retention of the Trinitarian doctrine as proof of their own orthodoxy. What was advocated by this great bulk of antisociniana?

I shall not provide a survey of their contents, especially because these writings are not only rather unspectacular but also rather unoriginal – they are, in fact, utterly predictable. The authors simply defended what the Socinians attacked; Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans all upheld the jointly professed early Christian dogma, of course retaining all the nuances implied in this multi-confessionalism. Nihil novi attuli was one of the prefatory remarks in De Iesu Christo servatore (1611) by one of the first Dutch polemicists, the Franeker professor Lubbertus, directed against Socinus’ book with the same title (1578), “I do not bring anything new.” In his dissertation on Lubbertus (1963), C. van der Woude dismissed the work in a few lines, saying: “We need not say more about his book, which conforms to the Holy Scriptures and the Reformational confessions.” Similarly, W. J. Kühler, pioneer of Socinus research, drew the conclusion in his general survey of 1912: “It is unnecessary to go into the polemics themselves; they teach us nothing new” (except, of course, that in these polemical writings the Socinian publication under attack was sometimes quoted in its entirety) which made them available to a wider audience and unintentionally served as propaganda. A more interesting question is: where did this considerable antisocinian concern come from – why did the orthodoxy “constantly put their best efforts toward the cause of this controversy”?

To find an answer to this question, and to acquire a more detailed picture of Protestant antisocinianism, we will select one example to analyze more closely: a totally unknown debate from the equally virgin research territory of German-Reformed antisocinianism. One of the leading German-Reformed centers was the Bremen Academy, where the famous Ludwig Crocius (1586-1653) worked as a dogmatician. Crocius was a mild and tolerant theologian, and a friend of the irenic Georg Calixtus in Helmstedt. As a deputy to the National Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-19, his admiration of Arminius, and his reservations about the supralapsarian doctrine of predestination, had temporarily provoked the displeasure of the Counter-Remonstrants. Exactly one century after the birth of Fausto Sozzini (1539) Crocius published his Antisocinismus Contractus [Antisocinianism in brief], consisting of 330 questions and answers distributed over 28 disputations – 500 pages in all. What moved him and other polemicists?
Before their expulsion from Poland in 1658, Socinians in Germany kept a low profile. Crocius also remarked,

that by the grace of God in our German churches we do not have any intercourse at all with the Socinians, so that until now there has been no necessity for the Christian republic to get acquainted with their teachings or to transmit and distribute these to others, either in the presence of the people or by refutation. Rather, Socinian writings should be avoided, “as they are full of manifestly blasphemous teachings, and with diabolical strophes and sophistry might easily confound those less experienced.”

Why then this “polemic theology”, as he himself called it?

An obvious reason, which however is only rarely mentioned in the literature, might be that compared to Catholicism and Lutheranism, Socinianism offered the best opportunity to train students in the currently popular polemic disputes. Crocius, too, judging from his enumerations of points of difference and the repeated “Socinus, Smalcius, Osterodt, etc. here answer negatively, we answer affirmatively”, wanted to provide a textbook for his students rather than engage in a controversy.

An additional reason might be that among the students (also those Eastern European students that had swarmed out over Western Europe, including Bremen) there was often a secret interest in Unitarianism. In Franeker, for instance, former students of Vorstius’ from Steinfurt even anonymously published a short tract by Socinus, resulting in national tumult.

A third reason: even though there might not have been any Socinians in the vicinity, the Socinian elevation of ratio over revelatio actually meant a real (and therefore attractive?) innovation... and menace.

Finally, in the prevalent confessionalist climate some theologians might have felt the need to deliver a public statement of orthodoxy by prominently drawing attention to the differences separating them from Socinianism. This was especially relevant in the Calvinist Dutch Republic: subscribing to, for instance, a historicising doctrine of election was soon associated with the loathed Remonstrantism, infected as it was with Socinianism. This might also have applied to Crocius; in any case, a year earlier some of his Bremen colleagues who sympathised with Dordrecht had asked the Utrecht faculty for a pronouncement on allegedly Socinian statements made by Crocius.

