

THE RHETORICS AND POLITICS OF THE CONVERSION OF ISAAC DA COSTA

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Arie L. Molendijk, Groningen

I.

Isaac da Costa (1798-1860) was one of the leaders and spokesmen of the early nineteenth-century Dutch revival movement, the *Réveil*. His famous pamphlet titled *Against the Spirit of the Age* of 1823 was a fierce critique of Enlightenment values, such as human autonomy and representative government. With his alleged free will and overpowering reason modern man, according to Da Costa, prefers to be a ‘godless and spiritless animal’, rather than being dependent upon God.¹ The publication of this booklet aroused a great literary struggle and made Da Costa somewhat of an outcast. The story goes that before visiting a friend of Da Costa one asked first, if the ‘agitator’ was perhaps present and declined to go in, if the answer was in the affirmative. His great-uncle, the well-known economist David Ricardo (1772-1823),

¹ Isaac da Costa, *Bezwaren tegen den geest der eeuw* (Leiden, 1823), p. 8. In this note I will only give a small selection of the literature, first on the booklet and second on Da Costa in general.

- On the *Bezwaren* see D.P. Oosterbaan, ‘Rondom Da Costa’s “bezwaren”’, *Antirevolutionaire Staatskunde* (driemaandelijksch orgaan van de Dr. Abraham Kuypersstichting ter bevordering van de studie der antirevolutionaire beginselen) 11 (1937), pp. 1-53; G.M. den Hartogh, ‘Rondom Da Costa’s “bezwaren” en hun ontvangst’, *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 59 (1959), pp. 37-52; Ulrich Gäbler, ‘Zum theologischen Gehalt von Isaäc da Costas “Einreden wider den Zeitgeist” 1823’, in: U. Gäbler & P. Schram, eds, *Erweckung am Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Amsterdam, 1986), pp. 223-245; J.A. Bornewasser, ‘Roomse bezwaren tegen Da Costa’s *Bezwaren*’, in: *idem*, *Kerkelijk verleden in een wereldlijke context* (Amsterdam, 1989), pp. 345-356; A. Th. van Deursen, *Huizinga en de geest der eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1994).

- On Da Costa in general: L. Knappert, ‘Costa, Isaäc da’, in: P.C. Molhuysen, P.J. Blok & K.H. Kossmann, eds, *Nieuw Nederlandsch Biografisch Woordenboek*, vol. VI (Leiden, 1924) col. 336-348; J. Meijer, *Isaac da Costa’s weg naar het christendom. Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis der joodsche problematiek in Nederland*, s.l., s.d. [Ph.D. Thesis (Amsterdam, 1941)]; M.E. Kluit, *Het Réveil in Nederland 1817-1854* (Amsterdam, 1936); M.E. Kluit, ‘Mr. Isaäc da Costa. De mens in zijn tijd’, in: *Isaäc da Costa. Op 28 april 1960, honderd jaar na zijn overlijden, herdacht* (Nijkerk, 1960), pp. 9-38; Ulrich Gäbler, ‘Auferstehungszeit’. *Erweckungsprediger des 19. Jahrhunderts. Sechs Porträts* (München, 1991), pp. 86-114, 191-194; Arie L. Molendijk, ‘“Wider den Zeitgeist”. Die Gedankenwelt von Isaäc da Costa’, in: Harm Klueting & Jan Rohls, eds, *Reformierte Perspektiven. Vorträge der zweiten Emdener Tagung zur Geschichte des Reformierten Protestantismus* (Emder Beiträge zum reformierten Protestantismus, vol. 4) (Wuppertal, 2001), pp. 79-104.

who had become a Christian, toured the Continent in 1822 and described his meeting with Da Costa as follows:

I had heard much of his great talents before I saw him – he was represented to me to be one of the very best poets in Holland. Of his merits in this department of knowledge I should have no means of judging even if he wrote in a language I knew. I was told that he was also a metaphysician and generally a well-informed man. I thought him a young man of excellent abilities, who had reflected and read a good deal – he expressed his opinions in French with great fluency and eloquence – he would have shone in a public assembly if his voice were better, there is something in his voice not pleasing. He has lived a great deal by himself, which I think has been of great disadvantage to him, for he delivers his opinions as if it were impossible he should ever change them, and as if there were no chance that he may have come to wrong conclusions, on points too which have long divided the world. In politics he is almost an advocate for absolute government; he has not any correct notions of representative government, nor of the securities for freedom. On these points his views are quite crude, – he has read on these subjects, but he has not read enough. I have recommended one or two books to him but I do not think he will read them.²

Ricardo was clearly impressed by Da Costa's – oratorical – qualities (the unpleasant character of his voice, by the way, was noticed by many of his contemporaries), but, on the other hand, there is a sense of estrangement noticeable: how can such an intelligent person be so bold and headstrong in his views, opposing predominant Enlightenment ideas? Up to the present day, opinions about Da Costa differ sharply. On the one hand, there is a great deal of literature which sees him as one of the leading lights of Protestant revival, turning against the grain of a weakened, compromised public church; on the other hand, he is considered to be a somewhat odd person with reactionary religious and political views. However, Isaac da Costa was a prolific and influential author and charismatic leader, who wrote a great variety of occasional verse and religious tracts, and inspired many of his co-religionists at the time, not only by his writing but also by direct intercourse, foremost in the *réunions*

² David Ricardo, 'Journal of a Tour on the Continent 1822', P. Sraffa & M.H. Dobb, eds, *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo*, vol. 10 (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 177-352, at 207-208.

he organized in his Amsterdam house. These religious meetings, during which he explained the Bible in a way in which the texts became a living reality, made a lasting impression on many visitors.³

One startling fact in the career of Isaac da Costa has not yet been mentioned: his conversion to Christianity. Together with his wife Hanna Belmonte (1800-1867) and his friend Abraham Capadose (1795-1874), famous for his struggle against vaccination,⁴ he was baptized in the Leiden *Pieterskerk* on the twentieth of October 1822. In this paper I will go only generally in Da Costa's biography and writings in general, but focus, first, on his 'conversion narrative' and, secondly, try to contextualize it, especially with a view to the emancipation of the Jews.

II.

