

## VISION AND REVISION

(a brief history of neo-Calvinism in The Netherlands and Canada)

Harry A. Van Belle, Ph.D.

The King's University College

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

### I. NEO-CALVINISM IN THE NETHERLANDS

Dutch neo-Calvinism began during the previous century as a Reformed reaction to modernity. Its roots go all the way back to the Sixteenth Century Protestant Reformation, but its more immediate impetus lies in the Evangelical Revival which swept through Europe during the Nineteenth Century. In this chapter we will explore the origins of neo-Calvinism, its history in the Netherlands, before 1950 and the impact this movement has had on the Reformed Dutch immigrant community in Canada after 1950.

Western societies have changed radically over the past several centuries, due largely to the process of modernization, or to the establishment of a "capitalist, industrial socio-economic order" (Berger 1967, 132). These changes have had a profound effect upon religious groups within Western societies as well. Until recently, it was commonly held that, because of its secularizing tendencies, this modernization process would eventually spell the demise of religion. As is now more and more evident, religion has proven to be more vital, flexible, and persistent than was initially supposed. Thus, for example, more recent theories of secularization attempt to differentiate between the decline of *religion* (in its formal, organized, and institutionalized form) and the persistence of the *religious* (in its personal, individualized, private form) (Beckford & Luckman 1989).

#### A. MODERNISM AND THE NINETEENTH CENTURY REVIVAL MOVEMENT

That modernization necessarily leads to secularization was the belief of the neo-Enlightenment movement of Modernism, which had its heyday in Nineteenth Century Europe. Like the Classical Enlightenment of earlier times it espoused the centrality of

reason over religion in human life (Kluit 1970, 12). But even during the Nineteenth Century this Modernistic view met with considerable resistance. It came to expression in the Nineteenth Century Evangelical Revival movement which spread across Europe and also influenced Christendom in the Netherlands (Kluit, 80).

Throughout Europe the State supported churches of that time had become influenced by the spirit of Modernism. These State churches preached a rational/reasonable religion (Kluit, 209), which gave many of its members little comfort or direction for their everyday lives. To these people, the existing official, State sanctioned churches espoused a formal, institutional religion which deviated from the religion of the bible (Kluit, 13-15).

They yearned to return to what they saw as the central message of the Gospel, that of sin, salvation and repentance (Kluit, 151) and in reaction to this status-quo church religion, they began to practice a private, family religion, a religion which had as its aim personal piety. To that end they met in each others' houses on week nights and Sundays for bible study and prayer (Kluit, 167). Today these meetings might be called "households of faith, grow groups, cell groups or cottage meetings". At that time they were called "conventicles". This practice was the beginning of a continent-wide Evangelical revival in Europe.

The principle factor uniting these Revivalists throughout Europe was their pietism. These people emphasized the centrality of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Over against the State religion they promoted a personal religion for the private sphere (Grosheide & Van Itterzon 1960, vol.V, 627-629). Today these Revivalists might be variously called Evangelicals, Charismatics, or Fundamentalists.

## **B. NEO-CALVINISM: DUTCH BRANCH OF THE REVIVAL MOVEMENT**

All across Europe the views and practices of the Revivalists brought them in conflict with the officials of the State church. Their convictions also put them at odds with the officials of the State, who saw themselves as the protectors of official religion, and who considered the behavior of the Revivalists as a source of disunity in the church and in the State. The legal tool they used to prevent the Revivalists from meeting was usually a

version of the Napoleonic Code Penal which forbade groups of more than twenty people from meeting without permission of the State (Kluit, 248; Grosheide & Van Itterson, vol.V, 627-629) .

The Dutch adherents of the Revival movement were frequently harassed and subjected to measures that ranged anywhere from fines to jail terms, merely for meeting together (Kluit, 248). As a result of this harassment, many of the Revivalists decided to secede from the State church, the *Hervormde Kerk*, in 1834 and to form their own denomination. They called themselves the *Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk*. Yet another group seceded fifty-two years later, in 1886, and they were known as the people of the *Doleantie*, or the people who 'mourned' (the apostasy of the State church). In 1892 these two denominations united to become the *Gereformeerde Kerken*, or Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (Bratt 1984, 3-13; Grosheide & Van Itterson 1960, vol.I, 98-104, vol.II, 448, vol.III,187-190).