This brings us to another question: was not a certain affinity to be expected? Both branches, Socinianism as well as orthodox Protestantism, had sprouted from the one trunk of the Protestant Reformation. Both tested their theology against the text of the Bible. Socinians were sound philologists; Socinus (a renowned Hebraist) used a purely philological argumentation as his theological method. Lutheran and certainly Reformed exegetes had the same excellent linguistic instinct, thanks to their often Humanist education. The Socinian shift of emphasis from “doctrine” to “life” is also found in some Reformed theologians (including
Crocius) and Lutherans, such as Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705), the father of Lutheran pietism. Did this result in a more nuanced judgment on the Socinians among the milder Protestants? Was Crocius more moderate than such markedly Calvinist antisocinians as Lubbertus in Franeker, Polyander in Leiden and Maresius in Groningen? Was he more tolerant than the orthodox Wittenberg theologian Abraham Calov (1612-86), who accused fellow-Lutherans, such as for instance Crocius’ friend Calixtus, of Socinianism? Was he more nuanced than Hoornbeek in Leiden, who considered his antisocinian colleague Heidanus a Socinian, in the same way as Voetius placed Coccejus in the Socinian dock? Did Crocius deploy his arguments in the same way as Johann Amos Comenius? This Reformed theologian and pedagogue (1592-1670) had connections with the Socinian movement and acknowledged the appeal of Socinian views. He did reject them eventually, in no uncertain terms, but at the end of his life, when challenged to do this by his adversary Daniel Zwicker. Incidentally, on that occasion Comenius also reckoned Luther and Calvin among the despots [...] The answers to these questions will be provided in the next and last paragraph.

Antisocinianism: Some General Observations

On the basis of Crocius’ Antisocinismus the following five observations may be made on Protestant antisocinianism.

Socinianism as Renewal of an Old Heresy

Established Protestantism saw Socinians as renewers of heresies from the time of the Early Church. To Crocius, they occupied the third position on the gliding scale from “true Christian”, “brother in Christ”, “heretic” to “total unbeliever”: they were heretics, “because they consort clearly with sect leaders, both old and new”: with Gnosimachi, Noetians, Aetians; with Arius, Manetus, Ebion, Cerinthus, Paul of Samosata; with Pelagians, Manicheans, Donatists, Papists and Anabaptists. Socinianism meant a retrograde step, turning back the clock on the Reformation, a relapse of many centuries.

Disputed points

Crocius’ main objection, which again revealed him to be a typical (Protestant) antisocinianist, was to the Socinian denial of Christ’s preexistence and of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The first jeopardised reconciliation by expiation, the second the theonomous character of salvation and Biblical anthropology. This already becomes clear from Crocius’ opening definition:
What is Socinianism? A pernicious heresy, an amalgam of many monstrous heretic aberrations, whose sum total amounts to denying the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and the satisfaction for our sins, and leads to a misguided pursuit of eternal life on the basis of one’s own obedience. Nevertheless, Crocius then addressed all dogmatic loci, a method also representative of the orthodoxy. On all points of ecclesiastical doctrinethe heretics were weighed and found wanting. Not until Spener (1706) do we find a concentration on the divinity of Christ as the “Haupt- und Grundartikel” of the Christian faith, “an dem unser Heil liegt und auf ihm der Bau des ganzen Christentums beruht”; in Spener, something becomes visible of the Christocentric orientation that via Zinzendorf and Schleiermacher was to exert its influence until the twentieth century.

