



The Reveil in the Netherlands

Character and Impact

1. The Character of the Dutch Reveil

a) Similarities with other Revival movements

The Dutch Reveil, as has been shown, was closely related to similar movements in Western Europe and North America, all of which were influenced by Pietism. The men of the Dutch Reveil were concerned, first and foremost, with the *praxis pietatis*, or practical godliness, which they felt had almost vanished from religious life in The Netherlands. Like all Pietists, they believed that the essence of Christianity consists of the personally meaningful relationship of the individual to God. The Reveil people were devout Christians who spent much time in prayer and Bible study and sincerely tried to live a holy life. This emphasis on sanctification, as we saw last time, brought out the criticism of men like Kohlbrugge, who felt that by doing this the centrality of the doctrine of justification was jeopardized.

Another characteristic which the Dutch Reveil had in common with kindred movements was its conviction that Scripture alone is the source of authority. This, of course, had always been the Protestant and Reformed position. What was different, however, was that the men of the Reveil tended to accept the Scriptures uncritically; without careful, scientific, exegetical study. Men like Da Costa and Groen van Prinsterer knew the Scriptures well, but they were laymen well educated and cultured to be sure — but still laymen, not professional theologians. Consequently, their approach to Scripture was primarily devotional rather than exegetical. Their emphasis was on experience, and they believed that everything they needed to know was taught them by the Holy Spirit.

Not surprising, in light of their somewhat Biblicist approach to Scripture, the men of the Reveil, generally speaking, were not overly concerned about the binding authority of the Creeds. With the exception of Groen and a few others who did hold to a high view of the Reformed Confessions, the majority adopted a rather modern position on the Creeds. Not that they were opposed to what the Confession of the Church taught as such, although, as we see later, there were some who had questions about Predestination as defined in the Canons of Dort. But the general feeling was that the Reformed Confessions had not spoken the final word on every issue. Da Costa, for instance, considered them as incomplete and not in every respect expressive of the contemporary faith of the Church. Oostendorp explains the reason for this moderate view of the Creeds this way:

"The Reveil never felt slavishly bound to any creeds. Its leaders were largely converts who had freely, in the light of Scripture, taken their stand. For them the Bible was the real source of authority. No man could be forced to believe because something was 'Reformed', but only because it was scriptural."

The Reveil, therefore, claiming support for their position by appealing to the Confession of Faith itself (Art. 7), felt at liberty to follow Scripture wherever it might lead.

This freedom to interpret Scripture without being bound by the limits imposed by the Creeds, came to its clearest expression in the views held with respect to eschatology (doctrine of the last things). The Reveil was very interested in this doctrine and most held to a millennialist position, either post- or pre-Bilderdijk's historiography was dominated by his conviction that the world harmony, destroyed by man's fall, would be restored only when Christ would come to reign on earth. He believed that the

second Advent would take place in his generation, and that his own period was the age of the pale horse (Rev. 6:7).

Da Costa was no less interested in eschatological questions, and became an even more consistent pre-millennialist than Bilderdijk, who hovered between pre- and post-millennialism. Da Costa became an ardent "prophetic thinker", widely disseminating his views via his lectures and poems. A Portuguese Jew, he saw a great similarity between Holland and Israel, and he entertained a very strong hope for the spiritual revival of both. In Israel's case, he also believed in their restoration as a nation.

It was his strong conviction that Christ would soon return to usher in His millennial reign on earth, and this conviction enabled him, and others of his way of thinking, to carry on in the face of great opposition. They knew that even though the times were bad and, from the human point of view, hopeless there was nevertheless reason for great optimism. "*Out of the darkness shall once more come light,*" Da Costa wrote in the conclusion of his *Objections*.

