

Case Study: The Netherlands

Dr. Bob Goudzwaard

Introduction

It is certainly not self-evident why the Netherlands has been chosen as one of the two specific case studies of this conference. For as far as the institutional side of Christian higher education is concerned—which is one of the central themes of the conference—many other countries could offer more interesting material than does the Netherlands. In terms of curriculum development or organizational strategies it cannot boast excellence or glory in distinguished contributions.

But in some other aspects, the case of Christian higher education in the Netherlands is indeed very instructive, even unique, which makes it a worthwhile subject for our common reflection. Two aspects have to be mentioned here specifically.

The first aspect relates to the way in which Christian higher education came into existence in the Netherlands. More than a century ago (in 1880, to be specific), Abraham Kuyper founded the Free University in Amsterdam. But unlike developments elsewhere, especially at that time, this Reformed university was not started on the basis of a pre-existent theological seminary, “enlarged” or “expanded” to offer to children of Christian parents additional educational or academic opportunities. No, from the beginning, the Free University was meant to be a real university; the three faculties of law, literature, and theology were all present from the beginning. Furthermore, the primary motive was obviously not to create a good and pro-

tected place for young Christians to study the different existing sciences. Students from different backgrounds, also non-Christian, were welcome from the beginning, for the leading motive was very clearly expressed in an open letter to Reformed Christians in the Netherlands requesting financial support for this initiative. "If no Christian university is erected," we read in this letter of 1877, "then we must fear that the higher academic education of our national life will be handed over to unbelief; that science will become an instrument used against the glory of Christ; and that the whole body of statesmen, lawyers, medical doctors, and literary men, together with the natural scientists, will become, with all their influential powers, apostles of naturalism—which in the end will kill all spiritual life."²

A Christian university which starts in this way is not only exceptional by itself, but its formula is also a challenge to all of us. It raises questions about its possibility of succeeding and its possibility of being implemented elsewhere. Or is perhaps such a formula of Christian higher education restricted to a specific time and a specific culture?

If the development of Christian higher education within a country is so closely oriented to the task of the inner reformation of science, a **second** aspect of general importance has to be mentioned, namely, the relation between Christian higher education and its original support community. The start of the Free University occurred in the context of a deeply conscious orthodox-Reformed community, which, though clearly in a minority position, wholeheartedly wanted to participate in that great task of the inner reformation of the sciences. Within a century, however, a lot can change, and indeed has changed in the Netherlands. The supporting community is socially and religiously no longer the same as before, and neither is the Free University as the mother institution of Dutch Christian higher education. Many observers, especially from abroad, deplore this change and are puzzled by it. What caused this transition, which they usually describe as a transition in the direction of a broader, more liberal, and, to some extent, even politicized type of ecumenically oriented Christianity, and as a loss of distinctively Christian scientific contribution? This question is significant not only for the Dutch situation. What happened in the Netherlands can happen elsewhere—for example, in our Christian supporting constituencies and within our present institutions of Christian higher education. Is the Dutch history in this respect perhaps a "model" for what will happen in the future in most other countries?

The Origins of Dutch Neo-Calvinism

For a better understanding of the Dutch case of Christian higher education, due weight has to be given to its mainly **neo-Calvinistic** background. Neo-Calvinism is an expression, first used by E. Troeltsch, to indicate and summarize the renewed attention in the Netherlands at the end of the nine-

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teenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century to the social, political, and scientific implications of the teachings of John Calvin. It was a time in which the spirit of "Reveil"—a movement of Christian revival which started in Switzerland during the first half of the nineteenth century and influenced all of Western Europe—was still alive and had entered a new phase of reflection and organization. Groen van Prinsterer, one of the main leaders of the "Reveil" in the Netherlands, had paved the way for this new episode, despite the fact it was not part of his own intention. Although he himself had contributed greatly to a reflection on Christian policy, was an outspoken opponent of slavery in the Dutch colonies, and had given many years of his life to the struggle for Christian education, Groen van Prinsterer was not in favour of efforts to build a coherent world-and-life view or willing to commit himself to the construction of a network of Christian organizations.

