Groen van Prinsterer’s interpretation of the French Revolution and the rise of ‘pillars’ in Dutch society

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The historian, publicist and statesman Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801–76) fathered a number of societal configurations in his country which to this day tie together the complex consociational democracy that is the Netherlands. He accomplished this on the basis of a comprehensive historical interpretation of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. He viewed the ‘Age of Reason and Revolution’ as the eclipse of Christendom and the emergence of post-Christian modernity, a vision which he summarized in his book of 1847, Ongeloof en Revolutie. In a long career he made it his mission to combat the fruits of ‘the Revolution’ as they were being harvested in his own time, and to formulate ‘anti-revolutionary’ or ‘Christian-historical’ alternatives for state and church, education, learning and scholarship.

Biographical sketch

Groen van Prinsterer was born near The Hague in 1801, the eldest child and only son of the court physician and the heiress of a Rotterdam banking family. The boy was reared with the greatest care, to which he responded well, excelling in French, geography and horsemanship. Late autumn 1813 finds him playing chess with a Cossack officer billeted in Dr Groen’s home during the liberation of Dutch soil in the final Allied campaign against Napoleon following the battle of Leipzig.

History does not record who won those matches, but we do know that the lad was precocious. Later, at university, it became an expression among several generations of students: ‘To speak Latin like Wim Groen.’
After six years at Leiden young Groen submitted two dissertations for which he was awarded a double doctorate, one in jurisprudence and one in letters. He fitted in well, and his prospects looked good, although attendance at Bilderdijk’s private seminar had taught him to keep a critical distance with respect to the received orthodoxy in matters historical and political.1

The year 1829 found Groen in Brussels. He was now the king’s personal recording secretary and had to compose concise summaries of the proceedings in the parliament of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. With mounting alarm he witnessed from the public gallery the rising agitation for revolt among liberal members from the South, and during lulls in the debates he sought guidance in the writings of Pascal, Burke and Lamennais. Before long he began to publish, anonymously, a weekly journal which he called Nederlandsche Gedachten and in which he criticized what he saw as a tug-of-war between autocratic royal centralism and parliamentary pretensions to sovereignty, both of which he came to see as being rooted in the new liberal doctrine of the state. Behind this doctrine in turn he saw the influence of Enlightenment philosophy with its substitution of divine right with popular sovereignty based on a social contract, and its comprehensive programme for a new European society founded on reason instead of revelation. When the revolutions broke out in Paris and Brussels in the summer of 1830, Groen had convinced himself that their common origin could be traced back to the great revolution of 1789 and its intellectual-spiritual antecedents. He summed up his view of the history of modern times in a simple formula: apostasy the root, revolution the fruit.

Sometime afterwards Groen was appointed curator of the royal family archives. In the next four years he published seven volumes of correspondence of members of the House of Orange, notably of William the Silent,2 and wrote later that this labour had opened his eyes to the religious faith that had given birth to the Dutch Republic and had provided the backbone for the Dutch nation. From 1841 on, he published instalments of a new handbook for Dutch history, the first such synthesis since the authoritative one of Wagenaar.3 In advance of its completion Groen composed a compendium for use in schools, Kort Overzigt (1841), accompanied by a song book, Vaderlandsche Zangen (1842). Concurrently he began an ambitious and wide-ranging inquiry into the causes of the revolutionary era that Europe had entered. Beginning with a study of the Renaissance and the Reformation, he traced the waning influence of the latter and the rising influence of the former, culminating at last in the humanism and rationalism of the Enlightenment, whose lofty ideas were put to the test in the French Revolution of 1789.
By 1845 Groen felt ready to set forth ‘the ensemble of his convictions’, a blend of his reading of modern history and a diagnosis of his time. His sources were voluminous. Extracts, notes and draft chapters have survived. For the history of the French Revolution, which was then still in its pre-document phase, he relied on memoirs of participants, the narrative accounts of Mignet and Thiers and the highly personal Considérations of Madame de Staël.

Groen decided on a series of lectures in the privacy of his home library. In fifteen lectures before an invited audience averaging twenty in number, he explained that the Revolution, such as it was, tried to do much more than right wrongs or bring constitutional reforms. It tried to erect society on a new foundation, a society without God. The revolutionaries were bent on putting into practice what they had come to believe from reading the philosophers (in particular Hobbes and Sidney, Locke and Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau). Thus, beneath the violent eruptions on the surface seethed the intellectual-spiritual revolution that had first turned the mode of thinking throughout Europe on its head: the visible upheavals displayed the practical consequences of the hidden. In the words of Guizot (whose method Groen followed here): the ‘anatomy’ of history sends the historian back to the ‘physiology’ of history; empirical facts betray the presence of the deeper-lying laws of history. Thus Groen practised a scientific history that looks beneath the surface of recorded events to discern hidden motors, in this case the powerful ideas that were guiding – and on occasion overriding – all human designs.