Da Costa believed that Holland occupied a special place in God's plan, and he saw great similarities between his adopted country and Israel. Both had been richly blessed by God. Both had shown great ingratitude by their repeated backslidings and apostasies. But for both there were promises of pardon and restoration, because God is faithful to His covenant and its promises. In his poem, "Israel en Nederland", Da Costa writes:

*Have mercy, God of Holland! Return,
Come back into our midst
For the sake of the anointed Name and Glory,
Through Whom Thy children pray....*

And for Israel his prayer was:

*Restorer of ancient Israel,
Protector of our fathers,
Yes, Thou, Thou wilt, in spite of hell
Gather together the remnant.*

*For Thou art unchangeable
And the Scepter of Thy Kingdom
Shall not depart from Thy people
Until transformed by thousandfold lustre,
It will blind the eyes of Satan.*

Still another characteristic of the Dutch Reveil was its international and interdenominational nature. The leaders of the Reveil sought fellowship with kindred spirits in other countries. This was true, not only in the beginning when they were, influenced by such men as Merle d'Aubigne, Cesar Malan and Adolphe the Monod also in the later years of the movement there was considerable contact with evangelicals abroad. This contact took the form of personal visits, correspondence and meetings. As early as 1830, Gaussen and d'Aubigne expressed the desire to organize a so-called Evangelical Alliance, but it was not until 1848 that this dream was finally realized, mainly through the efforts of five English clergymen: the Anglicans Steward and Bickersteth; Dr. Banting of the Wesleyan Church; Dr. Mauer of the Presbyterian Church; and especially the well-known Independent, John Angel James.

The first meeting was held in London in 1848, and the second in 1855 at Paris. Subsequent meetings were held in Berlin (1857), Geneva (1861) and Amsterdam (1867).

At all these meetings, there were representatives from all over Europe, not in the least from The Netherlands. Groen van Prinsterer was a featured speaker at both the Geneva and Amsterdam meetings, and delivered powerful orations on such topics as *Religious Nationality* and *Dutch Calvinism*. The presence of Groen and other Dutch leaders of the Reveil at these meetings shows

that they were ecumenically-minded and believed in the catholicity of the Church. Though some felt that the principles on which the Alliance were based were too vague, most could subscribe to the statement of principles and support the main goals of the Alliance; namely, to experience the communion of saints, to get to know each other as evangelical Christians, and to build each other up in the faith as well as strengthen each other in the battle against unbelief and superstition.

b) The Unique Character of the Reveil

So far we have looked at the similarities between the Dutch Reveil and kindred movements in other parts of the world. But there are also differences which show that there was something very unique about this religious awakening.

For one thing, it was basically an aristocratic movement, certainly as far as the leadership was concerned. There was considerable support for the Reveil from the middle class, but almost all the leaders were either wealthy, highly educated or both. There were several counts, barons and other members of the nobility among them.

The Reveil in The Netherlands was also unique in that it was much broader in its vision and scope than its counterparts in other countries. For one thing, it was not so exclusively preoccupied with the salvation souls as were the spiritual awakenings in Scotland and America. The men of the Reveil sought nothing less than the reformation of the whole man, as well as the church and society in general. In this respect, the Reveil had much in common with the Evangelical Revival in England at the time of the Wesleys, for that revival too made a big impact on society, and led to the improvement of social conditions and public morality.

Still, what was unique about the movement in Holland was that it was much more philosophical and theological in nature even though, as mentioned earlier, the reveil men were laymen and not professional theologians. Oostendorp, after contrasting it with American revivals, says: "*The Dutch Reveil is more like a school of thought — a theological, philosophical, political movement.*" Men like Bilderdijk, Da Costa and especially Groen van Prinsterer, understood far better than their spiritual counterparts in other countries the real causes of the apostasy in Church and State. They recognized the evils of the Enlightenment and its daughter, the French Revolution, and were able to draw out its horrible implications for all of life. As was noted earlier, Groen realized that the only weapon that could possibly succeed against unbelief and revolution was the Gospel of a sovereign God. The Word of God, not the word of man, God's sovereignty, not the sovereignty of the people, were the means whereby sin-enslaved men could attain the true freedom, with all the other freedoms that flowed out of it. Only by returning to the God of the fathers, the God who had done such great wonders for Holland in the past, would there be any hope for the nation which was now on the brink of spiritual and moral bankruptcy.

2. The Influence of the Revell

a) On the Secession

In addition to the immediate impact of the Dutch Revell which has been mentioned already, the movement also had more lasting results. The great reforms in the religious, political and social life in the Netherlands during the latter part of the nineteenth century cannot be understood without the contributions made by such men as Bilderdijk, Da Costa, Groen van Prinsterer and Heldring.