Isaac da Costa described his becoming a Christian several times. There exist three narrative accounts, which were all written decades after his conversion. Two of them were given in texts which actually dealt with his spiritual mentor, the at the time famous Dutch poet and reactionary *enfant terrible* Willem Bilderdijk (1756-1831). After his mentor had died in 1831, Da Costa edited the fourth volume of Bilderdijk's correspondence, with the letters to Da Costa. Shortly before his own death Da Costa finished a biography of his beloved teacher and friend. In both volumes Da Costa described in some detail his own religious development.⁵ The third narrative was originally published in 1845 in an English periodical, *The Voice of Israel*.

I will take this last text as a starting point for my analysis. This narrative was first published in a foreign medium, which shows that there was an international audience for this type of stories. *The Voice of Israel* was a magazine oriented towards 'enlightened Jews who believe in Jesus Christ as their Messiah', and its editor had

³ N. Beets, *Het dagboek van de student Nicolaas Beets 1833-1836*, ed. by P. van Zonneveld ('s Gravenhage, 1983), pp. 222-223; J.H. Sikemeier, *Elise van Calcar-Schiotling. Haar leven en omgeving, haar arbeid, haar geestesrichting* (Haarlem, 1921), pp. 35-43; cf. pp. 90-91; Allard Pierson, 'Isaac da Costa naar zijne brieven' (1872), in: *idem, Oudere Tijdgenoten* (1888), fourth edition, ed. by P.L. Schram (Amsterdam, 1982), pp. 1-33.

⁴ Joh. Verhave & J.P. Verhave, 'De vaccinatiekwestie in het Reveil', in: J. van den Berg, P.L. Schram & S.L. Verheus, eds, *Aspecten van het Reveil* (Kampen, 1980), pp. 230-255.

⁵ Bilderdijk's role is also evident from Da Costa's many poems; cf. [Da Costa], *Da Costa's komplette dichtwerken*, ed. by J.P. Hasebroek (1861), third edition (Leiden, s.d.) [1876], pp. 329-333 ('Aan Bilderdijk'), 363 ('God met ons').

insisted that Da Costa should write the piece. The aim of the publication was evidently to boost the moral of this group. The untitled piece was prefaced by a kind of (unsigned) editorial,⁶ which clearly opposed the view, ‘that it is only ignorant and uneducated Jews who embrace Christianity. Absurd as this assertion is, it is so often repeated that it passes current with many, who have neither opportunity nor inclination to inquire into its truth. Through the kindness of our beloved brother, who has yielded to our urgent entreaties, not only to give us an account of his conversion, but to give it with his name, we are enabled to show our dear brethern of the house of Israel, that one of the master-minds of the day, one who is not only the greatest poet that Holland has produced, but is equally renowned as a philosopher, a theologian, and a politician; this man brought up in hatred and contempt of Christianity, has been brought by the force of truth, and the power of Divine grace, to be a humble disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ’. After pointing to the greatness of Da Costa, the editorial ended with an exhortational question: ‘O brethren! Ought ye not to enquire whether ye be not rejecting the truth of God, to your own condemnation?’

After a short time an unauthorized German version appeared, initiated by the German missionary J. Aug. Hausmeister, whose introduction referred also to the booklet about the conversion of Da Costa’s friend Abraham Capadose.⁷ By this translation Hausmeister wanted (as did the English editorial) to take the edge off the argument that only poor and ignorant Jews had themselves baptized.⁸ Soon afterwards the Dutch original was published in the magazine *De Tijd*. The unsigned editorial stated that one wanted to prevent a Dutch translation of the inaccurate German text,⁹ which, nevertheless, appeared as a small booklet in the same year.¹⁰ The trajectories of this text show a marked international – or at least European – interest in conversion stories.

⁶ Isaac da Costa, [untitled], in: *The Voice of Israel*, Saturday, February 1, 1845, pp. 87-88 (three columns per page); cf. Jacob Meijer, *Da Costa's weg*, p. 101, note 15, who points to the fact that Da Costa kept a reprint of the English text, including corrections.

⁷ [Abraham Capadose], *Conversion de M. le Docteur Capadose, Israélite Portugais*, publiée par la Société des amis d’Israël de Neuchâtel (Neuchâtel, 1837); *Bekeering van Doctor A. Capadose, Portugeesch Israëliet*, uitgegeven door het Genootschap der Vrienden van Israël te Neuchâtel, uit het Frans vertaald door M.J. Chevallier (Amsterdam, 1837).

⁸ [Da Costa], *Een en ander uit het leven van Dr. da Costa door hem zelve beschreven*, Naar de Hoogduitsche vertaling (Amsterdam, 1845), Voorrede, [p. 6].

⁹ [Da Costa], ‘Uit het leven van Mr. Is. da Costa’, in: *De Tijd. Merkwaardigheden der letterkunde en geschiedenis van den dag, voor de beschaafde wereld* 1 (1845), second part, pp. 276-281; at 276.

¹⁰ [Da Costa], *Een en ander uit het leven van Dr. da Costa*.

The publication in *De Tijd* probably gives the most reliable text, and I will rely on this version, using occasionally the English text. The general form of the text ‘From the Life of Mr. Is. da Costa’¹¹ is that of a first-person narrative. In the beginning, however, Da Costa addressed the reader, and, more in particular, the editor, directly: ‘You press me, dear brother, to tell about my conversion to Christianity and how I became a disciple of Christ’, and I can not resist your request and conceal from you ‘how the God of my fathers has wrought in my soul’.¹² Da Costa continued by stating that he wanted to join his testimony with that of ‘my brethren’, who try to teach others by making known the ‘ways, by which the Lord had led them in His wisdom and benevolence’. The story ends with an eulogy, thanking and praising God for the many evidences of His unspeakable mercy. Seen from Da Costa’s theological point of view, the process of conversion happens between God and man, God working in man’s soul.¹³ Thus, the locus of conversion is the inner self. However, if one looks at the actual narrative, in which Da Costa seeks to explain his transition to Christianity, the focus is, almost exclusively, on his own formative years and on the persons and teachers who were involved in this development.