While the Revival movement counted many prominent figures as its members, not many of them decided to join the seceded churches. This left these churches with a membership that was largely made up of politically, economically and educationally *kleine luyden*, literally 'people of little means'. Thus, they had little influence on the public affairs of the country and, in spite of their considerable number, changed little about the status quo, at least initially (Bratt 1984, 6).

They did, however, have a charismatic leader in the person of Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper had been raised and educated in a modernistic environment. He had a religious conversion later in his life. This led to his resolve to lead these *kleine luyden* into the mainstream of Dutch public life by educating them and by uniting them into a viable Christian political and cultural force. This was the beginning of what is now known as the neo- Calvinist movement.

The Nineteenth Century Revival movement demonstrated the tenacity of the religious in the lives of many Christians, the beliefs of Modernism notwithstanding. It showed how people can accommodate themselves to the banishment of religion from public life by practicing it in their private lives. But it may be questioned whether religion lives on *only* in the private sphere. Neo-Calvinists were not content with defending the relevance of religion by assigning to it some "religious" area of life called "private, personal, or individual", next to other, "cultural, social, economic, political and scientific" areas. Instead they argued that life as a whole, including its so-called "public" areas, is

essentially religious. And they demonstrated the validity of their thesis by erecting an array of religiously motivated cultural, social, economic and educational institutions.

By institutionalizing their opposition, i.e. by concretizing their own neo-Calvinist world view into cultural, social, economic, political and educational action, they provided the prevailing sentiment of Modernism with a challenging alternative.

The reason for their energetic attempts at erecting and transforming societal structures in a Christian-Calvinist direction was their conviction that religion must be lived publicly to be authentic. For them personal faith must have public relevance.

The more immediate impetus for their action lay in the preceding Revival movement. In that sense they were *neo-Calvinists*. But they differed from the Revivalists in that they found their ultimate spiritual/historical roots in the Calvinist Reformation of the Sixteenth Century. In that sense they were *neo-Calvinists*. The birth of the Netherlands in the Sixteenth Century had been inextricably intertwined with the Calvinistic religion. Moreover, together with Christian Humanism, Calvinism has had a considerable influence on Dutch life ever since. (Schuchart 1972; Schama 1988). Thus, by calling themselves Calvinists, the neo-Calvinists could lay claim to considerable historical continuity.

Typically, Calvinists have a deep sense of God's guiding, providing and calling presence in their lives. They trust God to help them through whatever difficulty they may have to face and they see it as their mission in life to serve Him with the whole of their being (Van Belle & Disman 1990). Schama (1988, 26) refers to this religious attitude in his description of the 'eleventh hour rescue' which depicts the conviction of Sixteenth Century Reformed Calvinists that God has a tendency to come to the rescue precisely when the need is the greatest and all seems lost.

Kuyper appealed to this centuries old religious attitude when he sought to mold the *kleine luyden* into a viable political and cultural force. He got their attention, and later claimed their allegiance, via his often repeated slogan that Christ is King, or Lord, over all of life, i.e. not just in the church, but also in the rest of life, not just in the private sphere but also in the public arena.

For the *kleine luyden* this phrase had a dual meaning. It was, first of all, a comfort for them. They believed that, if Christ was King, then He would also look after them and that, therefore, they had no need to worry. Second, for them this slogan also represented a call to action. If Christ claimed to be King over the whole of their lives, then they had also better serve Him with the whole of their lives, in education as well as in worship, in the state as well as in the church and the home, communally as well as individually -- in public, as well as in private (Algra 1965, 304-316; Bratt 1984, 14-33; Grosheide 1960, vol.IV, 346-351; Langley 1984).

It was the dual meaning of the slogan that Christ is Lord over all of life, which formed the spiritual mainspring of neo-Calvinism. This firm conviction, together with a clear program of action and strong leadership, united these neo-Calvinist *kleine luyden* of the Nineteenth Century into a formidable cultural and political force in only a few decades. By the turn of the century, they had, in addition to their own churches, their own religiously based day schools, university, newspapers, housing projects, social service societies, labor unions, business organizations and political parties.

