



The legacy of Groen van Prinsterer

"...Christians think too little about the necessity of good works and they remember too little that while man is nothing in himself, he can do everything through Christ. This is an insight which I will use profitably because I believe it is very important for both our age and our country. We must always keep in mind that (the Christian life) is neither by works nor without them."

Inspiration

These inspiring words about the importance of living the Christian life were penned by the father of the Anti-Revolutionary world view perspective, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, in writing to a friend on August 24, 1841. This important remark about the vital relationship between justification and sanctification spells out the connection between personal faith commitment and the concern to influence the religious direction of national life. This is one of many such observations made by this man of God during the Evangelical renewal movement known as the Réveil that swept through Europe more than a century ago.

We live at a time in which the Evangelical and Reformed world in North America stands at the crossroads either tempted to naively capitulate to the pressures of secularism or desiring to transform secular culture in its many aspects by the power of Christ the King. Groen was a transformationalist who boldly fought against capitulation to the secularism of his day. "The Gospel versus the Revolution" was his slogan. Lonely was his struggle, but he was faithful.

The Groenian legacy of Christian insight and faithfulness can be an important inspiration for our task today. The problems of militant secularism in personal and public life with which Groen struggled so valiantly long ago in The Netherlands have mushroomed into a crisis felt in the entire Western world and beyond.

Public career

In order to better understand Groen's important contribution to a Christian view of culture, it is necessary to present a few facts about his stormy career.

Born into an aristocratic family in 1801, he lived a comfortable life in The Hague as far as personal wealth was concerned. After undergoing a lengthy conversion experience, he surrendered his life to the Lord in 1833. Then this young nobleman turned his back on the cultured frivolity of the leisured class and consecrated his considerable academic talents gained at Leiden University to the Lord's service in private and public life. His wife Betsy was of great spiritual encouragement to him throughout his long life. An appointment as a staff member of the King's Cabinet between 1827 and 1833 put the young nobleman in touch with the problems of domestic and European political change that shaped his life-long concerns.

Groen's public career included significant contributions as historian, statesman, and publicist. Advocacy of church confessionalism in the Reformed tradition formed yet another important aspect of his activities.

His beloved historical work involved the publication of a huge number of documents of the House of Orange-Nassau of the Reformation period in many volumes and a Reformed interpretation of modern Dutch history in the influential *Handbook of the History of the Fatherland* (1846). This serious historical work laid the foundation for scholarly research in national origins emphasizing the

Reformed character of national development. The *Handbook* was the most widely circulated of his books during his lifetime. It was a standard text in Christian schools for several generations.

A quiet man, Groen was dedicated to the Lord's service in various aspects of public life due to the positive influence of his historical studies. Even though he experienced much discouragement, the Anti-Revolutionary leader persevered. Some of his favorite pastimes included serious conversations with his friends, writing letters to a host of correspondents, meeting Evangelical leaders all over Europe, and sending free copies of his books to various inquirers. In addition he attended many Bible studies and faithfully worshipped at the Waalse Kerk in The Hague. In all these endeavors Groen sought to promote the Reformed faith in the various aspects of life. Kindness towards his friends, patience with his opponents, and compassion toward the needy were characteristics he exhibited throughout his adult life.

Another important aspect of Groen's career was his role as a statesman. In 1840 and then between 1849 and 1865 (with several interruptions) he served as a Member of Parliament in the Second Chamber of the States-General in The Hague.

In making his entry into active politics in 1840 Groen published a lawyer's analysis of constitutional problems entitled *Contribution to Constitutional Revision in the Netherlandic Spirit*. In this manifesto the author called for a revision of the national Constitution to provide for governments to be responsible to parliament (and not merely to the King) as well as for the introduction of reforms insuring freedom of conscience, the press, worship, and education. A call was also made in this book for the infusion of Christian values in national life, including the reorganization of the public school along denominational lines of Reformed and Catholic. In this book published in 1840 Groen still assumed that The Netherlands was a Christian state.

Turning point

The year 1857 marked a turning point in Groen's political career, for then he recognized by the turn of events that the state was no longer Christian but secular. The Primary Education Act of 1857 first proposed by his former colleague, Premier Justinus van der Brugghen, was passed by the Liberal parliamentary majority of 47 votes in favor and 13 votes opposed (including Groen). This act provided for a secular public school based on an appeal to a vague deism disguised as Christianity that was supposedly offensive to no one and open to pupils of all beliefs. No longer would there be a public school which was in any clear sense Christian from an orthodox standpoint. The new religion of the public school was secular humanism. In effect, this legislation was a rejection of Groen's attempt to solve the school question by the introduction of denominational public schools. At this point Groen resigned his parliamentary seat, for he realized that the nation was no longer Christian. He was stunned. A few years later he was reelected to parliament, but this time as the champion of private Christian schools as the alternative to the secular public school with a deceptive Christian facade.

Groen also made a contribution as a publicist. At the beginning and the end of his career in the 1830s and the 1870s he published the periodical *Netherlands Reflections*. During the 1850s he edited *The Netherlander*. Both newspapers were the means by which he published his commentaries on current events. Likewise many occasional pamphlets of a polemical nature also flowed from his pen. Generally, these journalistic efforts were not very effective, since they were written in an obscure style and therefore appealed to few readers.

Much more significant in his publicistic efforts was his most important work, *Unbelief and Revolution* (1847). This prophetic study was probably the single most perceptive book produced by the North Atlantic Evangelical and Reformed renewal movements during much of the 19th century. It demonstrated that Groen was the first major thinker in the international Evangelical and Reformed community to seek to analyze comprehensively the fundamental problem of unbelieving secularism in both its revolutionary and elitist liberal varieties.

