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GROEN VAN PRINSTERER AND HIS BOOK¹

THE word revolution is often heard these days. Not always in a bad sense—as is supposed. That the world in every respect is in an evil case is generally agreed. All kinds of writers and speakers are trying to point out the trouble, and what should be done about it. Writers and orators, editors and politicians are frantic to discover the causes, to formulate the remedies, and so avoid catastrophe, which is feared. And the Modernist theologian, having dispensed with the light which Heaven supplies, gropes about in the dark as helplessly as any. Large numbers subscribe to a life- and world-view which dates back to the jungle; which has been evolving ever since (very miraculous, indeed, in what it has accomplished, then); and which to-day is showing signs of collapse—let us say, reversion to the jungle. They themselves very nearly admit this.

This paper brings to your attention an eminent Dutch statesman who gave this very matter his attention, and, taking up a firm position in Revelation and calling secular history to witness, insistently warned against the dire consequences of failing to follow the proper line of conduct. We refer to the Honourable G. Groen van Prinsterer. He is scarcely known outside of the Netherlands, but left a powerful impression upon his country. His views are embodied in his famous work, *Ongeloof en Revolutie*. The first edition appeared in 1847. Although this is almost a century ago, it seems that it is practically unknown outside of the Netherlands, as it was never translated. Van Prinsterer made much study of history and the philosophy thereof. In his political career he was dominated by what he conceived to be the real and true quality which underlies everything, namely, the Divine governance of the world. This he believed with all his powers of mind and heart. He connected with it its specific Christian character. He pointed to it at every turn; he proclaimed it in parliament as well as in lesser places. His general idea constituted the girders of the platform of the new political party in Holland, called the Anti-revolutionary

¹ Pronounce the "oe" in the name Groen not as the German umlaut, but like "oo" in the word "moon". It may be noted further that after common usage in Holland, Mr. Van Prinsterer will often be called, in the text below, simply Groen. His book is *Ongeloof en Revolutie* (Unbelief and Revolution). Thorbecke was an able statesman in Holland in the days of Groen and was its Prime Minister for some time.

party, as he had pointed out that in principle any other view is subversive of the Divine ordinances for the world in all its spheres of life and action, and therefore revolutionary. This is the main thesis of his masterly work, *Ongeloof en Revolutie*.

We shall first give a short account of the man and the salient events of his life and work.

I

Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer was born in The Hague on August 21st, 1801, and died there on May 19th, 1876. He studied law, philosophy and history at the University of Leyden. Of all his political friends he was the only one who not only devoted wellnigh all his life to national political affairs, but also from early youth passed his days in the highest government circles. In 1829 he became Private Secretary to King William I. He gained the regard and confidence of the king to such an extent that Groen's views often affected the royal acts. The king even indulged him despite instances in which Groen thought quite otherwise than the king did and was not afraid so to inform His Majesty. Grateful as Groen was for the unmistakable favour shown him by the king, he asked in 1833 to be relieved of his secretaryship in order to devote himself to historical studies. He was given the task of investigating the royal archives of the House of Orange which resulted in the publication in 1840-55 of the *Archives de la Maison d'Orange-Nassau* in thirteen volumes, and all in the French language. Meanwhile he began taking an active part in national politics through writing and otherwise, and continued this till late in life.

At this point we must give some account of his religious development. He had been brought up under the liberal religious ideas then so prevalent in the Netherlands. But the Swiss Réveil exercised a powerful influence upon him in moulding him in his person and so for his life-work. It will be recalled that in Switzerland, even in Geneva, the city of Calvin, rationalism had gotten the control of everything. But the power of God unto salvation once more entered in a movement called the Réveil. This had its remoter origin in the missionary activity of Madame de Krüdener, of Riga, Russia. This strange lady, after many years of a gay life, forsook the world, and began in 1814 her travels throughout Europe, preaching repentance,

proclaiming the Gospel message in prisons, holding up the foolishness of the Cross to the wise of this world, and even to kings and princes the majesty of Christ as King of kings. Wherever she went she made careless sinners to tremble, and she drew around herself crowds of the anxious and spiritually hardened of every sort and station. She visited Geneva in 1814 and greatly influenced students of the University. In 1816 Robert Haldane appeared there, and opened his parlours in the evening to the students of theology in the University, and expounded to them the Epistle to the Romans. These meetings attracted large audiences; and such men as Merle d'Aubigné, Cesar Malan, Gausson, and others, were converted and led to adopt evangelical views. This revival of earnest religion assumed considerable proportions and spread to other countries. In Holland it mostly affected aristocratic circles. In 1828 Merle d'Aubigné (the historian of the Reformation) was preaching in Brussels. It so happened that Groen van Prinsterer was one of his hearers. He came there, liberal in his theological views, and being a man of consistency in following up principles, he was in danger of being drawn into revolutionary ways. What Merle meant for him in this situation, Groen expressed thus: "The antidote was there for me. Especially also in the preaching and friendship of Merle d'Aubigné. Soon I learned the meaning of the so-called *Réveil*. Christian *reawakening*. Reformatory return to the Evangelical A B C. Return to the Holy Scriptures and in these Scriptures to the main thought which had been the life-giving power of the Church Reformation." At d'Aubigné's death in 1872 Groen wrote: "There is hardly anyone to whose influence upon my life, in the higher sense of the word, I can accord equal thanks." In one of his writings Groen confesses: "I am a descendant (*issu*) of Calvin, a child of the *Réveil*. Faithful to the motto of the Reformers: Justification by faith alone, and the Word of God remaining forever. I contemplate history from the point of view of Merle d'Aubigné, of Chalmers, of Guizot. I desire to be a disciple and a witness of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

