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Groen van Prinsterer's Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution (Book Review)

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Often, the power of Vander Mey's voice is almost overwhelming, not only for the manner by which he turns and spins words, phrases, and sentence parts; but also for the sheer number of voices he can generate. *Alladin*, Disney's recent blockbuster movie and record-shattering video, would not have been the success it was if it weren't for Robin Williams, whose incredible voices animate the film as remarkably as its cartoonists did. As one reads this book, one comes to realize that Vander Mey, in some ways, has similar powers. Few writers, Christian or not-Christian, write with so much sheer energy as Randy Vander Mey. Few can so delight with words. Within the world of Christian writers, one thinks only of Robert Farrar Capon as coming close.

But in this book of words readers may sometimes find themselves riding verbal surf so overwhelming they can too easily lose balance. When that happens we go under.

When Vander Mey attacks substantial enemies, as he

Groen van Prinsterer's Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution, by Harry Van Dyke (Jordan Station, Ontario, Canada: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1989). x + 561 pages, paperback, \$29.95 Cdn. Reviewed by John C. Vander Stelt, Professor of Theology and Philosophy.

Why would H. Evan Runner, professor of philosophy at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, in the 1950s become the founder and mentor of a voluntary and international student organization, called the Groen van Prinsterer Club? Why would James W. Skillen, a former professor of political science at Dordt College and now executive director of the Washington-based Association for Public Justice (APJ), include a section on "Groen van Prinsterer" in his doctoral dissertation at Duke University (cf. his "The Development of Calvinistic Political Theory in the Netherlands, with Special Reference to the Thought of Herman Dooyeweerd", 1974)?

Why would Donald Morton, a former instructor of history at Dordt College and since the middle 1970s associated with the International School in Amsterdam, invest a considerable amount of time to assist Harry Van Dyke in editing, translating and publishing *Lecture XI* in 1973 (68 pages) and *Lectures VIII-IX* in 1975 (87 pages) of Groen van Prinsterer's *Unbelief and Revolution*, published in 1847? Why would Harry Van Dyke, assistant professor of history at Redeemer College in Ancaster, Ontario, Canada, spend almost a decade studying, editing and translating the fifteen lectures Groen van Prinsterer gave in 1845/6 to some twelve to twenty-one civil servants, lawyers, professors, and physicians?

The answer is simple—because Groen van Prinsterer's *Unbelief and Revolution* contains a classical description of what it means to follow Christ while one lives in the center of culture and on the cutting-edge of life. As a little known but formidable reformer, Gallium Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876) looked behind the mask of the dominant spirit of his age and clearly saw in his own life and

does, for instance, in "In God We Trust," he's brilliant because he's advancing upon foes worth his considerable skills. When he's going after other problems—"Special Music," for instance, or "Lord," or "Just"—he becomes, in light of his best work, less effective, somewhat petulant.

But when he's honest and forthright, when he's caring and kind, when his considerable talents are used to illustrate awe, even fear of God almighty, Randall Vander Mey turns out brilliant ideas in memorable adornment, great style carrying perceptive substance.

This is, bottom line, a wonderful book, full of insight and brimming with the kind of perceptions that will make it impossible for us to use some of the stock phrases of our lives as glibly as we've done in the past.

Rumor has it another similar book is already in progress. Here's hoping rumor is right. Those of us who care about our "God talk" are brighter and sharper for Randall Vander Mey's good sense.

the world around him the profoundly *religious* conflict between reality and myth, love and license, freedom and slavery, shalom and deception. As a perceptive historian and sensitive politician, he rediscovered something of the depth and scope of complete allegiance to God ('s revelation) and the practical implications of such a commitment for followers of Jesus Christ in such things as their study of history, concern for education, interest in justice, renewal of faith life, and wish to help the poor.

In the first part of his Ph.D. thesis in history at the Free University in Amsterdam, Van Dyke describes in the first three chapters the socio-economic, political, and intellectual aspects of Groen's world, as well as the general Dutch Reveil and the Secession of 1834 (which he did not join, in part because of its world-flight mentality). In the next nine chapters, he provides a detailed explanation of the purpose, sources, audience, style, main argument, editions, and translations of Lectures I-XV Groen delivered in his home in the winter of 1845/6 on the general topic of the nature of unbelief and revolution and the relationship between these two major historical forces.

In the thirteenth chapter, Van Dyke provides an excellent and critical discussion of the most important controversial issues in Groen's views, viz., his monarchical bias, Platonizing leanings, deterministic inclinations, and logicistic tendencies (pp. 217-270). The *first* part of this book ends with concise and clear summaries in Dutch (pp. 271-276) and French (pp. 277-285) and a helpful select bibliography (pp. 285-292).