As a community, they were, to use Breton's phrase (1965), "institutionally complete". Life inside this neo-Calvinist community was lived in terms of a common pattern of rituals. They prayed before and after every meal and read the bible morning, noon and night. They attended church twice every Sunday, as children they went to catechism and to a Christian day school and as young people they participated in their youth clubs. These clubs were primarily discussion groups in which young people learned to apply neo-Calvinist principles to their lives, and in learning this, formed their own neo-Calvinist identity. Finally, as adults they were actively engaged in the work of their church, of their political party and of their Christian organizations. Thus, in many ways they participated in the life of their neo-Calvinist community.

There were, of course, other influences at work in this community as well, and not all of its members always acted as described. Neo-Calvinism only set the tone. But there is considerable evidence to indicate that this was an exceptionally cohesive community and that the influence of neo-Calvinism was pervasive in the life of its members.

Politically, these neo-Calvinists also felt quite secure. They had become a force to be reckoned with in Dutch public life. They comprised no more than 9% of the Dutch population and never got more than 16% of the vote. Nevertheless, between 1900-1950, for at least six times, one of their own was elected prime minister of the Netherlands,

with Kuyper being the first (Van Belle 1991a, 308-338; Colijn 1929, 6-12; Langley 1984).

### C. DUTCH NEO-CALVINISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Neo-Calvinism was a timely response to the cultural-historical situation of the late Nineteenth Century. In its time and place it was an effective public Christian witness against the prevailing mood of Modernism. But now, one hundred years later, the question is valid whether it was anything more than a time-and-place bound historical phenomenon.

In one sense it is, namely, in its assertion that the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life is a perpetually contemporaneous confession.

A brief account of the history of Dutch neo-Calvinism during the first half of the Twentieth Century will illustrate the importance of this assertion and what was meant by it.

As the prefix 'neo-' indicates, they saw their movement as more than a mere perpetuation of the Calvinist tradition, even though they certainly believed themselves to be rooted in that tradition. They saw their movement as a reformation of the Reformation. In the last of his series of six lectures on Calvinism, delivered at Princeton University in 1898, Kuyper told his audience that they should

not copy the past, as if Calvinism were a petrification, but

go back to the living root of the Calvinistic plant, clean and water it, and so cause it to bud and to blossom once more, now fully in accordance with our actual life in these modern times, and with the demands of the times to come,... *a new Calvinistic development needed by the wants of the future* (1931).

It was a fundamental article of faith for the neo-Calvinists that to be Reformed meant to be reforming. What they had in mind was the ongoing task of perpetually reforming

their existing cultural/historical context, but also their own views and practices, in a Christian direction. They were to be Reformational. This slogan was their answer to reactionary, as well as revolutionary tendencies in their environment and within themselves.

During the first half of the Twentieth Century, Dutch neo-Calvinists proved themselves to be purer in doctrine than in practice on this point. Once these erstwhile *kleine luyden* had become culturally and politically established, they confined themselves, by and large, to perpetuating the life style, and system of public participation, they had forged for themselves during the previous century. They began to live their lives in terms of 'pillars', or religious blocs. While this drew them closer to one another, it isolated them from those who were not neo-Calvinist. They considered the question of how to relate to the non-Calvinists as settled: You in your small corner, and I in mine. The boundaries had been drawn, all that was needed was to defend them. ( Van Kaam 1964, 271-275, Van Belle 1991b).

This view of private and public life clearly ran counter to what Kuyper himself envisioned as the end product of the neo-Calvinist Reformation. This is evident from a speech, which he gave in 1912, entitled *Uit Het Diensthuis Uitgeleid*, (Liberated From Bondage). In this speech, Kuyper first spent some time recounting the battle to gain public recognition by the neo-Calvinists over the past half century. But then he went on to argue that, now that the members of the community had achieved what they had fought for in the previous century and had become culturally and politically established, it was time for them to change their ways.

Whereas previously it had been necessary to oppose members of other faith communities, now it was their responsibility to join them in the common task of running the country. They were to exchange their swords for trowels. They were to become builders rather than warriors. Instead of the adversary principle, Kuyper now stressed the spirit of common cause and cooperation. Whereas before, Kuyper had emphasized the importance of principled action, now he cautioned his followers to clearly distinguish between being principled and being stubborn.