The lectures were published under the title Ongeloof en Revolutie. The volume’s leitmotiv is summarized on the last page: ‘the Revolution, to the full extent of its pernicious fruits, is the consequence of the Revolution doctrine – just as that doctrine itself is the consequence of the systematic rejection of the gospel’. The fatal error of the Enlightenment had been to replace the two cornerstones of Christendom with two foundations of its own: truth was henceforth to be established by human reason, and law was to be determined by the human will. But on this basis, Groen protested, we are delivered over to fallible human insight debated over by rival schools, and to arbitrary human decisions arrived at after naked power struggles. Has not recent history demonstrated, he pleaded, that on that basis we are bound to slide from polite deism to militant atheism in religion, while in politics we shall be doomed to alternate between radicalism and despotism? And has the new legitimation of power been able to safeguard our civil and political liberties? Hardly, for we must bow by turns to the tyranny of an elected majority or the will of an autocrat.
endorsed by plebiscites. The Revolution keeps us trapped in a vicious circle. Against this revolution one ought to declare war.

**From interpretation to action**

What Groen created with his larger-than-life interpretation of the Revolution was a *myth*. By this term I mean something akin to ‘an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image [which may or may not] accurately reflect empirical fact – it exists on a different plane – but [which] sometimes exerts a decided influence on practical affairs’.

Indeed, Groen’s ‘myth’ self-consciously involved the historiographical conceptualization of both analysis and evaluation, two levels of mental activity that are normally integrated on a still deeper plane, in the human heart, where resides a person’s ultimate commitment; thus Groen’s historical interpretation was squarely rooted in his ultimate value system or religious stance. But, in addition, his myth of the Revolution was intended not just to provide understanding but also to spur on to action and exert a ‘decided influence’ on society: in this sense a myth easily and naturally begins to function as a practical *ideology* (a term which I do not here use in the Marxist sense of a self-serving rationalization of class interests). In all this, Groen understood his work as a historian to be eminently human, personal, subjective, a testimony to the truth one has come to see and believe in, and thus partaking of the very same dynamics that he saw at work in the history that was the object of his study.

History-writing for him was intellectual debate, and intellectual debate was a battle of the spirits. Candid about his own special angle of vision, he formulated the paradox, ‘Only he can be impartial who takes sides.’

Huizinga, second to none when it comes to appreciating an evocative image, once said of *Ongeloof en Revolutie* that its image of ‘the Revolution’ was ‘born of anger and alarm’ and drew from the historical event ‘only the point of departure, for the sake of giving a name to the romantic-apocalyptic conception which is the modern form of the Augustinian concept of the *civitas terrena*.

Augustinian it was, but at the price of inflating the Revolution’s point of departure? Indeed, according to Groen’s view the course taken by the Revolution was implicit in its starting point. François Furet has recently discredited all such conflations of ‘two different levels of analysis’ because they confuse the causes of the French Revolution with the specific dynamics of the Revolution once set in motion. Unquestionably,
Ongeloof en Revolutie is a textbook example of such ‘confusion’. In effect Groen says: tell me what you believe in, and I shall tell you where you will end up. The revolution of 1789 was first prepared by the revolutionary thought of the Enlightenment; but what is more, once this thought had become common coin – once it had become axiomatic that governments should be based on consent sealed in the social contract and politics should be based on reason harnessed by the collective will – the train of events set in motion in the spring of 1789 would follow a predictable course right down to the abyss: the heady days of ’89 were bound to lead to the decapitations of ’93 and subsequently.

Groen does not fail to offer the historical proof. Logical consistency was evident, he argues, first in defying the royal will and proclaiming a National Assembly of the sovereign people, and then in reducing church and clergy to a civil service. In his twelfth lecture Groen examines certain ‘contingencies’ which are purported to have unhappily derailed the Revolution but which can instead be perfectly accounted for, he thinks, from the persistence of the new ideology: the vacillation of the king; the reluctant cooperation of clergy and nobility; the half-hearted intervention of the other European Powers (with the exception of Britain). In similar fashion Groen shows that it was altogether consistent with the new theory of liberty when the Assembly was made supreme, the king denied a veto and soon deposed, the radical element given the reins of power, and the Central Government declared omnicompetent, dissent a capital crime and periodic coups d’état a sacred duty.