The *second* part of Van Dyke's study consists of an accurate English translation of Groen's original lectures on "Ongeloof en Revolutie." Despite its abridged form—

approximately one-third has been omitted, because of its irrelevance for the English speaking world—this section is still some 247 pages long. Van Dyke increased the value of this *first* English translation for purposes of further research by retaining the original pagination and by adding a list of works cited and three extensive indices of names, subjects, and scripture references in Groen's lectures (pp.541-561).

Because of its excellent scope and depth, the reader would do well to consult David S. Caudill's extensive and insightful discussion of Van Dyke's study and translation in "The French Revolution as Phantom of the Opera" (*The Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. I, No. 1 [1991], 243-272). The fundamental issue of the nature and role of "religion" (in the sense of allegiance to something ultimate) in society and civilization, as discussed by Groen, is, according to Caudill, an issue we are still struggling to understand more clearly. This topic fascinated not only Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), Groen's successor in the Netherlands, but also someone like Harold J. Berman, Story Professor of Law at Harvard Law School—cf. his *The Interaction of Law and Religion* (Nashville/New York: Abingdon Press, 1974).

Perhaps two of the most memorable statements Groen van Prinsterer made are about his intent, to be a "confessor of the gospel, not statesman" ("evangelie-belijder, niet staatsman") and about his approach, viz., "in my isolation lies my strength" ("in mijn isolement ligt mijn kracht"). These two statements have often been misunderstood, however, as Van Dyke clearly shows. Groen did not mean to say that politics is unimportant or that Christians should isolate themselves from the world. On the contrary! Only by being fully engaged in educational, political, and economic life does one begin to realize the religious conflict between the spirit of unbelief and the spirit of belief. Only by being a Christian can one be truly strong, and will one not separate himself from interacting with non-Christians. The basic conflict is not between persons, but between principles that come to expression in conflicting historical forces. In terms of allegiance to something ultimate, priority must be given to confessing the gospel, also when one is a statesman, for a true statesman who loves justice cannot avoid doing what the gospel requires.

The meaning and purpose of history is the restoration of creation, within the perspective of a new heaven and new earth with Christ at the center. It is of the very essence of unbelief to deny this fact, to blindly believe that human perfection is attainable in society (cf. the humanist slogan: "Build schools, tear down jails!"), and not to realize that, unless people repent and return to God's laws, the final result will be liberalism, socialism, revolution, and anarchy. Groen gave a *religious*, not just ecclesiastical, interpretation of Revolution. He compels us to think of what

we do in daily life and of our history in terms of both God's blessing and His curse. On this score, Groen's views resemble the prophetic critique Leslie Newbigin has given of our culture.

Three Dutch Christian political parties (Anti-Revolutionaire Partij, Christelijke Historische Unie, and Katholieke Volks Partij) had good reasons to commemorate Groen's death in 1876 by jointly publishing *Een staatsman ter navolging. Groen van Prinsterer herdacht (1876-1976)* [Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre B.V., 1976, 264 pages], and the government rightly issued a fifty-five cent commemorative stamp in honor of Groen. Even today Groen's profound impact continues to be evident in his legacy as a prophetic critic of culture, as a father of the Christian day-school movement, and as a reformer of society.

In his lifetime he endured much reproach, especially from fellow aristocrats, and fought courageously for some forty years like a "general without any army." A few years before his death he was buoyed up when Abraham Kuyper, thirty-six years younger than he, understood the genius of Groen's struggles, liked the positive direction in which his mentor moved, and picked up the baton to run with it until his death in 1920.

Van Dyke's superb introduction to and lucid translation of Groen's *Unbelief and Revolution* deserves to be read widely and studied carefully in all English-speaking countries and cultures, especially in our twentieth century in which two world wars, the collapse of Russian communism, and the spreading crisis in Western democratism, with its built-in ontic and epistemic relativism, have indicated that Groen's work was truly prophetic, unlike Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* published one year later in 1848.

Groen van Prinsterer's critique of his culture and his emphasis on the need to walk on the paths of obedience and shalom leave us some one hundred and fifty years after his classic study was first published with no choice but to rethink our understanding, or, better, practice, of being followers of Jesus Christ in our day. The reader of Van Dyke's careful analysis of Groen's views will not only benefit from Groen's positive insights, but will also be able to avoid certain remnants in Groen's approach that arise not from the Gospel, but from what is foreign to God's revelation and to genuine religion.

Teachers of history, civics, politics, etc. in Christian grade schools and high schools, and in colleges, seminaries and other institutions of tertiary education in Western and other cultures would do well to take careful note of Groen's view of humanity in light of God's revelation, especially now that we are the beneficiaries of Harry Van Dyke's excellent introduction to Groen van Prinsterer's ideas and classic work.