Scholasticism, Proof Texts, and Exegesis

Crocius’ method of argumentation (also characteristic of the orthodoxy) was a mixture of (analytical) scholasticism, combined with the use of loca probantia (proof texts), and exegesis. The Bremen scholar himself characterised his method as an analytical use of Bible testimonies, in which he sometimes tried to beat the Socinians with their own philological weapons. He for instance pointed to their suggestive placement of the comma in the Word from the Cross in Luke 23:43 (“Verily, I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise”):

Nothing is more common in their writings than the distortion and depravation of the Holy Scriptures. One example from many: in Luke 23:43 they corrupt the punctuation, connecting today to the preceding verb I say, so that the sentence then becomes: “Today I say to you, you will be with Me in Paradise, that is, when I shall have returned to judge”.

Of course antisocinians could not avoid appealing to the orthodoxa antiquitas, to confessions, decrees, and writings on Trinitarian theology and on Christology by Early Church councils and theologians. Being a true Calvinist, Crocius maintained at the same time both the perspicuitas and sufficientia or perfectio of the Scriptures, together with the right of tradition, i.e. the validity of what may with legitimate consistency be deduced from the Bible. To him, these deductions implied the entire Christian tradition, within which he just as easily looked for support among the Church Fathers as among medieval theologians such as Peter Lombard, William of Ockham, Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, Gabriel Biel, Albertus Magnus, and contemporary theologians – Catholic, Lutheran and especially Reformed.
Dogmatic Purity in Academic Context

Like most antisocinian polemicists Crocius knew the incriminated writings in detail, and showed scholarly objectivity in quotations and references. In an exemplary manner (and with some recognition?) he stuck to the maxim of the philosopher Cornelius Martinius, quoted by himself: “Nothing is more criminal than to attribute a statement to your opponent that he denies to be his view.” Crocius’ professionalism contrasts sharply with the tone of some who did not write in the language of scholarship, Latin, but in the vernacular, such as the Leiden minister Petrus de Witte, who exhibited “an unprecedented virtuosity in vituperation and abuse.” Aside from possible other motives, Crocius was clearly (also) concerned with the scholarly dispute and with maintaining a pure doctrine in an academic context.

Conservation of Heritage vs. a Radicalised Self-Image

In his by now classical *A History of the Reformation* of 1907, Thomas Lindsay states:

Socinianism, unlike the great religious movements under the guidance of Luther, had its distinct and definite beginning in a criticism of doctrines, and this must never be forgotten if its true character is to be understood. [...] Whereas the central thing about the Protestant Reformation was that it meant a rediscovery of religion as faith, [... Socinianism] was from first to last a criticism [...] of doctrines. This criticism was a radicalization of what had started with the Protestant Reformation. Whereas this was primarily about the liberation of the believers from an institutional Church and the dogma from a totalitarian doctrine, the Socinians went one step further and struck at the basis of that doctrine; their criticism was fundamental. This was also the image Socinians had of themselves. They praised their leader because he had outdone the other Reformers in destructive thoroughness, also witness the following double hexameter, quoted via Comenius (1660):

Alta ruīt Babylon; destruīt tecta Lutherus,  
Muros Calvinus, sed fundamenta Socinus.

“To loft Babylon (the Catholic Church) has fallen; Luther broke the roof, Calvin destroyed the walls, but the foundations were shattered by Socinus.”

To this fundamental criticism established Protestantism reacted by “defending the foundation of the Christian religion”, to quote Lubbertus, by conserving the Reformation heritage against the “extirpation of the Christian faith.” We who look back from the 21st century see clearly what largely remained vague to Crocius and his generation: that this fundamental criticism made Socinianism not really (retrospectively) a
return to an old heresy, but rather (prospectively) a first beginning of the transformation of the Christian faith into secularised, Humanist ethics.\textsuperscript{63}