Da Costa, however, began his tale by referring to a series of events in days long gone. His family came from the Iberian Peninsula – which (as we will see later) was extremely important to him – and he noticed that several of his ancestors became Roman Catholic. First they did so, because they were forced, but later on a few of them remained Christian out of ‘conviction and sincerity of heart’. This was not an isolated phenomenon, Da Costa emphasized, as it happened more often that Jews became members of the Catholic Church in all honesty. In this way he framed conversion not as a phenomenon brought about by outer force or external necessity, but as an authentic decision of a free person. It is also remarkable that the text does not betray any form of anti-Catholicism; even Da Costa’s own conversion is foremost depicted as a conversion to Christianity and not to Protestantism in particular. But let us turn again to the story Da Costa is telling. ‘Humanly spoken’ Da Costa’s relatives would have remained within the bosom of the Roman Church, were it not for the fact

¹¹ The ‘Mr’ in the title refers to Da Costa’s doctor’s degree in law. The article in *The Voice of Israel* has no heading.

¹² I try to give a faithful rendering of the meaning of the text and do not try to translate this somewhat older Dutch literally.

¹³ At another occasion Da Costa explicitly limited the use of the word ‘conversion’ to the activity of God; cf. *De mensch en de dichter Willem Bilderdijk. Eene bijdrage tot de kennis van zijn leven, karakter, en schriften* (Haarlem, 1859), p. 282.

that one of its members, who held a high office within the church of Oporto, was so severely tormented by doubts concerning Christianity, that he left his office and the country, in order to return to the ‘Synagogue of his ancestors’. In this context the frightening fate of Uriel da Costa (ca. 1591 – ca. 1641), who – ‘swayed back and forth between doubt and unbelief’ – finally committed suicide, is also mentioned. The moment of doubt and the questioning of religious belief were highlighted.

Since two centuries, Isaac da Costa’s family – the story continues – ‘belonged to the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam and enjoyed all the privileges, which Holland has given to my people in its exile and affliction’. Without any further explanation, Da Costa goes on saying how much his father (as most Jews) was attached to the House of Orange, and, therefore, opposed to the French turnover of the Netherlands in 1795. His father allegedly induced the same sentiments in him. According to Isaac, his father was not a strict (orthodox) Jew, although he showed respect for the religious practices and customs of his people, whereas his mother should have been more attached to the ideas and practices of ‘Rabbinic Jewry’.¹⁴ Even from this brief description it is clear that for Da Costa religion and nationality or, even, ethnicity were somehow related to each other.

The by far largest part of the article is devoted to his own personal *Werdegang*. From his early youth on he had, on the one hand, ‘a religious instinct, a vague desire to know and serve God’, but, on the other hand, his heart was filled with doubt. He trembled before the vicious mockery and ridicule of eighteenth-century philosophy, but this did not lead to complete unbelief. He read Plato and Moses Mendelssohn, but their arguments could not warm his heart. Finally he made up a Deistic system (concerning the essence of the deity, world government and the immortality of the soul), mixed with Rabbinic and Mosaic theses. But notwithstanding all this intellectual effort, Da Costa’s heart was caught up – as he writes – in worldly vanities, and ‘sin had supreme rule in the daily intercourse of life’. This kind of rhetoric calls, of course, for a counterpoint, and, indeed, the next sentence speaks of God’s providence which brought together two extremely important circumstances.

The first was that his father destined him to the career of jurisprudence, a field – as was stressed – which was not open to Jews, till the French turnover in 1795. To

¹⁴ The English version has ‘modern Judaism’, which is probably a wrong translation.

this aim he visited first the Latin school, and, later on, took lessons from a professor in history and literature. Da Costa did not mention his name, but it was David Jacob van Lennep (1774-1853), who taught at the Amsterdam *Athenaeum* and defended the authenticity of the Mosaic writings against ‘the sophisms and fallacies of Voltaire’. ‘I began to believe in the divine nature of the Old Testament’, Da Costa wrote, and he became convinced that there was ‘a revealed religion, that the Bible had divine authority and that this was a historical fact’. So, because young Isaac was very talented, his father intended him to be a lawyer, and this, in an indirect manner, led to a revindication of religious revelation. As a kind of corollary, Da Costa mentioned the fact that his study of Biblical history had also led him to study the history of his own people, especially during their stay in Spain and Portugal. In this history of Israel, Da Costa continued, he noticed something he could not explain, unless he considered them to be both a very privileged *and* at the same time an extremely hard punished people. This result gave him already a premonition of that religion, which is the only ‘fulfilment of the true divine Judaism’.¹⁵

The second circumstance which Da Costa mentioned was also of a non-religious nature, and this was his gift for poetry. As a young poet he was introduced to the ‘greatest of our Dutch contemporary poets, the celebrated Bilderdijk’. Da Costa did not fail to say that he was introduced by a learned scholar of Hebrew; ‘a man of my people’, he added, stressing again his Jewish background. This scholar was his own teacher and friend Mozes Lemans (1785-1832), who took part in a Literary Society dominated by enlightened Jews, which had elected Bilderdijk as an honorary member. At another occasion Da Costa pointed explicitly to the irony of this situation, that the admiration of these enlightened Jews for Bilderdijk was conducive to his own conversion trajectory.¹⁶ The tone gets more dramatic, the moment Bilderdijk is introduced: ‘Misunderstood, persecuted, banished (in 1795), harassed by all sorts of misfortunes, he had found from his youth, strength and consolation in the gospel of Christ. Attached in heart to the truths of the confession of the Reformed Church, he had moreover early perceived the glorious future, announced by the prophets to the ancient people of God: its conversion to the Messiah, which they crucified’. Da Costa got very much attached to him and through him Da Costa ‘walked in the light, which

¹⁵ The text is not completely clear here, but another interpretation does not make good sense; cf. [Da Costa], ‘Uit het leven van Mr. Is. da Costa’, p. 278f.