As far as the reformation of the Church is concerned, both the Secession and the Doleantie movements received much of their inspiration and impetus from the Reveil. And even those who remained in the State-Church were able to use many of the ideas of the Reveil men in their efforts to improve conditions in the Church of their fathers. As a matter of fact, it was the latter who may be considered the modern successors and spiritual descendants of the Reveil. Both the Confessional party and the Reformed Alliance (Gereformeerde Bond), but especially the latter, have always had the most sympathy for what the Reveil aimed at, namely the reformation or restoration of the established Church *from within*.

The Reveil men never envisioned a separation from the Church. They were very critical of the abuses and errors of the Church, but it was the criticism of children who knew their mother was ill and who, therefore, sought to nurse her back to health. The Reveil never viewed the Church as false, but sick, and that is still the opinion of the Reformed Alliance. That is why, when the Secession came in 1834, only very few of the Reveil people joined this movement. There was much sympathy for the Seceders, especially when they were persecuted for their convictions. But the men of the Reveil were too catholic in their view of the Church to feel at home in what they felt was the narrow and restricted atmosphere among the Seceders. They could not break with the Church of their fathers. The attitude of the Reveil to the established Church and to the Secession movement is summed up very well by Da Costa, who wrote:

Although the body of our Netherlands Reformed Church has undoubtedly deviated from her original confession and goals in her public teaching, government and discipline, such deviation considered in itself by no means identifies her as that false church from which one, according to art. 28 of our Confession of Faith, must needs separate oneself. Neither does this deviation, without any additional sign and direction from above, give the true believers freedom to secede from that Church and institute a new one.

Needless to say, this negative attitude of the leaders of the Reveil towards the Secession did not endear them very much to the Seceders. The latter viewed the Reveil with increasing suspicion and distrust, and accused the movement of inconsistency and half-heartedness, if not worse.

Nevertheless, the Reveil was too important a movement not to leave its impact on the Secession. For one thing, there was great affinity between them as far as the life of godliness was concerned. Both movements stressed the necessity of personal conversion and a close walk with God. True, the Secession was not primarily indebted to the Reveil for this emphasis, for it had been among the common people who joined the Secession that the Reformed faith and the practice of godliness had been preserved, while the official Church had become liberal and worldly. But the Reveil did much to reinforce and fan the flame which was by the grace of God still there, but which had in many places nearly died out.

That the Reveil indeed had its effects upon the Secession may be illustrated by the case of H. P. Scholte. According to Oostendorp, this father of the Secession was *"the most evident link between these two movements"*. While still a student for the ministry, Scholte came under the influence, if not the spell, of the Reveil. He regularly attended the Sunday evening Bible lectures of Da Costa in Amsterdam and learned things there which shaped his mind more than the formal education received at Leiden University. When, later, he became, along with De Cock, a leader of the Secession, the influence of the Reveil soon became evident. For many years he wrote articles in his magazine *De Reformatie*, which though basically Reformed, often reflected a type of thinking which, to say the least, was untraditional. Scholte was disillusioned with the Secession and *"found the reformation of tradition harder than secession from a corrupt church"*. What especially bothered him was the narrow, exclusivistic spirit which he found among many of his brethren. He dreamed of *"a great international revival which shall break away from the false denominational hierarchies and form **one church of faith**"*. In other words, Scholte's ideal was to have a church made up of true believers only for this he was influenced especially by the Englishman Darby, whose name was highly respected in the circles of the Reveil.

But Scholte also held to a rather moderate view of the Confessions, was a convinced pre-millennialist, keen interest in international evangelism and world-wide missionary movements, and this can only be attributed to the influence of the Reveil upon him. Not surprisingly, his views got him into trouble with his brethren in the Secession Church. Especially his open championing of his millennial views met with strong opposition. Scholte, however, did not slavishly follow Darby and others of the millennial and dispensational school. He strongly affirmed the unity of the covenant and there is no evidence that he departed in any serious way from the basic Reformed understanding of the way of salvation. Scholte's position in the Secession Church was from the beginning difficult because he tried to combine in his thinking concepts which perhaps cannot be espoused simultaneously and harmoniously. Scholte was too much of a Reveil man to be completely happy in

the circle of the Seceders. But he was too Reformed to be comfortable with all the Darbyist ideas, especially in the area of ecclesiology (doctrine of the Church). Finding no sympathetic audience among his brethren in the Netherlands, Scholte eventually moved to North America where he hoped to make a new beginning and try out his somewhat peculiar hybrid theology.