Consequently, there is not much mildness to be found in antisociniana such as that of Crocius. The conclusion must be that also for irenic theologians such as Crocius, as well as Comenius and Coccejus, the chasm separating them from Socinianism was too wide and deep; that advocating a moderate predestination doctrine and emphasizing personal responsibility and morality, also stressed by Socinians, did not imply tolerance towards them. This means that there is little irenic rationalism and "enlightenment" to be found in Crocius (taking him as a \textit{pars pro toto}). On the contrary: he maintained that the "mysteries of faith are the objects of pure revelation and unique belief"\textsuperscript{64} and that "the Scriptures cannot elicit faith and obedience in people without internal illumination and particular revelation of the Holy Spirit."\textsuperscript{65} Consequently, the accusation of Socinianism addressed to the Bremen Academy by the Provincial Synod at Rotterdam of 1641\textsuperscript{66} was no more than confessionalist calumny. Apparently, the Calvinist brothers had not read Crocius’ \textit{Antisocinismus Contractus} of 1639. It was to be more than half a century before confessionialism had abated and a climate had materialised in which fundamental Socinian criticism had been translated for wider circles into a less dogmatic use of the Bible.\textsuperscript{67} By that time, Socinianism itself had dissolved into the wider stream of the Enlightenment, whose course it had helped to determine.\textsuperscript{68}

\section*{Notes}
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8 BS 2000-2011.


10 Cf. Siegfried Wollgast, "Der Sozinianismus in Deutschland", in: S. Wollgast, Philosophie in Deutschland zwischen Reformation und Aufklärung 1550-1650 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2nd edn. 1993), 346-422.


12 See BS 4000-4414.


14 S. Lubbertus, De Iesu Christo servatore, hoc est cur, & qua ratione Jesus Christus noster servator sit, libri quattor, contra Faustum Socium (Franeker/Arnhem: Gillis van den Rade, Ianus Janex, 1611) (BS 4251; cf. 4252), cited after C. van der Woude, Sibrandus Lubbertus. Leven en werken, in het bijzonder naar zijn correspondentie (Kampen: Kok, 1963), 140.

15 Van der Woude, Lubbertus, 141.


17 So, among others, by Lubbertus and Maresius; on them, see below, n. 35 and 37; cf. Van der Woude, Lubbertus, 146-147; Nauta, Maresius, 351.


19 Kühler, Socinianisme, 222.


21 Janse, Grenzeloos gereformeerd, 17.

22 L. Crocius, Antisocinismus contractus, Hoc est, Errorum Socinianorum privatrum consequentiarum nebulis invulatorum examen & brevis ostension principiorum, quibus illis XXVIII. dispositionibus in illustri schola Bremensi habitis solidè refutantur & dogmata
catholicae fidei defenduntur (Bremen: Bertholdus Villerianus, 1639). I.8, 10 = disputatio 1, quaestio 8, page 10.

23 Crocius, Antisocinismus contractus, I.8, 10: “per Dei gratiam in ecclesiis nostris Germanicis cum Socinianis nullum nobis est commercium, nulla necessitudo, ideoque & illorum dogmata neque scire, neque aliis coram populo vel refutando tradere atque disseminare, reip. Christianae hactenus interfuit.”

24 Crocius, Antisocinismus contractus, I.8, 10: “1. quia scatent dogmatis manifestò blasphemis. 2. quia strophis & sophismatis diabolicis imperitiores facile perturbare possunt.”

25 Crocius, Antisocinismus contractus, I.8, 10: “1. quia magnum in ecclesiis nostris Germanicis cum Socinianis nullum nobis est commercium, nulla necessitudo, ideoque & illorum dogmata neque scire, neque aliis coram populo vel refutando tradere atque disseminare, reip. Christianae hactenus interfuit.”

26 An exception is Wollgast, “Zur Widerspiegelung”, 159: “Mag auch gelegentlich Freude an der Disputation Anlass für die antisozinianische Polemik geliefert haben: […].”


31 For an early example, see W. Janse, “1. quia magnum in ecclesiis nostris Germanicis cum Socinianis nullum nobis est commercium, nulla necessitudo, ideisque & illorum dogmata neque scire, neque aliis coram populo vel refutando tradere atque disseminare, reip. Christianae hactenus interfuit.”

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43 Crocius, *Antisocinismus contractus*, I, 4-5, 3-8.