But Abraham Kuyper, who was not only a man of deep spirituality but also a great intellectual and gifted organizer, did not have these reservations. Consciously he went back to Calvin's view on man, society, and state and tried to make it more adaptable, theoretically and practically, to his own time. So neo-Calvinism emerged with its own distinct world-and-life view. On this basis a network of Christian organizations came into existence. Abraham Kuyper was the founder not only of the Free University but also of the Anti-Revolutionary Party (which opposed the principles of the French revolution and was the first political party in the Netherlands) and of *De Standaard*, a daily newspaper for the Reformed community, the editorial columns of which he wrote for more than forty years. He was also the driving force behind the so-called *Doleantie*, out of which the Free Reformed Churches (*Gereformeerde Kerken*) arose as a separate ecclesiastical institution. Even more than sixty years after his death, the Netherlands would no doubt be a different place had Kuyper not lived and done what he did. Just to indicate his enormous influence, I can even tell my own life story in Kuyperian terms. Since my birth, I have been a member of the **Gereformeerde Kerken**; I went to **his** type of Christian school; I was a member of parliament for **his** Anti-Revolutionary Party, and I am now a professor in **his** Free University. If I publish in a daily paper, I usually do so in **Trouw**, the direct successor of **his** *De Standaard*. So I can say without any exaggeration that Abraham Kuyper succeeded in moulding my life from his sixty-year-old grave.

But when something lasts for such a long time, it is an indication that more than merely a deliberate personal influence is at work, that other factors play a role, no matter how great a genius that person may have been. No doubt this is true in the Dutch case. Kuyper's influence was so great because what he said, did, and wrote resounded deeply in the hearts and minds of many Reformed people, "de kleine luyden," or "little folks." As

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an orthodox-Reformed minority, mainly from the lower social classes, this group felt a deep inner resistance against all the enlightenment principles of the French Revolution. These principles they saw, especially because of the work of Groen van Prinsterer, as the direct fruits of the new atheism of a gradually secularizing culture. Abraham Kuyper did not have any difficulty in explaining to them that politics as well as education and science were falling prey to the spirit of an atheistic humanism, and that, to be able to fight against this powerful enemy, the best strategy was to unite the Reformed-orthodox community in a series of Christian organizations, not—and this is important—to withdraw from the world and to be safe and saved within their own Reformed subculture. His intention was just the opposite, namely, to stand together in the midst of an increasingly pagan world. Did not Max Weber describe Calvinism as an “innerweltliche Askese,” an asceticism in the midst of the world? This pagan world has to be fought in terms of its principles, in terms of its whole way of living and thinking, and, therefore, Christians have to stand together in an almost ascetic way.

This was also the context in which Christian higher education in the Netherlands was born. From the beginning the name “Free University” meant more than just “freedom from the State.” It also meant freedom in all their scientific efforts *from* all atheistic-humanistic presuppositions and freedom *to* a serviceability in the kingdom of God. For also in science neutrality is impossible. Even though it is a domain of “common grace,” in which Christians and non-Christians have to work and live together, also in the midst of that domain there is the religious “antithesis,” the great opposition between the kingdom of God and the powers of darkness and unbelief. Therefore, no one can escape the choice to which kingdom he wants to belong. For, as Kuyper said, there is no realm or domain of this world about which Jesus does not say, “It is mine.” For this reason, his banners should be visible everywhere. Or, as Kuyper wrote in his *Theological Encyclopedia* (1893), all science, also the science-of-unbelief, presupposes a kind of faith or belief—a deep trust in the I, in the self-consciousness, or in the rational laws of thought. Therefore, “even the simple question, if you believe with all your heart in God or are just a pantheist, is decisive for your entire field of scientific inquiry.”²² No one can escape this basic choice; everyone is part of that fundamental struggle.

Dutch Neo-Calvinism in Crisis

To any observer from the outside, it may sometimes appear as though in neo-Calvinism a general instructs his armed forces. And no doubt, there is a kind of military flavour present here. Atheism is the great enemy, and this enemy can be fought not only by attacking its spiritual roots but also by fighting its practical consequences. And this calls for organizational efforts. Everywhere a battle is going on, and everywhere the enemy has to

be resisted through institutional or organizational counteraction.

It is easy to see that this view of reality can have an enormous appeal to Christian people. It is for every sincere Christian a great honour to be elected to take a stand and to fight for the kingdom of God, and to know that, even if you are despised by others, you may and must just follow King Jesus. Because of this, there is also a very clear link between this way of participation in the fullness of life (in Christ) and the rapid "emancipation" of the "little folks" within Dutch society during the first part of the twentieth century.