¹⁶ Da Costa, *Willem Bilderdijk*, p. 279.

led [him] to the [Christian] faith'. It is claimed that Bilderdijk did not try to proselytize his young pupil. Instead, he spoke of the Old Testament, and 'especially he tried to make me feel that the true Christian shares in the hopes of Israel in regard to a glorious reign of the Messiah upon the throne of David'. At the occasion of Da Costa's obtaining his doctor's degree in law in 1818, Bilderdijk wrote that a sincere Jew is a Christian in hope.¹⁷ Bilderdijk also taught him that the ancient Jews acknowledged a plurality of persons in the ineffable unity of God. And indeed it is a fact that Bilderdijk held the Jews in high esteem and accorded to them an important role in the history of salvation.¹⁸

The conversion itself is depicted as follows:

Then did my eyes perceive the first rays of divine light. I began reading the New Testament; I read those unspeakably sublime and blessed words: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word was made flesh' (John 1). I began to feel an abhorrence of sin, for which the Saviour had himself manifested in the flesh and suffered the death of the cross. I perceived the fulfilment of Bible passages, such as the prophecies of Isaiah (11, 53, 61) and Psalms 22 and 110 and many other texts.

It is very much a textual experience that is narrated here. By reading both the Old and the New Testament the gospel can be perceived as the fulfilment of Old Testament texts. This insight has changed his life, Da Costa continued: 'I adored – I believed – and gradually this faith operated upon my conscience and my daily life'.

At another occasion Da Costa used the traditional metaphor of the scales that fell from his eyes 'on an unforgettable day in October 1820' to describe the insight that Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews, was the Saviour of the world.¹⁹ But such metaphors do not dominate the discourse, and, to some extent, they even appear as relics from older conversion narratives. Notwithstanding the incisive moment described here, Da Costa portrayed his conversion as a gradual process and even as a

¹⁷ Bilderdijk, 'Den Heere Izaäk da Costa bij zijne bevordering tot doctor in de rechten', in: Bilderdijk, *Krekelzangen*, vol. 3 (Rotterdam 1823), pp. 43-48; the poem is also added to the dissertation itself: Da Costa, *Specimen inaugurale juridicum, exhibens observata quaedam de conditionibus* (Leiden, 1818).

¹⁸ Joris van Eijnatten, *Hogere sferen. De ideeënwereld van Willem Bilderdijk (1756-1831)* (Hilversum, 1998), pp. 639-643.

¹⁹ Da Costa, 'Inleiding' [Introduction], in: *Brieven van Mr. Willem Bilderdijk*, vol. IV (Rotterdam, 1837), pp. v-xxiii, at xv; Da Costa, *Willem Bilderdijk*, p. 283.

life-time task. ‘Religion was no longer merely a sublime speculation, or a great national interest; I found that I must become the property of Jesus Christ, that I must live through Him and to Him [door hem en voor hem]. More than twenty years have elapsed since that period, and – when I look back – then I have to be ashamed of myself before God and men, that I fell short of this holy calling’. Dogmatic elements (the doctrine of Trinity, of sin, incarnation and reconciliation) and experiential and practical moments are closely intertwined in this narrative. To be the ‘property of Christ’ implies that the believer has to glorify God in word and deed. Evidently, this kind of belief is miles away from Deistic speculations, in which he was involved in earlier days, and also from seeing religion primarily in national terms.

Da Costa went on to describe the next step of his personal history, that he ‘opened his heart’ to his friend Abraham Capadose, and how their conversations were more and more directed to the great questions of divine truth and man’s salvation. Furthermore, ‘a third person’ joined them, who turned out to be Da Costa’s fiancée and later wife, his cousin Hanna Belmonte, whose thoughts were in accord with his own. By a ‘remarkable providence of the Lord and a special train of family circumstances’ she had been brought up in a Christian school, where she had participated in religious instruction, had been acquainted with the Heidelberg catechism, ‘and heard the blessed name of Jesus before I did’. ‘From the time I imparted to her what was passing in my own mind, she became to me a beloved sister in Christ, as well as a faithful companion in the trials of life, and in the search after eternal life through faith in our great Lord and Saviour’. The fact of their joint baptism on the 20th October 1822, in Leiden, is told in only one sentence.²⁰

Thereupon, the conversion of three members of the family of Da Costa is related rather extensively. His sister-in-law even married the son of a well-known Walloon minister (M.J. Chevalier). She was – Da Costa told his readers – a very pious woman, devoted entirely to her Lord and Saviour, who called her in her confinement. Another member of the family, who is not further identified, even studied theology, but died before he could assume his ministry. Thus, the conversion narrative is permeated by various elements of learning. All converts read the Scriptures, receive

²⁰ On this joint conversion, see Judith Frishman, *Dat hun geloof opregt gelove, hun keus de keus des harten zij*, s.l., s.d. (inaugural lecture Leiden, 1997); Frishman, ‘The Belmonte Women and their Conversion to Christianity. “Heil U, geachte Vrouw, uit Abrahams zaad gesproten”’, *Studia Rosenthaliana* 32 (1998), pp. 198-200.

religious instruction, and some of them even study theology and prepare to be a ‘teacher’ of the church. The final part dealing with the three members of the family, who converted to Christianity too, does not only serve the purpose of showing the element of learning and Bible study, so essential to the Reveil movement, but enable the author to stress the contingency of life as well, and, therewith, the importance of the redeeming ‘blood of Christ’. The final eulogy represents the ultimate framework of these six conversions in one short sentence: ‘To God, the most holy, be thanksgiving and praise for the proofs of his unspeakable mercies in life and in death and throughout all eternity. Amen’.

It is beyond any doubt that this text is a conversion narrative. The editorials both to the English and the Dutch edition emphasized this point, and Da Costa described in some detail his transition to Christianity against the background of his own Jewish upbringing. In this way the story met the expectations of the readership of *The Voice of Israel*, who must have found comfort in the story of this well-educated and famous Dutch Jew. The conversion – the word is used by Da Costa only once at the beginning of his narrative – is depicted in terms of his personal development and education. The persuasiveness of the text lies solely in its narrative structure; there is no attempt to make a case for the superiority of Christianity. Da Costa just narrates how he has come to believe that Jesus Christ is the Messiah told of in the Old Testament. The role of Bilderdijk in Da Costa’s inner transformation is highlighted, but is, evidently, not the only important element in the story.