Without such a change in attitude and strategy, Kuyper feared that the distance between the neo-Calvinists and other faith communities would become too great. It would become impossible for neo-Calvinists to work together with others for the common good

of the Netherlands. He also feared that, without this change in emphasis, schismatic tendencies would unduly gain the upper hand within the neo-Calvinist community itself.

Kuyper's call toward greater ecumenicity went unheeded for a long time. In fact, it was not until well after World War II, in the 1950's, that the neo-Calvinists in Holland began to practice what he preached in 1912, and when they finally did, they did so with a vengeance. As Dekker has shown (1992), not only have they joined hands with the others over the past four decades, they have become virtually indistinguishable from them (see also Dekker and Peters, 1989).

## II. NEO-CALVINISM IN CANADA

The influence of Dutch neo-Calvinism in its traditional form continues to be felt in Canada, and perhaps elsewhere, albeit on a much smaller scale. In Canada the influence of neo-Calvinism has been largely restricted to the Reformed Dutch-Canadian immigrant community. This religio-ethnic community is made up of Dutch immigrants with a Reformed background, most of whom immigrated to Canada between 1950 and 1960. Even today, the people who comprise this community number fewer than 120,000, in a country with about 28 million inhabitants. Thus, their influence on mainstream Canada can hardly be considered significant.

Nevertheless, within this community neo-Calvinism has had a major impact over the last four decades. It has significantly shaped the way these Dutch immigrants have attempted to integrate themselves into the Canadian context (Van Belle, 1990).

### A. THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH AND NEO-CALVINISM IN CANADA

The Christian Reformed Church of North America played a major role in the establishment of the Reformed Dutch community in Canada. This denomination traces its origin back to the Secession of 1834. It will be recalled that in 1834 a large number of Reformed Christians in the Netherlands seceded from the State church to form the *Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk* of the Netherlands. In 1846, and for some years thereafter, a sizable number of the members of this new denomination emigrated to the United States of America, under the leadership of the Revs. Van Raalte and Scholte,

with the intention of establishing Dutch Reformed colonies in Western Michigan and South-East Iowa (Algra 1965, 181).

After only a few years in the USA, the leaders of these colonies decided to join the Reformed Church of America (RCA). This denomination had been in existence in the USA for several hundred years and dates back to the time when New York was still a Dutch colony. Not all the members of the Dutch Reformed colonies agreed with this merger and their objections led them to secede from the RCA and to form the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRC) in 1857.

This new denomination grew rapidly and by the beginning of the Twentieth Century it had well over 100 congregations all over the USA (Bratt 1984, 222). Between 1900 and 1950 it even managed to plant a handful of Christian Reformed churches in Canada, specifically in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario. But it was not until the 1950's that the CRC saw a major expansion in Canada as the result of a wave of post-war Reformed immigrants from Holland. When it occurred, the growth of the Canadian CRC was truly phenomenal. In 1950, for instance, there were only 15 CRC congregations in Canada, in 1960, this number had risen to 131 (CRC Yearbook, 1950, 1960).

This growth in newly formed Canadian congregations was due mainly to a policy by the CRC to appoint field men and home missionaries in all regions of Canada. These representatives of the CRC did whatever they could to ease the pain that attended the immigrants' transition from one culture to another and in doing so they gathered them into communities of like-minded strangers in a foreign land.

## B. FORTY YEARS OF NEO-CALVINISTIC THOUGHT AND ACTION

These post-war immigrants did not immigrate to Canada with the intention of establishing Reformed Dutch enclaves on this continent. Their motives for immigrating were much more mundane. They left for economic reasons, or because space to live was scarce in post-war Holland. They left to avoid a third world war, or immigrated out of a sheer sense of adventure. Whatever reason they had, it was not missionary zeal that made them go.