But a deep and even painful question remains: namely, how far can this battle be seen as *the* struggle of every Christian, and whether it may be identified with the manifestation of the kingdom of God in this world. Is this effort to place the banner of Christ in every part of life not doomed to fail, "a victory caught too early"—the title of a penetrating study of Dr. A.A. van Ruler about the Kuyperian epoch—for the simple reason that in every human plan of action and organization sin creeps in always and everywhere?

This question became increasingly dominant in the period after Kuyper's death in 1920 and especially after the Second World War. Many Christians joined the "break-through" (*doorbraak*) movement and became members of non-Christian organizations. They rejected the practical fruits or implications of all these so-called "Christian principles" for political and social life—for example, the maintenance of the Dutch colonial authority in the Dutch East Indies or Indonesia. It became increasingly clear for many Christians that the "antithesis" between light and darkness runs straight through the heart of every human organization.

But what must be done at such a time with one's Christian parties, Christian newspapers, Christian trade unions, Christian broadcasting corporations, Christian employers' organizations, and last, but not least, with one's Christian schools and with Christian higher education? It will be clear that none of these were exempt from this broad crisis in Dutch neo-Calvinism! Almost nowhere in the whole world has the possibility or impossibility of Christian education been so thoroughly discussed as in post-war Dutch society.

Though the discussion about all these issues still goes on in the Netherlands—Dutch people never stop discussing anything—it can nevertheless now be said that some crystallization of opinions has taken place. And it may be good to share this with the participants of this conference, because it gives you at the same time some insight into the strengths and weaknesses of Dutch neo-Calvinism up to this moment.

An Evaluation of Dutch Neo-Calvinism

First, it can be said that there is an almost common opinion in the Netherlands that it is impossible to neglect neo-Calvinism as an important

cultural factor. This implies that one cannot regard it seriously as merely and only a mistake or failure from the beginning. If even voluntary Christian associations with massive memberships last for more than a hundred years, then in one way or another they must have had an appeal to the public and developed their own significant style.

In this context it is very important to be aware of one of the most characteristic elements of Dutch neo-Calvinism, namely, its total rejection of any kind of “otherworldliness” or escapism. There has been in that movement from the beginning a deep resistance to any seemingly pious effort to “use” the different domains of life—scientific, political, cultural, educational—as merely a kind of platform to “launch” the message of the gospel. The motivation for that deep resistance was certainly *not* that the gospel needs no witness, or that evangelism is of minor importance. The real motive was from the very start that the message of the Bible touches all the various ways of life in such a radical way that it wants to restore all these ways of life to what they were originally meant to be by the Lord-Creator. Hence, the contribution of Christians should always be fully in accordance with the specific character and (creational) colour of every “sphere” of life. Already Groen van Prinsterer made the remark that Christian policy is not identical with “evangelism” in the political realm, but with living and acting according to the norm of justice or the way justice is taught in the Word of God. Why? Because *doing* justice is, so to say, the concrete answer that has to be given by the state to its specific calling from God. By acting justly in a non-discriminatory way to all its citizens, the government, as it were, “confesses” Christ. Always and in every activity the fullness of life has to be taken into account, in order to be or become the salt of the earth.

In my opinion, this is and has always been an element of strength in Dutch neo-Calvinism and the orthodox-Reformed community in the Netherlands. One could never say that Calvinist scientists were not good scientists, that Christian journalists were not good journalists, or that Calvinist politicians were not good politicians. It was their pride to be really good in their own task, which they saw as their vocation. At the same time, their Calvinism implies that they did not fear to be different—an attitude that also leads to a critical stance towards the existing structures of society. Well-known is the sharp critique by Abraham Kuyper of what he termed the “architecture” of society, which he thought to be rotten and wrong in its very foundations. For him a clear connection existed between the kingdom of God and the poor and, at the same time, an absolute contradiction existed between that kingdom and capitalism, “a society bowed into dust to serve Mammon.” Therefore, he wished and worked for another “furnishing” of the house of society itself.

This combination of fearless critique and professional pride can also be found in the search of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, two Free University

professors, for the completion of a separate Christian philosophy, the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea. Opinions may differ strongly about the content of their effort, but no critic ever stated or could say that it was not really *philosophy*. It was also widely recognized that their critique was sharp and to the point. In their work, one can find a direct echo of what Kuyper wrote about the impossibility of scientific neutrality. With their great spiritual and intellectual capacities they could clearly demonstrate that neutrality or absence of values in scientific efforts results in antinomies or logical inconsistencies.