Groen tries to clinch his case in the thirteenth lecture. The masterminds of the Reign of Terror, Robespierre and Saint-Just, had logic on their side. With cool calculation they waded through seas of blood to preserve the people’s great work of the Revolution and establish the ultimate Utopia. Their fanaticism was free of excitement, resting as it did on the reasonings of the mind, which was captive to the optimistic world view of the Enlightenment. This world view remained popular despite the Thermidorean reaction. It was soon manipulated by Napoleon for his own ends, it was moderated in the Restoration, but it was never disavowed or replaced. We have been living in a state of ‘permanent revolution’, Groen concluded in 1846, and new outbreaks are gathering force just beneath the surface. To the liberals of his day he said: you endorse 1789 but condemn 1793? But these phases are inseparable. You can’t have your cake and eat it too. Embrace the ideals of the Revolution, and you are helping prepare the coming of anarchy, from which the only escape will seem the enthronement of the ‘strong man’, a dictator. Naturally, Dutch liberals, just then growing in strength and self-confidence, thought the charge
rather unfair. Downright upset were the conservatives of the establishment: Groen called them ‘liberals dragging their feet’, or worse: ‘hand-wringing onlookers’ who lacked any alternative of their own.

And so the myth of ‘the Revolution’ had immediate practical implications. Across the political spectrum Groen saw red only, red in various shades, framed by a broad band of colourless conservatives. Only he and his like-minded friends offered a real choice: ana-revolutionary politics. ‘Principle against principle’ was to be the watchword. Ideological polarization would clarify the political debate. Involvement by Christians in public affairs was to be the very antithesis of existing trends and currents. Every new proposal in politics and every new development in society would be tested to ensure it was free of the revolutionary virus. ‘Resist beginnings!’ Groen warned. And to prevent absorption of his fledgling group by either left-wing or right-wing revolutionaries (by liberals or conservatives), Groen began to advocate a strategy of separatism expressed in the maxim ‘In isolation lies our strength’, a slogan that was meant to encourage involvement in public affairs from a position of ideological distinctiveness guaranteed by organizational independence. Here lies the root of ‘pillarization’.  

The publication of the lectures in 1847 marks their author as a trailblazer of alternative confessional politics. He was a precursor of what later in the century was called Christian Democracy. Groen’s book became a Dutch classic. French had to wait nearly a century before Hazard’s studies of the Enlightenment echoed Groen’s theme; English did not get a comparable analysis until a posthumous publication by Christopher Dawson.

Anti-modern, postmodern and pre-modern

Groen’s head start, ironically, caused him to spearhead an anti-modernity countermovement in the very days that the spirit of modernity was breaking through triumphantly in nineteenth-century Europe – embraced by most, protested against by many others, but, according to Groen, challenged in its roots by few, and exposed by none in its many ramifications, such as secular scholarship, theological modernism, unbridled capitalism, grasping colonialism and, yes, female suffrage.

Clearly, Groen’s quarrel was with the very programme of modernity: to build the City of Man on secular, rational, pragmatic foundations. One might even say that in a double sense Groen van Prinsterer was a postmodernist avant la lettre. First, in the science of history he
dismissed the concentration on ‘naked facts’ as advocated by the new positivism. Second, in the broad area of culture he repudiated his generation’s belief in human autonomy and inevitable progress. Rather, he warned that ‘the modern theories’, which had begun in religious scepticism, would end in relativism and nihilism. According to Groen’s ominous prognosis, if the modern concept of rational human self-determination were ever to prevail, a phase of ‘despondent resignation’ would set in. On this point his train of thought is not hard to follow. For reason varies with the thinker, who is a complex human subject. In consequence, truth will be but consensus, adhered to on pragmatic grounds only. Similarly, the social order will be a mere matter of convention, and justice and right will be defined by the arbitrary will of the majority or by whoever happens to be in power. As a result, sooner or later a mood of utter indifference will settle over the public mind: respect for law will ebb away, claims to truth will be greeted with a shrug of the shoulders and history and literature will be reduced to ‘texts’, studied by the critics as so many games with words, with the barest of connection to any external reality, let alone to a transcendent realm of normativity. Apathy, Groen predicted, will choke all nobler aspirations, and any remaining ideals for reforming the social order will oscillate between utopias of absolute individual freedom and collectivist democracies administered with bureaucratic regimentation.