But when they arrived in Canada, they found that many of the Christian cultural institutions, to which they had been accustomed in the Netherlands, were lacking in Canada and they soon set out to erect them in typical neo-Calvinist fashion. Neo-Calvinist ventures were going on all over Canada. The number and variety of ecclesiastical, educational, economic, social and political institutions the Canadian Reformed Dutch have erected over the past four decades is impressive. Next to a large number of churches, many primary and secondary schools have been built, as well as several post-secondary institutions. In addition, the Reformed Dutch have formed their own associations in the area of politics, labor, business, agriculture, mental health, elder care and social welfare. The Reformed Dutch in Canada have been busy since the time of their immigration four decades ago (Van Belle 1990, 1991a, 1994).

### III. CONCLUSION

It seems, then, that the activity of establishing separate Christian organizations, so typical of traditional neo-Calvinism, waned among neo-Calvinists in The Netherlands after 1950. But it has continued unabated among neo-Calvinist Dutch immigrants in Canada, albeit on a much more modest scale.

Canada is a pluralistic country, where diversity is encouraged rather than opposed. Thus, when the Reformed Dutch arrived in Canada, they found it relatively easy to establish their own institutions.

But Canadian pluralism is a kind of double-edged sword for neo-Calvinists, because it is a *cultural* pluralism rather than a *religious* pluralism. That is, in Canada people are classified into groups according to their ethnic origin, or the geographic region in which they reside, *not* according to their religious belief. This means that religion is not a *public* factor in Canada. It is considered to be a *private* matter.

Canada has always been characterized by an uneasy balance between public and private matters. However, for all their talk about *multiculturalism*, in the final analysis, Canadians will assign primary status to public matters. Diversity is tolerated, and even encouraged, but it is not allowed to interfere with the public business of the country (Page 1992, 35-51).

As long as this public-private distinction is maintained, religiously based cultural action will receive only secondary status in Canada and Canadian neo-Calvinists will face an uphill in making their voice heard. One might wonder, therefore, why, rather than assimilating themselves as quickly as possible into existing Canadian institutions, the Reformed Dutch in Canada formed their own institutions in the first place.

One reason may be that the Reformed Dutch, being immigrants, erected their own institutions in order to preserve their ethnic identity, as they sought to integrate themselves into the majority culture of their host country. But the institutions which immigrants form for this purpose are almost always social clubs which serve to keep their "symbolic" ethnicity alive (Gans 1979). This practice does not explain why the Reformed Dutch have almost exclusively formed *religiously based* organizations of their own.

In establishing their own churches and in building their own schools they were greatly supported by their counterpart in the USA. But in establishing religiously based institutions beyond the church and the school the Canadian Reformed Dutch were largely on their own since the Christian Reformed in the USA are generally not in favor of forming those organizations. There is evidence, that, at least, the founders of these organizations saw their immigrant situation as similar to the situation of Dutch neo-Calvinism a century ago (Van Belle 1994) and also that, like them, they formed their own institutions primarily for religious reasons (Van Belle & Disman 1989)

It is one thing for a group to establish its own organizations. It is quite another to maintain them and to make them grow. It is our impression that there is less enthusiasm among the Reformed Dutch in Canada today for separate religiously motivated institutions than there was before. It is somewhat ironic that this should be happening at a time when these organizations are at their peak in terms of their size and diversity. Yet, more and more the activities of the Reformed Dutch seem to center around the institution of the church alone.

Throughout its history the Reformed Dutch community in Canada has felt the influence of North American Evangelicalism with its pietistic, charismatic and fundamentalistic emphases. Initially this influence was minimal since the Reformed Dutch oriented themselves more to The Netherlands than to Canada. Now that they have become more established on the North American continent, this influence is being felt more fully. In respect to their relation to the Evangelicals the Reformed Dutch are presently in a bit of a

bind. As a community they form a rather insignificant minority in Canada. Thus, if neo-Calvinism is to have any impact on the larger Canadian scene, they will somehow have to convince the Canadian Evangelicals, who are religiously their closest kin, of its power. But as the community intensifies its contact with this larger religious group its unique neo-Calvinist character is being challenged. Thus, the Reformed Dutch in Canada may presently be in danger of losing their identity. However, the very fact that they have made their presence felt at all testifies to the vitality of neo-Calvinism as a life style.

As to the continuation of neo-Calvinism, much will depend on whether or not the next generation, born and raised in Canada, will take ownership of this movement. The future will tell. In any case, it is presently far too early to announce the demise of neo-Calvinism in Canada.

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