
Pro Rege

Volume 4 | Number 2

Article 4

December 1975

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Recommended Citation

Vander Stelt, John C. (1975) "Light of the World and the Significance of Dordt," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 4: No. 2, 12 - 15.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol4/iss2/4

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The Light of the World and the Significance of Dordt

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A College Assembly speech delivered by Mr. Vander Stelt to the Dordt College student body as part of a series dealing with "The Light of the World" in various countries.

The Light of the world has shone also in the Netherlands. But here, too, darkness has often failed to comprehend the Light, especially in the area of education.

The second West-European and first Dutch Calvinistic institution of advanced learning was established in Leyden in 1575. The chief aim of this university of Leyden was to train preachers for the churches and politicians for the newly formed Dutch state.

The history of Leyden University epitomizes in many respects the nature of the ideological development and problems of Dutch Christianity ever since that time.

The central issue was simply this: is it possible to be a confessional Calvinist, privately, and at the same time a practical Arminian, publicly?

The first professors appointed to this Calvinistic university were not consistent in their confession. They did not fully integrate their confession with their profession. Most of the first professors entertained, quite freely and openly, scholastic ideas in their theological investigations and (Aristotle-inspired) Arminian thought-patterns in their nontheological studies. It should, therefore, not come as a surprise to us that the first student to receive a doctor's degree in theology at this first

Dutch Calvinistic University was none other than Arminius himself.

During most of the seventeenth century, preachers and other members of the national Dutch Reformed Church remained by and large Calvinistic, at least in doctrine. As teachers, politicians and tradesmen, however, they became increasingly more Arminian. They began to ignore, if not deny, the radical nature of man's fall into sin; consequently, they also undermined and relativized the all-encompassing scope of redemption in Jesus Christ. In this manner, the thought- and act-patterns of these Christians came more and more under the distorting influence of the extremely subtle spirit of Arminianism.

Forty-three years after the establishment of the Leyden University, the Synod of Dordt convened and met for nearly a half year. While the five points of Calvinism were being formulated by this Synod, while the proverbial T.U.L.I.P. was growing, Calvinistic teachers and professors were sowing, usually unawares, the seeds of non-Christian ideas. They did this particularly in the area of education. These seeds eventually developed into the weeds of Arminianism, especially in the non-ecclesiastical areas of life. During the final sessions of the Synod of Dordt, the founder of Rationalism, R. Descartes, watered some of these seeds when he visited one of his friends, a local school teacher in the city of Dordt, to discuss the need for a new educational basis in the training of future church and state leaders.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, education and statecraft in the Netherlands developed ideologically along Arminian and rationalistic lines. The fact that man is a sinner was stressed less and less. The need for total conversion and restoration was lost sight of. Man was beginning to pull himself up by his own bootstraps. This is what happened, for example, in the case of the internationally famous and political Arminian theoretician, Hugo Grotius. His basic political beliefs and legal system remained unchallenged

in the Netherlands until Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper came along in the nineteenth century, and other Kuyperian political thinkers such as Dr. H. Dooyeweerd and Dr. J. P. A. Mekkes continued Kuyper's work in the twentieth century. It is also what happened in the case of R. Descartes who exerted such a tremendous influence with his rationalistic philosophy, most of which he formulated and publicized during his more than twenty years stay in the Netherlands. It is the famous story of the first indigenous Dutch-Jewish philosopher, Spinoza, who lived, worked, and was excommunicated for his peculiar system of rationalism from the Synagogue in Amsterdam.

In the early nineteenth century, sparks of Presbyterian-Reformed Revival began to kindle in certain parts of Scotland, France, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. In 1834 the Netherlands experienced the Secession Movement. Participants in this movement were Scholte and van Raalte, forefathers of the Christian Reformed denomination in the U.S.A. and Canada. These Secessionists were primarily concerned with doctrinal purity and confessional soundness. Their general attitude, however, toward culture, and especially toward formal or advanced education, remained predominantly a negative one.

Intending to correct this negativism and to present some kind of positive solution, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, after his gradual and total conversion to Christ, began to point to students and teachers, church-members and preachers, citizens and politicians to the real and only Light of the world. This man, to whom the National Union of Christian Schools properly refers as the Father of the Christian School Movement, never lost sight of the fact that the entire cause of Christian education, even on the grade-school level, must be placed within that larger context of the life-encompassing struggle between the Gospel of Christ and the anti-gospels of unbelief in our Western civilization. The cause of Christian education was, therefore, right from the

start, inseparably connected with our calling in church and home, and also with our task as Christians in the state and in the rest of society. In spite of the fact that in this biblical approach, he was often ignored, at times strenuously opposed, even by many fellow-Christians, Groen van Prinsterer continued for at least thirty years as a faithful servant of the Lord to direct people to the Light of the world.