On the other hand, of course, Groen was equally a pre-modernist. First, critics are agreed that his representation of the ancien régime was far too rosy – in any case insufficiently depicted as requiring a radical overhaul. Secondly, and more importantly, the author of Ongeloof en Revolutie still assumed the existence of an objective moral world-order – he called it, by turns, nature, divine law, right, the order of things, the human constitution – something which humankind cannot ignore with impunity. He believed passionately that Truth could be known and was worth contending for, and that laws must serve the Right if they are to avail. Consequently, his lectures were offered as a contribution to the ongoing debate about the ‘correct’ assessment of an epoch, a contribution which he claimed would yield genuine insight and valuable lessons about the wrong turn Europe had taken.

In the light of this negative assessment of the advent of modernity, should Europe try to forget the Revolution and retrace its steps? As a child of his time Groen was steeped in history and historical sense and could hardly be expected to wish for the clock to be turned back. Besides, he appreciated the Revolution also as a cleansing storm that had removed much dead wood. The new order was therefore to be accepted and utilized to build a better future, but then on principles tried and tested. Not
so much the forms as the Christian foundations of pre-revolutionary society were to be recovered and reasserted. Failing that, the future looked grim. Nevertheless the countermovement could be undertaken with confidence, under the twin motto, ‘It is written! It has come to pass’, by which Groen meant: Revelation proclaims the order for creation, and History confirms that order in the judgement of nations and individuals and in the providential realization of history’s purpose.

In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, Groen and his anti-revolutionary allies tried to articulate positive alternatives. Accepting the constitutional changes that had irrevocably come about, they would work with them from a sounder basis and a different inspiration. They would apply to the new situation the fundamental principles of historic Christianity in their import for state and society. The liberal-democratic state could work only if imbued with recognition of God, respect for law, love of freedom and the spirit of charity and self-restraint. Historically, we stand for a ‘Christian liberalism’, wrote one of his friends, and Groen, for all his strictures against liberalism, did not demur.

In the new parliament after the great Constitutional Revision of 1848, a small, informal party began to identify itself as ‘anti-revolutionary’. Fearful of democracy, they nevertheless favoured full responsible government in the face of oligarchic and monarchist pretensions. In 1866, during the crisis over the appointment of a Governor-General for the East Indies, Groen shocked the conservative establishment by supporting the Second Chamber’s motion of censure of a Cabinet that tried to hide behind the royal prerogative to make such appointments. What Bismarck succeeded in doing in Prussia – have king and government outmanoeuvre the elected legislature – failed in those very years in the Netherlands. As a good Dutch Calvinist, Groen, although agreeing that the king should not just reign but also govern, nevertheless insisted that he should always do so in close consultation with the nation through its representatives. For that matter, no member of the House of Orange could wish to govern in any other way. Revolutionary autocracy – ‘Napoleonic Caesarism’ – had no place on Dutch soil.

Here we see Groen carrying forward the Orangist interpretation of Dutch history, though updated and purged of some of its less tenable aspects. On this view, not the least of the sins of the Patriots was that in 1795 they had called in the French to help chase out the prince of Orange. While Groen disagreed with his friend Isaac da Costa that the Netherlands was the ‘Israel of the West’, and avoided portraying the princes of Orange as modern analogues of the biblical Judges, nevertheless he did profess a distinctive place for his country in the designs of
Divine providence: namely, to be a seat of Protestantism and a haven for religious refugees. The Dutch Republic prospered because it harboured the Reformed Church. As he put it in his *Handboek der geschiedenis van het Vaderland*:

The Republic’s greatness did not arise from its constitutional arrangement, in which scarcely anything was arranged; nor from its liberty, which often existed more in name than in reality; nor from the character of its people, which does not surpass that of divers other nations. But its greatness arose from the faith, which is inseparable from the blessings of God. The Lord had planted his Church here, protected her against attack from without and apostasy from within, and favoured the State united with her, for her sake, with an abundance of his choicest benefactions, such that our history, more perhaps than that of any other Christian nation, is the story of Divine guidance and miracles.

To what extent may the Netherlands be called a second Israel? Not by identification, but by comparison. The blessings of the gospel were granted to the Netherlands, not exclusively, yet most excellently. To assert this is not pride. To ignore it would be the height of ingratitude . . . Countries and peoples are blessed and spared on account of the faith of some of the inhabitants. For ten righteous the Lord would have spared the city destined for destruction. “The Lord blessed the Egyptian’s house for Joseph’s sake, and the blessing of the Lord was upon all that he had in the house and in the field.”