His success in America was rather limited and in the end he left no permanent impact. Still, it cannot be denied that for a time the Christian Reformed Church via Scholte was influenced by the Reveil.

b) On the Doleantie

The Dutch Reveil has also had considerable influence on the Doleantie, especially upon its great leader and spokesman, Abraham Kuyper. Although critical of what he considered its weaknesses, especially its individualism and tendency toward asceticism, as well as its weak stand on the Confession, Kuyper was deeply appreciative of the piety of the Reveil people. But the influence of the Reveil upon Kuyper's thinking is especially noticeable in the areas of Christian education, social justice and government. In all these areas Kuyper was able to build on the pioneer work done by van Prinsterer whose successor he became. Groen's influence extended even to his liberal opponents in politics in that he forced them to examine their presuppositions. The Anti-Revolutionary party, established in 1878, pursued political objectives based upon Biblical principles. The result has been that even today in the Netherlands, Roman Catholics, Liberals and Socialists, as well as Christians, campaign on the platform of principles, much more so than in other countries. This influence in politics is largely attributable to the work of Groen van Prinsterer and his successor, Abraham Kuyper.

c) On the Netherlands (State) Reformed Church

Finally, the Reveil also influenced those who stayed behind in the established Church, especially the Confessional party and the Reformed Alliance, as well as the Ethical party. Since the Reveil was basically an informal association of more or less like-minded people, there were different emphases and approaches to the reformation of the Church. This makes it possible for different groups to appeal to different elements in the views set forth by the men of the Reveil. The Confessional party and those of the Reformed Alliance (Gereformeerde Bond) love to quote Groen who held a strong view of the Confessions, while the Ethical party like to appeal to those writings of the Reveil which stress religious feelings and morality, although it should be added that this party has almost disappeared from the scene today. Those who have a strong interest in the social task of the church will find inspiration in the work of Heldring. Thus, one can see that the Reveil has been, and continues to be, a force in the religious life of the Netherlands.

3. Concluding Observations

The Reveil has not only had its admirers, but also its critics. It is not difficult to identify aspects of the movement which invite and deserve criticism. It all depends, however, how one criticizes, as an enemy or as a friend. If I also offer my critique, I do so as a friend who admires the movement as a whole, but is not blind to some of its shortcomings.

Among these is the lack of consistent, well-defined doctrine of the Church. Although most of the Reveil people were members of the established church and longed for its reformation, they could never agree on how the Church was to be reformed. The result was that the "Christian Friends" at their meetings usually avoided the subject of the Church and concentrated on what they all had in common: their love for the Saviour, personal devotion, missionary zeal, compassion for the needy, etc. This tendency to avoid the controversial subject of the Church was intensified when many from other churches joined the movement. The Reveil became a kind of "Cave of Adullam", where people from widely diverse backgrounds came for comfort and spiritual fellowship. In such a situation it must have been very tempting to emphasize "spiritual" concerns at the expense of "touchy" subjects such as ecclesiastical divisions.

Closely related to this is the de-emphasizing of the importance of the Confessions in the Reveil community. As I mentioned earlier, there were some, especially Groen van Prinsterer, who stressed

the importance of the Reformed creeds, but the majority adopted a much more moderate position. Many took exception to the doctrine of reprobation as taught by the Canons of Dort, and even Groen had reservations here, so that he placed the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism above the Canons as far as value and authority was concerned.

The Reveil has also been faulted for being too "otherworldly", but I consider this criticism too severe. Like all serious Christians, the men of the Reveil had great problems with being "in the world, yet not of the world". Not being able to cope with a fallen world in which evil seemed to triumph, they sometimes adopted a negative attitude to life and sought sanctification through asceticism and world-flight. This explains also why the doctrine of the Last Things received so much attention from the Reveil. Christ's second coming would solve all problems and riddles with which they were faced every day. Only by divine intervention would the sad situation in church and society be changed for the better. This enabled them to have (perhaps too much) patience with the status quo. The only thing that really mattered was the salvation of souls; hence the zeal for evangelism and missions. It was especially Heldring who saw a danger here and for that reason urged his brethren to pay more attention to the concrete, social needs of the people.

Yet, although much was done in this area, especially during the later years of the Reveil, it was too incidental and fragmented to be of any lasting help. The men and women of the Reveil did indeed show compassion for the poor and needy, but what they failed to see was that behind the individual cases of poverty and other social evils, there was an evil system and structure that needed to be changed through better legislation if any real improvement was to be hoped for.