But this strength of Dutch neo-Calvinism has also its shadow-sides. Surveying in 1987 the six decades of the post-Kuyperian epoch, we can without much difficulty indicate these shadow-sides quite clearly.

The **first** shadow-side of neo-Calvinism was and is its rationalistic constructivism. We mentioned already that Abraham Kuyper tried to build a coherent world-and-life view from which a whole network of Christian organizations originated. *Socially*, this involved not only the risk of the growth of a rather isolated Calvinistic sub-culture, but also the increase of feelings of superiority, arrogance, and a sense of belonging to an "elect" minority—one of the most nasty consequences of every process of "pillarization." But also *intellectually* there has been and still is the danger of rationalistic constructivism—for example, where the challenge of Christian policy and the Christian renewal of science was interpreted as an invitation to erect completely new artificial systems of "derived" principles. It was one of the main reasons for the spiritual decline of the Anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands, especially between the two world wars.

The **second** shadow-side of Dutch neo-Calvinism has been and is that it so easily leads to erections of personal and collective "empires." It is one thing to start an institution or association from a deep and living motivation; it is something else to make it work from day to day and to maintain it. The willingness to take real risks diminishes; practical expertise becomes more and more important, approaching or even going over the brim of pragmatism; and, on the basis of increased influence in society, persons create their own islands of personal ambition. The original spirituality fades away; there is not only something to win, but also something to prevent and to protect. Many Christian organizations in the Netherlands, for example, now prefer a merger with non-Christian institutions if the survival of the Christian organization is threatened or if other benefits can be reaped. Or, they just choose to remain a "Christian" organization, not because of a deeply felt need, but because changing the name could lead to a loss of at least a part of their constituency. Perhaps they are dead branches of a dying tree?

The Present Situation

No doubt more weak points could be mentioned. But these two suffice

if we want to explain the strong reaction against the organizational side of the Reformed community of the Netherlands at this moment. For these negative attitudes have their source mainly in that strong reaction against the shadow-sides of neo-Calvinism as an empire, a reaction which has had two sides from the beginning.

1. If and in so far as feelings of arrogance, superiority, and pride had become a natural part of neo-Calvinistic culture, the natural reaction was, and is, to feel ashamed for so many expectations that were not realized, and to say fully good-bye to those far-reaching intentions. There is then also a natural inclination to reject all forms of dogmatism or rationalized systems of belief. Christian life is a matter of modesty, of personal existential decisions, of the rejection of belonging to an elect minority.

2. If and in so far as neo-Calvinism has fostered and encourages empire building and produces sometimes a sterile complex of institutions and organizations which stand by themselves and relate to a past which they themselves scarcely remember, then the natural reaction is to openly challenge this frozen world and to test it in terms of good and bad, or, if it is concluded that such testing has become a hopeless effort, to leave it forever.

If these two aspects of disappointment are combined with the above-mentioned "strong" element in Dutch neo-Calvinism—namely, its deep respect for this created world in which we have to fulfill our vocation—then something becomes clear about the prevalent attitudes in the mainstream of the Dutch Reformed community, which are different from the attitudes in the recent past and puzzle so many observers from abroad. What looks like liberalism in these attitudes is often more anti-dogmatism or, better, anti-constructivism. What looks like losing the ideal of the inner reformation of science in a Christian way is often more a fruit of an inner rejection of rationalism and a plea to maintain personal and existential elements in a Christian's scientific contribution. And what looks like a kind of horizontalism and a rejection of the heritage of the past is in fact far more a kind of revitalization of the mandate to stand in *this* world against injustice, against the structures of egoistic self-interest, against all deformations of truth, or, in short, against the present day expressions of the kingdom of darkness, regardless of whether it manifests itself inside the so-called Christian world or outside that world. The openness in the mainstream of the Dutch Reformed community towards global ecumenical movements and its interest in issues of war and peace, ecology, and roots of racism and poverty are not a denial of its own past; it is mainly a fruit of still standing in the heart of that original revivalistic movement, but now without the arms and legs of its later organizational manifestation (and subse-

quent deformation).

Other things could be mentioned as well, including decay, for example, of public morality. But if only these negative aspects are stressed in our evaluation of the Dutch Reformed community, then, in my opinion, real mistakes are made. In dealing with Christian associations and institutions, we should remember that we live in another cultural phase, a phase that has made us more critical, perhaps too critical. It would not only be incorrect, however, but also painful, if this attitude in the Netherlands were merely interpreted as a blunt scepticism or as a sign of a loss of all true spirituality.