50 Wallmann, "Pietismus und Sozinianismus", 154.
51 Crocius, Antisocinismus contractus, Praefatio ad lectorem, 6b: "[... postmodum verò Socinismum [...] à me contrahi ac principiis analyticis, recti & obliqui indicibus, hoc est, sacrae scripturae testimonii dexteré adhibitis enervari voluit." An example of this method: Crocius' answer to the question "whether the mysteries of faith, which are the objects of pure revelation and unique belief, are contrary to human reason" was to distinguish between, on the one hand, "the light, judgment and verdict of the true and illuminated reason as such, which partly are remnants of God's image, partly the first fruits of the Spirit of rebirth, on the other hand the darkness and corruptions that have befallen Man since the Fall, which are his lot before he will be enlightened and corrected by the Word and the Spirit of God. The mysteries of Faith do not contravene the first type of reason, 1. because God's gifts are not mutually incompatible, 2. because the light does not extinguish that which is more, but completes that which is less; they are incompatible with the second type of reason, as becomes clear from 1. the blindness of the human spirit, Eph. 4:17; 2. the rebellion of human reason, Rom. 7:22; 3. the depravity of human nature, Gen. 6:6; 4. the hostile affect towards the divine; 5. the continual objections of sinners, Hebr. 12:3, especially the Jews, Acts 13:45.
54 Crocius, Antisocinismus contractus, Praefatio ad lectorem, 6a: "Neque enim, inquiens, sceleratius quicquam in eum, qui cum disputas, committere potes, quâ si opinionem vel sententiam ei affinges, quam quia esse suam", taken from Cornelius Martini, De Analyse logica tractatus, in quo multis illustribus exemplis ostenditur, quid sit analysis logica [...] (Helmstedt: Rabe, 1619); on him, see H. J. De Vleeschauwer, Cornelius Martini en de ontwikkeling van de protestantsche metaphysica in Duitschland (Brussel: Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, 1940); Wollgast, "Zur Widerspiegelung", 157-158, 166-168.
55 Kühler, Socinianisme, 223. On him, see BLGNP 3, 405-406.
59 Van der Woude, Lubbertus, 140.
61 Wallmann, "Pietismus und Sozinianismus", 156; cf. Z. Ogonowski, "Der Sozinianismus und die Aufklärung", in: Wrzecionko (ed.), Reformation und Frühaufklärung, 78-156, there 133-139. Some inkling of this seems to have been felt by the deputies of the Synod of South and North Holland, who in March 1653 reported to the States of Holland and West-Friesland on the Socinians: "ende maken van de godtsalicheyt maer een heydenssche zedenkonst" [they reduce salvation to a heathen ethic]; see "Remonstrantie van de gedeputeerden [...] betreffende het wenen der Socinianen", in: Eekhof, De theologische faculteit, 239-244, there 240, cf. 64*. To Spener, too, half a century later, Socinianism was "wenig mehr [...] als eine Ethic und sittenlehr, die man eben so wohl aus Seneca, Epicteto und andern Heyden schöpfen könte", Spener, Vertheidigung des Zeugnisses, III. Anhang, 23, cited via Wallmann, "Pietismus und Sozinianismus", 156.


66 The synod summed up as objections: “Dat men invoert een Sociniaensche verlocheninge van de voldoeninge Jesu Christi van onse sonden. Dat de genade Gods algemeen is. […] Dat alle menschen door Jesum Christum gerechtveerdight zijn, ende vrijheyt ende recht vercregen hebben tot het eewige leven. Dat men in alle religien can saligh worden.” [that one introduces a Socinian denial of the satisfaction for our sins by Jesus Christ; that God’s grace is universal; (…) that all men are justified by Jesus Christ and have secured freedom and a right to eternal life; that people can be saved in all religions]; W. P. C. Knuttel, *Acta der particuliere synoden van Zuid Holland 1621-1700*, I-VI (Den Haag, 1908-1916), II, 307 (Art. 23).