To understand how Da Costa constructed this particular narrative, it is helpful to have a short look at the two other texts which recount his conversion. They are incorporated in texts about Willem Bilderdijk, and pay special attention to his contribution. In his hagiographic *biography* of Bilderdijk, Da Costa told of the Israelite Society of Welfare and Civilization (‘Tot Nut en Beschaving’),²¹ which held Bilderdijk in such great esteem. As we know, at a meeting of this Society Da Costa was introduced by his teacher Lemans to the famous poet. Referring to a young man (‘an insignificant lad’), a son from the people of Israel, Da Costa devoted six pages to his friendship with Bilderdijk, without making it explicit that he described his own relationship with the ‘old man’ (‘den Grijzaart’). In this way old wisdom is contrasted with youth. Although Da Costa stressed that his meeting with Bilderdijk had nothing

²¹ Meijer, *Da Costa’s weg*, p. 35, points out that it was not a strictly Israelite Society.

to do with his later religious quest, he also said that he had some premonition that this Dutch Ishmael would be decisive for his inner life. Da Costa emphasized that Bilderdijk did not proselytize, but he made no secret of the fact that Bilderdijk's poetry, especially the poem about the Fall of the First World ('Ondergang der Eerste Wereld') had a lasting impact on his own view of life. No doubt, the personality and teaching of this great man paved the way for his conversion.²²

In his *Introduction to the edition of the letters* which Bilderdijk wrote to him, Da Costa told the story in some more detail, but along the same established lines. A new element was the reference to the 'chaos of confusion between the youthful ebullient passions and the need for higher things'.²³ In this situation a line of Bilderdijk about Christ as the reflection of God's glory hit Da Costa as a 'ray of light in the darkness'.²⁴ It took some time, before Da Costa came to understand the main tenets of Christian belief, but, finally, he saw that Jesus Christ was also the saviour of the Jews. Of course, he told Bilderdijk of this change of heart. Next to Bilderdijk, he entrusted this secret to his fiancée and his dear friend Capadose. These three descendants of Israel continued their study of religion and Bible, and came to the conclusion that they had to join the Dutch Reformed Church. Also the later conversion of his mother and sister-in-law was recounted by Da Costa in this context.²⁵

Notwithstanding several different new elements (references to Bilderdijk's poems and Da Costa's own troublesome condition), the general drift of the three narratives is the same: They all tell about Da Costa's upbringing, his Jewish background, his parents and teachers, the special role of Bilderdijk, the close intertwinement of his reflections upon his Jewish roots and his turn to Christianity, and the fact that various relatives converted as well. The stories are very much about Da Costa's own biography and his finding a new identity, which combines Jewish and Christian elements. The story stops at the moment he has found his new identity, whereas it would have been possible to conclude it by referring to his own religious activities, for instance, the many *réunions* he organized in his own house. On the whole, I detect little religious zeal to convert others, so little, that at one occasion Da

²² Da Costa, *Willem Bilderdijk*, pp. 276-283.

²³ Da Costa, 'Inleiding', in: Bilderdijk, *Brieven*, part IV, p. xiii; cf. Da Costa, *Willem Bilderdijk*, p. 277.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. xiv.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. xix.

Costa felt more or less obliged to say that he does not disapprove of proselytising.²⁶ His own conversion was actually presented as a free decision, the result of a personal quest.

III.

The previous part focussed on the way Da Costa narrated his conversion. Now I will relate the narratives to Da Costa's family circumstances and to the socio-political circumstances of Jews in the Netherlands at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

According to his own saying, Da Costa's conversion took place in the autumn of 1820. In the meanwhile he was engaged to his cousin Hanna Belmonte. They married the day after Da Costa had defended his literary Ph.D. thesis. The wedding took place on the 5th of July, 1821, at the Amsterdam Town Hall. Six days later they married 'before the Rabbi', as Hanna put it in her diary.²⁷ Costa's father died in February 1822 and was buried according to Jewish custom, much to Abraham Capadose's discontent. Da Costa's Christian friend Willem de Clercq (1795-1844), however, described the Jewish ceremonies in a sympathetic way, and stated that Da Costa 'acknowledged in the Jewish prayers, said at the deathbed of his father, the true spirit of Christianity'.²⁸ Thus, until his father's death Da Costa lived the life of a crypto-Christian. Earlier on, in August 1821, de Clercq had written in his diary, that Da Costa had confided into him, and had asked him, if de Clercq should survive him and 'providence would not give him the opportunity to be open about his feelings', to give public utterance to this fact, '*but only after the death of his [Da Costa's] parents*'.²⁹

Here we touch upon the *social* aspect of conversion, which Da Costa passed over completely in the various accounts he gave of his conversion. There is even no hint of the fact that the religious sensibilities of his parents, his father in particular, may have influenced the moment he made his conversion public. All emphasis is put on the ongoing chain of conversions in his family. We know – as did Da Costa – how

²⁶ Da Costa, *Willem Bilderdijk*, p. 282.

²⁷ [Hanna da Costa-Belmonte], *Dagboekje van Hanna da Costa-Belmonte*, ed. by O.W. Dubois (Heereveen, 2000), p. 30.

²⁸ [Willem de Clercq], *Willem de Clercq naar zijn dagboek*, vol. I, ed. by A. Pierson & De Clerqs jongste kleindochter [youngest granddaughter], (Haarlem, 1888), p. 213.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 190 (emphasis in the original); cf. p. 213.

difficult it was for Capadose to confess his new religion to his family and, especially, to his uncle Immanuel Capadose, who had no children of his own and had more or less adopted his nephew, whom he would leave a large sum of money on his death.³⁰ Conversion is also very much about social affiliations. According to the sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, people will – in making religious choices – attempt to conserve their social capital. They even write that ‘conversion is seldom about seeking or embracing an ideology; it is about bringing one’s religious behaviour into alignment with that of one’s friends and family members’.³¹ This is clearly contradicted by the examples of Da Costa and Capadose; at least, Capadose risked serious family trouble, by confessing his new belief.