With respect to the issue of Christian education, it is quite remarkable how deep in the Netherlands the resistance is against the present governmental policy to "modernize" school education according to the uniform standards of success, that is, mainly according to standards of the modern business enterprise. For instance, the "Union for School and Gospel" (Unie School en Evangelie, the origins of which go back to the time of Groen van Prinsterer) openly fights for the possibility to devise its own type of examinations, to prevent schools being degraded from living communities to factories for the transfer of knowledge and information. The "Second School Struggle," as it is sometimes called, has scarcely begun, but in thousands of Christian schools in the Netherlands enough faith, courage, and vitality seem to be present to challenge the present powers dehumanizing modern education in the name of an endlessly demanding higher productivity.

Concluding Remarks About the Comparison Between the Netherlands and South Africa

South Africa is the second case study on this last day of our conference. It is a country which, especially on the Afrikaaner side, is also deeply influenced by Calvinism. There were numerous contacts between the two countries, and it even has to be said that the ideology of apartheid consists also of elements that can be found in Kuyper's theology. And, indeed, there are striking parallels between the original Dutch and the present South-Afrikaaner neo-Calvinism, not only in terms of an antithetic militant attitude to the "outside" world, but also in terms of feelings of superiority, belonging to a chosen minority, and a strong awareness of an inalienable task and vocation. How then can it be explained that the distance and degree of disagreement between the mainstream of the South African Reformed community and the Dutch Reformed community have become so extremely great? Is this just a question of two sisters living in hate?

No doubt it is true that similarity in origin can lead to great divergences—it is not nice to look very much alike. But certainly more is at stake. Two considerations may be helpful here.

The first is that from the beginning Afrikaaner Calvinism has in some aspects been very different. We miss in it the sharp critique of the political

and economic structuration of society, which was so crucial and central in Kuyper's message, and also Kuyper's emphasis on the priority of the poor. Theologically the moderating element of **common grace**, which binds Christians and non-Christians together in a same world and society, has been to a high extent absent in South African theology. As a result, subcultural isolation got more chances in South Africa. Remarkable, too, is the heavy emphasis in South African theology on the presence of sin. "The white man always refers to the brokenness of this world, but he uses it as a legitimation for sin," so Rev. Eliah Tema once said to me. And, finally, it is not without great significance that the right to resist a government—a typical element in Calvin's teaching on civil society—is in fact non-existent in South African Calvinism, while it played a vital role in the foundation of the Dutch republic. These and other factors have, no doubt, hardened white Afrikaaner racism. But there is also a second reason, perhaps less well-known, but for this audience, not less significant.

During the school struggle in the Netherlands in the midst of the nineteenth century, Groen van Prinsterer was at first an outspoken supporter of the idea of public Christian schools for all children (except for religious minorities, who could have their own schools). But the liberals in Groen's day were willing to give in only under the condition that the Christianity taught in the public schools would be a Christianity that was oriented to general virtues and was beyond all difference of faith. In that dilemma—Groen wrestled with that problem for a long time—he finally chose openly and clearly for the viewpoint of leaving the public (or state) school without any claims of Christianity and of fighting for the recognition of separate Christian schools, supported only by the parents themselves.

This choice has been of utmost significance for the development of Dutch society and for the formation of Dutch neo-Calvinism in later years. But in South Africa, as far as I know, such a choice was not made. Public schools there still presuppose a kind of general, orthodox Christianity, but at the same time they are fully open to all kinds of nationalistic indoctrination. "Kristelijk-nasionaal" is the watchword, in which "nasionaal" refers to the willingness to defend their own Afrikaaner identity at all costs.

Of course, every explanation of what is now happening in South Africa—in terms of oppression, blatant discrimination, and torturing even of children—must fail at least to some extent. In its final root, evil is always a mystery, and capable of building its own escalation. That the educational situation in South Africa plays an important role in this is beyond any doubt, which gives all of us a lot to think about, responsible as we are for the presence and future of Christian education in all our different countries.

NOTES

¹Quoted by W.J. Wierenga, "De Vrije Universiteit als bijzondere instelling" in *Wetenschap in rekenschap, Gedenboek bij het honderjarig bestaan van de Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam* (Kampen, 1980), p. 15.

²Quoted by Wierenga, "De Vrije Buniversiteit als bijzondere instelling," p. 18.