There was something Pauline-like about the conversion of Groen van Prinsterer. This was true also of his successor, Abraham Kuyper. Both men were overwhelmed by the Light of the world. They could not help but develop a new perspective in and for this world of darkness.

Three hundred years after John Calvin's death, A. Kuyper experienced in 1864 something which changed the entire direction of his life and work. He redis-

in all man's tasks. Abraham Kuyper refused to be Arminian in those two areas of life in which so much darkness had developed over the years and in which the need for the Light of the world to shine had become so great, namely, education and politics.

It is far from us to idolize Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper. Neither one of these two men was infallible. Yet, it would be improper to ignore the positive results that have accrued from the ideas and ministries of these two Calvinists. The benefits derived from the work of these two men have been many and have become culturally significant for the Netherlands until even today.

The contributions of this neo-Calvinism have been invaluable for the Reformed community also elsewhere in the world. One must think in this connection

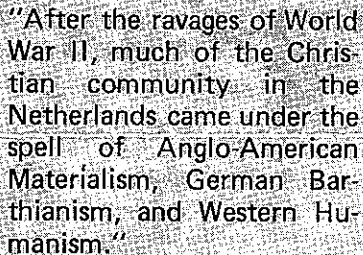
"This man, (Groen van Prinsterer) to whom the National Union of Christian Schools properly refers as the Father of the Christian School Movement, never lost sight of the fact that the entire cause of Christian education, even on the gradeschool level, must be placed within that larger context of the life-encompassing struggle between the Gospel of Christ and the anti-gospels of unbelief in our Western civilization."

covered the meaning of full redemption in Jesus Christ. Ever since this rediscovery, he did all he could to let the Light of the world shine in the worlds of journalism, politics, education, instituted church, industry, and labor. Freeing education from the shackling powers of imperialistic churches and states, Kuyper seized on the eminently evangelical idea of sphere sovereignty, a religious principle which he explained in his main address during the opening ceremonies of the Free University in 1880. Kuyper placed the Word of God central in all of life. God's authority is basic in all areas of life and determinative

of such causes as seeking to obtain juridical equality in education and mass media, introducing the political principle of religious pluralism and proportional representation, minimizing industrial strife and labor strikes, fostering a Kingdom-concern for church, state, and society, and showing compassion for the handicapped, aged, orphans, and prisoners. Sensitized by the Spirit of God and encouraged by what Bible-believing Christians were able to do in a positive way in the Netherlands, Calvinistic Christians also in the U.S.A., South Africa, Indonesia, Australia, France, Hungary, and Canada have been stimulated

to try, in their respective countries and cultures, to bring the Good News to bear upon the life-zones of art, labor, politics, industry, and education.

Since 1920 more and more Dutch Christians wanted to keep the Light of the world out of their daily lives. Things began to grow very dim. Life was darkened by the arrival of the ominous clouds of theological harangues, ecclesiastical unrest, political turmoil, and confessional staleness. After the ravages of World War II, much of the Christian community in the Netherlands came under the spell of Anglo-American Materialism, German Barthianism, and Western Humanism. This spiritual darkness made its entry first of all in politics, then in education, after that in mass media, then also in art, labor, and industry, and, finally, also in the instituted churches.



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When we keep this background and context of our heritage in mind, we look with amazement at the great work the Lord God has done. He has caused many men and women in and outside the Netherlands in various vocations and at various times to stand firm, to keep the windows in the different rooms of the building of our culture open, in order to let the LIGHT of the world enter in, and chase at least some of the darkness away. In so far as these Christians have succeeded in this unique ministry, we thank God

for their testimony. We are especially happy for the reflection of the Light of the world in the lives and deeds of those men and women who have sought to shun Arminian darkness in the area of education. It is for this reason that we thank God for the vision of also the founders of Dordt College.

We know what the Synod of Dordt stood for and stood against. Nothing less and nothing more is required of our College, the only educational institution in the world that has been named after this famous Synod of Dordt. Also for the Christian scholar and student the secret of life is the childlike confession:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the refuge of my life; of whom then should I go in dread? When evildoers close in on me to devour me, it is my enemies, my assailants who stumble and fall. (Ps. 27:1-2)

The words of Is. 60:1-4, as fulfilled in Christ, provide the only proper perspective for all Christian academies, including ours:

Arise, Jerusalem, rise clothed in light; your light has come and the glory of the Lord shines over you. For, though darkness cover the earth, and dark night the nations, the Lord shall shine upon you and over you shall his glory appear; and the nations shall march towards your light, and their kings to your sunrise. Lift up your eyes and look around; they flock together, all of them, and come to you; your sons also shall come from afar, your daughters walking beside them leading the way. Then you shall see and shine with joy, then your heart shall thrill with pride: the riches of the sea shall be lavished upon you and you shall possess the wealth of the nations.