These conversions were hard decisions to make. Not only benefits, but also costs, in social as well as in emotional respects, were involved. This brings us to the *psychological* aspects of conversion. It is evident from his own accounts, that Da Costa covered a long and winding road, before he actually became baptized. In his youth Da Costa was a celebrated poet and participated actively in the social life of the enlightened Sephardic literary society *Concordia Crescimus*, which he joined at the age of fourteen. Here he recited, soon after he was accepted, his poem ‘Praise of Poetry’ (‘Lof der dichtkunst’), and in the year 1814-1815 he gave no less than sixteen speeches and declamations. In the ‘harvest month’ of 1815 he made a great speech at the acceptance of the chairmanship of *Concordia*. At the age of twenty he had finished his studies in Leiden, and settled in Amsterdam, to practice law. In sum: Isaac da Costa was a gifted and somewhat precocious young man, an only child who seemed to meet the expectations of his father.³²

But then Da Costa’s luck apparently turned. His love for Capadose’s sister was rejected, and he was not happy in his early days as a lawyer. He was complaining about his supposed discrimination at the Assize Court (getting only minor cases to

³⁰ Capadose, *Bekeering*, p. 54; cf. David Kalmijn, *Abraham Capadose* (‘s-Gravenhage, 1955), p. 33-34; cf. [Isaac da Costa], *Noble Families Among the Sephardic Jews*, by Isaac da Costa, LL.D., with *Some Account of the Capadose Family (including their Conversion to Christianity)*, by Bertram Brewster, and *An Excursus on Their Jewish History*, by Cecil Roth (with over 40 full-page illustrations), (London, Oxford University Press, 1936), esp. pp. 173-180. Da Costa’s text is a translation of Da Costa, *Israël en de volken. Overzicht van de geschiedenis der joden tot op onzen tijd* (Haarlem, 1849), book III. For Isaac da Costa’s opinion of his uncle Immanuel Capadose, see Meijer, *Da Costa’s weg*, p. 18; for a genealogical table, see p. 163.

³¹ Rodney Stark & Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith. Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley, etc., 2000), p. 117.

³² Meijer, *Da Costa’s weg*, pp. 24-25, qualifies the remark reported by de Clercq, that Daniel da Costa had said he always had predicted that his son would be no good.

defend), and the tone of letters to his friends betray, at least, some feeling of depression. He hinted rather often at his own death, and his friends frequently noticed that he was not happy. He did no longer visit theatres and even stopped reading the news papers, and indulged in – partly phantastic – speculations about his putative highborn ancestry.³³ Without trying to argue for a specific case of psychopathology, this seems to add up to a – late adolescent – identity crisis, which somehow ‘triggered’ the trajectory that eventually led to his conversion. The role of Bilderdijk, who is portrayed by Da Costa as an old and wise, fatherly friend, has been of tremendous importance in this respect.

To understand the way Da Costa framed his religious and national identity, it is helpful to have a closer look at his milieu and the contemporary *socio-political* circumstances in general. A crucial question here is, to what extent he was raised in a more or less orthodox – or, at least, orthoprax – Jewish milieu. The issue is hard to decide, but – as far as I can judge – the influence of enlightened circles, in which the young Isaac moved, must not be underrated. My view is shaped by a somewhat atypical, but well-researched dissertation about Da Costa’s transition to Christianity, written by Jaap (Jacob) Meyer.³⁴ Meijer describes in some detail the enlightened milieu in which young Da Costa made his first artistic successes. Jaap Meyer³⁵ had to finish his Ph.D. thesis in a hurry in 1941, because of the impending measures against the Jews (excluding them from academic life), and that explains some of its lacunae. I will not recount the whole trajectory which was recovered by Meijer’s research, but highlight some important moments.

Obviously, young Isaac was brought up in a Jewish milieu. His father was one of the leaders (*parnassim*) of the Sephardic synagogue, and Isaac recalled various times the fact that he had recited there a chapter from the book of Habakuk by heart at the age of five. Probably he underwent the ceremony of Bar Mitzwah in 1811.³⁶ The descriptions Da Costa gave later of the celebration of the Sabbath and the Jewish holy feasts in his parental home are full of sympathy. It is also clear that his father was an open-minded man, who read a great deal, corresponded with his son in French and attached great importance to a good education of his only child. So, Isaac came in

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 60-64.

³⁴ Meijer, *Da Costa’s weg*; cf. Jaap Meijer, *Martelgang of Circelgang. Isaac da Costa als joods romanticus* (Paramaribo, 1954).

³⁵ The famous Dutch journalist Ischa Meijer (1943-1995) was the son of Jaap Meijer; cf. Ischa Meijer, *Brief aan mijn moeder* (Den Haag, 1974), p. 53.

³⁶ Meijer, *Da Costa’s weg*, pp. 26-28.

touch with teachers, such as Mozes Lemans, of a markedly enlightened persuasion. At a rather young age he read the French *philosophes* and felt attracted to Deistic ideas. It seems even probable that he felt some admiration for Napoleon, but he was cured of his idealization ‘by the horror of French tyranny’.³⁷

The French occupation of the Netherlands is generally seen as a watershed in the history of the Dutch Jews, who received full civil rights in 1796. ‘The separation of State and Church’ – in the words of the historian Ivo Schöffer – ‘made the Jewish community, which up till then had been a closed group with its own separate rights and duties nothing more than a church organization of which all concerned could be considered to be voluntary members with the possibility therefore to leave the Church and in this way perhaps escape the specific position and characteristics of belonging to the Jewish minority’.³⁸ But although the *Parnassim* lost some of their rights, for instance, to collect taxes (on the occasion of Jewish marriages and burials), they successfully defended their group identity.³⁹ Nevertheless, the Jews were forced to rethink and renegotiate their position under the new circumstances. The question was how to align oneself within the area of tension of being a Dutch citizen of Jewish descent and religion. Before the Batavian Revolution national (or ethnic) and religious identity could be easily connected to each other, because the Jews were a more or less closed community and had no full civil rights. But if they tried to integrate their new position of being Dutch within the old framework, they had to redefine their Jewishness as well. This process has been described in terms of ‘denationalization’.⁴⁰ It even was the question, if the two could be reconciled with each other, given the fact that at the beginning of the nineteenth century the Dutch nation was seen as a

³⁷ Quoted by Meijer, *Da Costa's weg*, p. 45.