Thus to the extent that the princes of Orange – notably William I, Maurice, William III – had protected the Reformed religion, to that extent Groen marked them as manifest instruments of the Most High.

While anti-revolutionaries were true but guarded Orangists and loyal parliamentarians, they also looked beyond the frontiers. On foreign policy they took the high ground: treaties were sacred and had to be kept, and Europe was a family of nations ruled not by might but by right, not by realpolitik but by international law. Accordingly, Groen denounced Bismarck the Iron Chancellor as a second Bonaparte, the Revolution incarnate in continental affairs.

For many years one of the main policy aims of the anti-revolutionaries was to guarantee the Christian character of state education, and gradually of free schools. They campaigned against successive education acts and administrative practices that discriminated
against denominational schools. Freedom of education was to them simply ‘freedom of religion with respect to one’s children’. By 1872 the Rotterdam stockbroker Jacob Voorhoeve, acquainted with things British, persuaded the ageing Groen that, just as good English liberals had had their Anti-Corn-Law League, so Christian liberals in Holland needed an Anti-School-Law League. It was duly founded, and its nearly 150 local branches by the end of the decade were the nuclei of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, the first political party to be properly organized in the Netherlands. By then, the old prophet was dead and his mantle had fallen on his disciple, the pastor-publicist Abraham Kuyper.

**Twentieth-century reception**

Kuyper trained his followers in the antithetical ways of Groen. They started Christian trade-unions to parallel the growing power of the socialist labour movement. In this way the existing ‘pillars’ in education and the press were complemented by ‘pillars’ in industrial relations. Our own century saw what I would prefer to call institutionalized pluralism (‘pillarization’) in the fields of broadcasting and agricultural organizations. It turns out that with his myth of the Revolution, Groen fathered a ‘pillarized’ society, the zuilenstaat. There has been a trend in recent decades toward depillarization, but every now and then there are signs of repillarization; after their setback in the elections of 1994, Christian Democrats were overheard saying: ‘Let’s return to the centre, where the Christian organizations operate.’

For the generation following Groen, whatever smacked of revolution had to be nipped in the bud or scotched. The celebrated railway strike of 1903 was aborted by Prime Minister Kuyper when he threatened to do what US President Ronald Reagan did in 1981 to striking air traffic controllers: conscript them all into the armed forces and order them back to work.

Thirty years later Kuyper’s followers knew almost instinctively what bolshevism and fascism represented: nothing but left- and right-wing variants of the Revolution! Studies appeared exposing the dangerous implications of the movements of Lenin and Stalin, of Mussolini and Hitler. A national synod of the Calvinist churches in 1936 put its members under interdict if they took out membership in either the pacifist socialist or the national socialist party. When the Nazi juggernaut rolled over the Netherlands, anti-revolutionaries were forewarned. Party headquarters advised the locals: ‘Read and discuss Groen’s _Ongeloof en Revolutie_.’
Soon the champions of divine-right government began to swell the ranks of the resistance, hiding Jewish and other fugitives from the regime, raiding distribution offices for ration cards, sabotaging telephone and railway lines, even liquidating opponents. It became a password among the German occupation authorities in The Hague: remember, the worst terrorist pockets are manned by Communists and Calvinists! Indeed, participation in underground activities by both groups was disproportionately high.30

In the post-war years the A-R Party held out the longest against decolonizing Indonesia. There were to be no concessions to guerrilla fighters who had collaborated with the Japanese and now held their own people hostage. Sukarno was no William of Orange; his struggle for independence, unlike the Dutch revolt against Spain, was no legitimate uprising: it was a revolution.

In 1853, Robert Fruin, after reading Ongeloof en Revolutie, mocked its logicism and biblicism, and he was sure Groen’s party ought never to be voted into power.31 A century later, Pieter Geyl, that master and lover of debates, argued at length that in terms of scholarship Groen’s book had been ‘one grand mistake’, a specimen of history-writing whose unhistorical method and reactionary bias had rendered its contribution to scientific historiography ‘more confusing than constructive’ and in the long term ‘unfruitful’.32 Historiographically unfruitful?33 Perhaps.34 But in any event not without fruit for concrete history, as Geyl notes: Groen was a leader of Calvinists ‘whose rise to consciousness and political power is one of the great phenomena in our national history of the last one hundred years’.35 It was a story of consciousness-raising which was intertwined to a remarkable degree with a historical interpretation first articulated by Groen van Prinsterer.