As mentioned earlier, the Reveil was mainly an aristocratic movement. And aristocrats tend to be conservative and predisposed to accept the existing social order. "*The poor always ye have with you*", is one word from the Master that the rich tend to quote rather frequently. It was no different with the Reveil. Much money was spent in relieving the poor, but very little was done to bring about any permanent changes in their lot as a class.

It has to be admitted that the Social Democrats at the time had a better insight into the social injustices that prevailed all over Europe than the leaders of the Reveil and Christians generally. No doubt this was partly due to the fact that the way in which the Social Democrats sought to change society, namely by revolution if necessary, so frightened both orthodox and liberal Christians (the latter being liberal in theology only but conservative in politics), that they had no sympathy for this radical movement that was sweeping throughout Europe in the mid-eighteen hundreds.

Yet these radicals, wrong as they were in advocating revolution, did have a cause and it is regrettable that the Church during that period did not address the social problems of the nation as it should have and could have, if only it had taken seriously what Scripture has to say about social justice. As S. Van der Linde says:

"What a pity that the Reveil could only see these demands of the Social Democrats as revolutionary and not as Biblical; as consistent with faith in God Who takes heaven and earth so seriously that He renews them both by His Son Who was willing to become man, real visible man, for it. How is it possible then to consider this visible world so unimportant? Here the Reveil ... clearly shows its limitations."

But in spite of these reservations and criticisms to which even more could be added, I believe that nevertheless the Reveil, on balance, has been a positive force in the Netherlands. Surely, with all its shortcomings and weaknesses it was a mighty movement of the Spirit of God! Aristocrats though many of its leaders were, theirs was not only a nobility of class, but they belonged to that spiritual elite described in Hebrews 11 as heroes of the faith, "*of whom the world was not worthy*" (v. 30).

The following is the testimony of Allard Pierson who knew many of the leading figures of the Reveil as they often met in his parent's home in Amsterdam. Although he was not of their party, but belonged to a more progressive school of theology, he nevertheless retained the highest respect for his parents and their friends, whom he is not ashamed to call his spiritual ancestors. While most "enlightened" men of his time ridiculed Da Costa, Groen and other leaders of the Reveil, Pierson

writes this in his *Oudere Tijdgenoten* (Older Contemporaries), "as for me, I wish for no other pedigree than these mocked pietists". After describing their real piety as consisting of their contempt for success and seeking a Kingdom that is not of this world, he goes on to say, "Therefore I remember you with thankful emotion, friends of my parents, hearts of gold, children of the Father's House." They were, as Pierson put it, "men and women of one Book; the Bible was their Book of life."

H.J. Honders sums up his evaluation of the Reveil in this way:

"Their weakness may have been a lack of critical-theological reflection, but their strength lay in their confessing and experiencing of 'man nothing and Christ everything'. Sin and grace were for them things of the greatest magnitude which were not to be propagated only intellectually as doctrines, but they lived out of these truths ... It would be given to others to recover the value of the Church and the Confessions according to the Scriptures. But we can only be filled with gratitude for that generation which in times of religious dullness and inertia, despised the same and in faithfulness to God's Word confessed the Name of Christ not in the least by performing numerous works of mercy. They have seen that religious apathy must lead to apostacy and aversion to the most sacred values of life."

Nicolaas Beets, well-known preacher and poet of the Reveil summed it all up in this verse:

*What falls away from the high God must fall;
Like guilt, like destiny for all.
The family, relations, people and the State,
Both who are small and who are great:
Those who forsake the Lord, His face provoking,
Are left by Him, His wrath evoking.
Yet daily one can hear them state:
No problem! We don't need His aid.
But those who say this are not thinking;
Fact is, they are perishing and sinking.*

*Wat afvalt van den hoogen God,
Moet vallen.
Een zelfde schuld, een zelfde lot
Voor allen.
't Gezin, 't geslacht, het volk, de staat,
De kleinen en de grooten:*

*Verlaten wordt wat God verlaat,
Wat God verstoot, verstooten.
Wel hoort men dagelijks stem op stem
Weerklinken:
"Geen nood! Wij redden 't zonder Hem!"
Maar die het zeggen — zinken.*

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