³⁸ Ivo Schöffer, ‘The Jews in the Netherlands. The Position of a Minority Through Three Centuries’, *Studia Rosenthaliana* 15 (1981), pp. 85-100, at 92; cf. J. Michman, ‘Gothische torens op een Corinthisch gebouw. De doorvoering van de emancipatie van de Joden in Nederland’, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 89 (1976), pp. 493-517; R.G. Fuks-Mansveld, ‘Verlichting en emancipatie omstreeks 1750-1814’, in: J.C.H. Blom et al., eds, *Geschiedenis van de Joden in Nederland* (Amsterdam, 1995), pp. 177-203.

³⁹ Menachim Eljakim Bolle, *De opheffing van de autonomie der Kehilloth (Joodse gemeenten) in Nederland in 1796*, s.l., s.d. [Amsterdam, 1960]. The English summary gives a short overview of the main events (pp. 201-207).

⁴⁰ F. van Cleef-Hiegentlich, ‘De transformatie van het Nederlandse Jodendom’, *De Gids* 148 (1985), pp. 232-242, at 236.

Protestant nation.⁴¹ Against this background the interpretation of Jewish conversion at the time in terms of assimilation is not that implausible.⁴²

How did Da Costa try to establish his identity within this multi-faceted situation? It is hard to trace the whole trajectory Da Costa went through and to test the hypothesis that due to enlightenment influences he gave up the unity of a Jewish people *and* religion, felt more and more Dutch and, finally, went over to Calvinism.⁴³ Probably the trajectory was a bit more complicated than this thesis suggests. But let me just take up some – in my view decisive – moments from his biography which may help to explain the road he travelled.

- With a view to the elements mentioned in this hypothesis, the *first* aspect we can note is that during his membership of the literary society *Concordia* Da Costa developed a kind of Dutch patriotism, to which he testified in his poems, the most famous perhaps being the ‘Redemption of the Netherlands’ (‘De bevrijding van Nederland’). This fits the assimilatory tendencies of the Jews in this enlightened society.

- *Secondly*, one has to take the influence of Bilderdijk on Da Costa into account. On various occasions he referred to the fact that Bilderdijk paved the way for his conversion, by pointing to the messianic expectations of the Jewish religion. From Bilderdijk’s writings it is evident, that he accorded a very special position to the Jewish people in the history of salvation. There is no reason to doubt Da Costa’s testimony in this respect.

- A *third* factor is Da Costa’s great interest in the history of the Jewish people. From the early 1820s on, he planned to write a book about this subject, which – with a delay of some twenty-five years – appeared in 1849 under the title ‘Israel and the Nations’.⁴⁴ The national existence of Israel was of great importance to Da Costa, even after Israel was no longer a nation in the political sense of the word. Moreover, he stressed the superiority of the Sephardic Jews (over the Ashkenazim), who descended in his view directly from the tribe of Judah and had emigrated to the Iberian Peninsula after the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem. In his literary dissertation he had already pointed to this memorable event: ‘Prima Judaeorum in Hispaniam migratio

⁴¹ Peter van Rooden, *Religieuze Regimes. Over godsdienst en maatschappij in Nederland, 1570-1990* (Amsterdam, 1996).

⁴² Schöffner, ‘The Jews in the Netherlands’, p. 93.

⁴³ Gäbler, ‘*Auferstehungszeit*’, p. 92 (with reference to the article of Schöffner mentioned above).

⁴⁴ Da Costa, *Israël en de volken. Overzicht van de geschiedenis der joden tot op onzen tijd* (Haarlem, 1849).

videtur ante conditum templum Hierosolymitanum secundum locum habuisse'.⁴⁵ A consequence of this was, of course, that the Sephardic Jews were exempted from the reproach, to have taken part in the crucifixion of Jesus. In retrospect Da Costa spoke of his 'national pride' in this respect: 'In the midst of the contempt and dislike of the world for the name of Jew, I had ever glorified in it'.⁴⁶ He tried to demonstrate that his ancestors were noblemen and he even considered the possibility to have his noble ancestry officially recognized by the Dutch government.⁴⁷

- *Fourthly*, these speculations about his own Jewish background were connected to his turn to Christianity. Bilderdijk's messianic interpretation of Jewish religion and the special role accorded to the Sephardic Jews were important in this respect. Da Costa wanted to prove that God and Christ were somehow hidden in the Talmud.⁴⁸ Studying the history of his own people, he perceived something so extraordinary as to be quite inexplicable, 'unless we view the Jews as the subject ... of a special election of God, and of an enormous crime on the part of the elect people'.⁴⁹

- *Fifthly*, with a view to Da Costa's chiliastic expectations, it is probably not too far-fetched to say that these were transferred from the Jewish to the Dutch people. He liked to talk about the 'God of the Netherlands', whereas he considered speaking about the 'God of France or England' rather blasphemous. 'Wonderful is the relation [of God] to our little Holland: like Judah under the Old Covenant. ... Lately I was very much impressed by the listing of the manifold occasions, where God had directly interfered on behalf of our country. After the history of ancient Israel, there is no history more poetical, magnificent and divine than ours'.⁵⁰

IV.

⁴⁵ Da Costa, *Specimen academicum inaugurale, exhibens positiones quasdam ad philosophiam theoreticam pertinentes* (Leiden, 1821), in a thesis added to the dissertation; cf. H.G. Hubbeling, 'De literaire dissertatie van Isaïc da Costa.', *Documentatieblad voor de Nederlandse kerkgeschiedenis van de negentiende eeuw* 17 (1983), pp. 13-25.

⁴⁶ Da Costa, 'Uit het leven van da Costa', p. 278 (english version, p. 88, 1th column).

⁴⁷ Meijer, *Da Costa's weg*, pp. 68-72.

⁴⁸ Meijer, *Da Costa's weg*, p. 82.

⁴⁹ Da Costa, 'Uit het leven van da Costa', p. 278 (english version, p. 88, 1th column).

⁵⁰ Da Costa to Bilderdijk (7 October 1823 and 17 September 1824); quoted in: G. Brom, *Romantiek en katholicisme in Nederland*, vol. I (Groningen – Den Haag, 1926), p. 71. Bilderdijk was of the same opinion in this respect; cf. Bilderdijk, *Brieven*, part IV, p. 114: 'Ik geloof met U, dat Holland thands en in zijn verval, 't middelpunt van 't ware christendom worden moet' (22 [15] June 1823).