In his latter years Groen served as the distinguished elder statesman of the growing Anti-Revolutionary Party that was active in politics and in the struggle for Christian private education. In

1876 the old leader died. Many believers, great and small, paid tribute to him at the impressive funeral service.

Anti-Revolutionary perspective

Groen called his perspective the Anti-Revolutionary or Christian Historical world view. In fact it was an important initial contribution to an Evangelical and Reformed theology of culture.

There are four main aspects to the structure of Groen's thought: an independent Christian position, a Reformed hermeneutics, a cultural apologetics, and a politically spiritual attitude.

Following the Biblical tradition of Augustine and Calvin, Groen articulated an independent Christian position based on the infallible Bible and a perception of the fundamental antithesis in history between the City of Man and the City of God. Stress was put upon the conversion of the heart to Christ, the importance of the Reformation heritage for the modern world, and the Kingship of Christ over all aspects of created reality. In this statesman's view, the spiritual antithesis is between the gospel and humanism, while the historical antithesis is between the Reformation spirit of historical obedience to God's standards and the Revolution's spirit of modern secular indifference to Biblical norms. Due to his independent position based on the Bible, Groen differed from the conservatives of his day who opposed revolutionary change with a vague, scholastic notion of Natural Law.

The advocacy of a Reformed hermeneutics was the second aspect of the Anti-Revolutionary statesman's thought. He believed in the continuing normativity of the Ten Commandments seen in the light of the gospel and applied to contemporary problems by means of principles. The believer's responsibility, in his view, was both to preach the gospel and to seek to apply Christian values in the various aspects of life. A repressive, theocratic approach was rejected in favor of a Christian transformationalism peacefully applied in a pluralistic society. Thus the church has the spiritual task of preaching the Word and exercising ecclesiastical discipline while the state is to promulgate public justice. This Reformed hermeneutics separated Groen from the generally repressive approach of the Catholic opponents of the Revolution.

The articulation of a cultural apologetic or general defense of the faith was the third aspect of the Anti-Revolutionary world view. Groen sought to defend the orthodoxy of the Reformed confessions from the comprehensive attacks of the forces of humanistic unbelief in the culture. The reversal of values in religion and politics, he pointed out, gave rise to the frightful instability of the swing back and forth from individualistic anarchy to collectivistic tyranny seen first in the French Revolution of 1789 to 1799 and repeated often thereafter. Concerning this constant erosion of values in society, he wrote, *"There is a life-and-death struggle between the gospel and this practical godlessness..."* Hence the theoretical revolution of the denial of Christian values gave rise to political revolution as part of a vast secularizing process.

This cultural apologetics sought to reaffirm the legitimate function of the state as normed by God as a limited task, for believers to carry out a Christian witness for truth in historical studies against revolutionary falsification and in general uphold Christian principles in the culture against the rising tides of secular humanism. In his apologetical task Groen attempted to distinguish Christian truth from the various modern expressions of the religion of unbelief. With insight he observed:

"The Revolution is an all-embracing system for religion, law, and ethics; it is a reversal of ideas (by a rejection of revealed truth) in church, state, and society: Social Revolution.

"Liberalism in the historic-academic sense is this system of the Revolution tempered by implementation or situation. It is liberality from unchangeable law and the Supreme Law-Giver."

The cultivation of a politically spiritual attitude was the final aspect of this Anti-Revolutionary world view. Political spirituality involves the perception of the basic religious conflict between man's sin and God's grace in history and culture. The *Handbook* and *Unbelief and Revolution* contain many politically spiritual insights. This sanctified attitude enabled Groen to be edified as he studied revolutionary history and secular politics by comparing the sin of unbelief with the truthful

righteousness of God. Hence political conflicts are never merely political but always involve spiritual conflict.

"The preaching of the gospel is practical," he wrote, "even when it causes opposition. The articulation of Anti-Revolutionary truths is practical even when the Revolution principle is dominant ... This continual witness is itself dynamic action. The preaching of justice in the face of continual injustice is not superfluous."

Legacy

The legacy of Groen van Prinsterer includes the following propositions:

1. the Christian life involves both faith in Christ and a sense of stewardship over the talents and possessions given to us by God;
2. there is a basic antithesis between the Gospel of God's saving grace in its fullness and all forms of humanistic secularism;
3. in order to be true to the Lord, political expressions of our faith must be based on Biblical standards independent of all forms of humanism, including conservatism, liberalism, Marxism, etc.;
4. the articulation of a cultural apologetics and a politically spiritual attitude is basic to the goal of the transformation of the culture along Christian lines which involves the infusion of Biblical values into democratic procedure; and
5. the standards of private and public conduct as well as state authority ultimately come from the Bible formulated as principles to meet contemporary problems.

For many reasons this Anti-Revolutionary statesman is our contemporary. Like J. Gresham Machen of Westminster Seminary, he believed that Christianity (and its unfolding) is based on facts in history. Like Francis Schaeffer, he struggled to refine the meaning of Reformed Christianity in our secular world. In a real sense Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* is a chilling fulfillment of Groen's intuitive perception that unbelief and revolution lead to the concentration camp system of the USSR. Likewise, the Anti-Revolutionary statesman would have seen Lech Walesa's Solidarity free labor movement as the struggle by Catholic believers for the rights of groups suppressed by the Marxist Polish state.

Today the legacy of Groen van Prinsterer is needed to inspire us as we seek to serve the Lord in transforming a culture that is becoming ever more indifferent to God and His commandments.

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