There are various ways to look at conversion and the stories told about conversion trajectories. The story often concentrates on the crucial period during which the conversion took shape, relating only in passing the preceding and later developments.⁵¹ Isaac da Costa, however, went into some detail to connect his personal history as a Sephardic Jew to his becoming a Dutch Christian. He tried to bridge the gap – so to speak – by stressing the Messianic expectations of the Jewish religion. It would be false, though, to interpret Da Costa’s conversion solely in religious terms, as he himself was so much involved in speculations about his national Jewish history. He made huge efforts to research the history of the Sephardic Jews and his own ancestors at the Iberian Peninsula, thus taking pride in being a Jew of noble birth. Some of his ancestors – Da Costa claimed – converted to Christianity, but they were still (seen as) Jews. Analytically, therefore, the distinction between religious and ethnic (national) identity is made. But, on the other hand, it was difficult to separate religion and ethnicity, because the two were so closely intertwined. Religious history was interpreted by Da Costa in national terms, and *vice versa*. Ultimately, the Jews were so special, because they were the elected people, and this explains, to some degree at least, that Da Costa, as he turned to Christianity, again established a close link between his new religion and the Dutch people.

This is not to say that there were no other factors involved. Of course, there had existed a long theological and religious tradition in the Netherlands of defining Calvinism in national terms.⁵² Bilderdijk did not hesitate to establish this connection. Moreover, the separation of State and Church in 1795 did not mean that the Dutch nation was conceived of as a fully secular state. The Netherlands were seen as a ‘Protestant’ (in the broad sense of the word) country and the Protestants were actually privileged (at least compared to the Catholics and the Jews). The fact that Jews received civil rights in 1796, put them under pressure to re-establish their identity, which up till then was that of a separate group with its own religious and ethnic (national) characteristics. Isaac da Costa’s search for his own Sephardic past could be explained against this background. If, however, assimilation would have been the main issue here, one would have expected that he would have opted for the main stream within Dutch Protestantism. The ‘choice’ for Bilderdijk and the Reveil in

⁵¹ Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, *Konversion zum Islam in Deutschland und den USA* (Frankfurt a.M., 1998).

⁵² Joris van Eijnatten, ‘God, Nederland en Oranje’. *Dutch Calvinism and the Search for the Social Centre* (Kampen, 1993).

general, especially in its radical version, was not the best or the easiest way to integrate in the Dutch nation. There was indeed – as Da Costa noted himself – some sort of irony in the fact that the admiration of the enlightened society ‘For Welfare and Civilization’ for Bilderdijk led to the first acquaintance between the two of them, and, finally, to Isaac’s conversion to Bilderdijk’s bland of Calvinism. Da Costa came under the influence of Bilderdijk at the very moment he was re-establishing his own identity and even underwent some sort of an identity crisis, which was triggered by personal and professional distress.⁵³

As the editor of the *Voice of Israel* pointed out, the conversion of Isaac da Costa was not that common. Da Costa had already established himself as a respected poet and was seen as a young man with great capacities. After his conversion he wrote many more poems and religious tracts, gave lectures on various historical, aesthetical and religious subjects and advanced to a renowned lay preacher. The accounts we have of the *réunions* at his house show the degree to which even relative outsiders were fascinated by his rhetorical skills. His style makes a somewhat outdated impression on present-day readers, but in the first half of the nineteenth century he was well read. He was very much perceived as a Jew by his contemporaries, but that did not alter the fact that he was held in high esteem as a religious leader and writer. As far as I can see his conversion did not become a paradigm for other Jews. His publications do not betray a great missionary zeal; instead, he preached to the converted, that is to say, to his fellow Christians of gentile descent. Yet it would be false to see Da Costa’s conversion in terms of trading one orthodoxy for another. The influence of Enlightenment ideas on the young Da Costa must have been rather strong. The fierce attack on these ideas in the pamphlet *Against the Spirit of the Age* is not the logical outcome of his upbringing, but rather its high-spirited reversal, which celebrated his newly found identity. Da Costa remained interested in all kinds of historical, literary and philosophical topics, on which he lectured extensively.

In the narrative of his own conversion the moment of free decision is dominant, which did not preclude, of course, that God was, ultimately, the one who worked this great deed. In this sense the structure of the story betrays, so to speak, the ideas of the pamphlet which criticized man’s alleged free will and emphasized his dependence upon God. Da Costa stressed over and over again that Bilderdijk did not

⁵³ A psycho-historical interpretation, no doubt, would focus on these elements and the role of Bilderdijk as a father figure for Da Costa.

try to proselytize him. The conversion was presented by Da Costa as a long biographical road. Essentially, it was a story about a learned quest for personal truth, a truth, which the individual has to appropriate for himself. Therefore, the story of his conversion was principally about himself and not about God. Of course, God and Christ were of ultimate importance to Da Costa, but the conversion story centred on his personal identity. In this sense it was a very modern story about a doubtless extremely complex identity. In a letter to his friend Willem van Hogendorp (1795-1838), from the sixth of July 1821, he characterized himself by four epithets: oriental, nobleman, poet, and pupil of Bilderdijk.⁵⁴

He solved – if I may use this word – his late adolescent identity crisis by relating his Jewish descent to the religion of Bilderdijk. In his own words: ‘I remained (no, I first truly became) an Israelite at the moment that I – through the grace of the God and Saviour of my fathers – confessed to be a Christian’.⁵⁵ The narrative ultimately resolves the dialectics between the free personal conversion and the outer personal and socio-political circumstances and constraints (the death of his father, the emancipation of the Jews) in favour of the authenticity of the individual decision. In this sense the choice for the ‘religion of my fathers’ is – seen from a structural point of view – also a conversion to modernity. Notwithstanding the emphasis on the inner religious life, this type of religion had a clear societal impact, as Da Costa’s vehement critique of Enlightenment values shows. But even in those cases, where this seems absent, conversion can ultimately only exist, because the supposedly inner transformation is made public. Conversion is, finally, a coming out, and, therefore, the rhetorics of conversion is intimately connected to its politics.

⁵⁴ Meijer, *Da Costa’s weg*, p. 81: ‘Oosterling, Edelman, Dichter, en kwekeling van Bilderdijk’.

⁵⁵ Da Costa, *Israel en de volken*, p. ix.