II

Proceeding now to Groen's political career it must be remembered that politics in Holland ran and run largely on

religious lines. Roughly speaking, there obtain to-day in the Second Chamber of the States General three groups, each containing about one-third of the delegates. These groups are the Roman Catholic, the Socialist and the outspoken Christian (Protestant) blocks. During the largest part of the nineteenth century, in the days of Groen, there was a Liberal party which at that time was dominating everything. This Liberal party did not favour any emphasis upon distinctive religious ideas. The public schools, e.g., had to be strictly neutral in matters of religion. Of course, this neutrality played directly into the hands of irreligion and to the advocacy of matters which were at variance with Holy Scripture. To-day this Liberal party has well-nigh disappeared, and the Socialist has become the larger irreligious block, which to-day has about one-third of the membership of the States General, roughly speaking again. The cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam are completely in their control. At the last election even the Communists had 118,000 votes.

In the days, then, of Groen this Liberal party had complete control, even to such an extent that the evangelicals scarcely asserted themselves. Van Prinsterer appeared as the lone figure who openly and determinedly came out for evangelical Christianity and pleaded its cause. Support he had but little and some of that would turn aside from him. He endured much opposition, was misunderstood even by those of his own kind, and towards the end of his life he withdrew dispirited. They called him a "general without an army". He thus states his own position: "Since 1829 my chief thought has remained the same. Also in my organ, *De Nederlander*, I have under various forms, almost daily, put in the foreground as guide in my investigations of statecraft the Christian-historical and therefore anti-revolutionary ideas, the view which has the unshaken support of Revelation and of history; and for the selfsame reason is opposed to the ground-note of this age; against the self-deification which places the origin of truth and right in human thinking and good-pleasure; against the doctrine which through denial of the highest truth overturns the relations of things in every sphere of right and morals; against the *Revolution*. As far as practicable I have infused this leading thought into the whole range of our political views." Fine as was Groen's idealism, and courageous as were his efforts, they all availed very

little. Jhr. Mr. De Savornin Lohman says of him: "That such an unusual spirit as hardly any other nation can point to should be ignored all his life, by almost all his contemporaries and even by those of his own persuasion (even though he had many friends and admirers), is to be deplored although it can be explained. He was too much ahead of his time, which appeared from this, that the very things he predicted actually came to pass."

III

Dr. A. Kuyper began his public career in 1863. Soon there developed a strong bond of fellowship between him and Van Prinsterer. Since 1869 the young theologian supported Groen in political matters with exceptional ability and energy, and the tired warrior in 1872 hailed and appointed Kuyper as the providentially indicated new leader of his party.

To give an idea of the whole situation for a century, we here insert this stirring part of an oration of this leader delivered before the quadrennial meeting of delegates of Voters' Societies in preparing for the campaign of 1913:

"Everything had become dark. All had fallen asleep and sunken in impotency. When the French cockades knocked at the gates of our country, they still spoke of 'Keezen' and Patriots, but even the name Calvinist had disappeared from our language. So much so that even Bilderdijk could no longer grasp the glory of Calvinism, and sought in vain to derive from medieval mysticism and from a new-fangled philosophy what only the mighty spirit of Geneva could have furnished, the incomparable poet.

"Neither among our statesmen, nor among the men of science, nor among our theologians did only one man of power arise at the end of the eighteenth century who took up the cudgels for Calvin against Voltaire, or for Marnix against Rousseau. Ministers of the Gospel reputed for orthodoxy the rather set the example before their congregations of dancing around the French Liberty-tree. As brethren, not forsooth in religion, but in politics, the regicides of Paris were taken in. And when at last the bane was broken, and Napoleon disappeared in St. Helena, and Orange returned with the title of royalty, it seemed that ambiguous oscillation between that which our

fathers had honoured and that which Paris recommended us, had become the acme of Dutch wisdom, so pitifully that even to-day the period which we crawled through from 1813-48 remains a disgrace to our national character and no less a very sad witness against a Calvinism on the verge of suicide.

“Only two beacons then broke through that dark sky. The reaction which began in the Church with Molenaar, and which since 1834 was energetically continued by the followers of DeCock. That was the first one. And the second beacon blazed up on the Vijverberg [the residence of Groen]. When Thorbecke approved of the quartering of soldiers upon the pious, Groen van Prinsterer, more than his equal, took up the cause of a new-born Calvinism in order later on to choose for himself the place of honour among the *Issus de Calvin*. At that time Groen had not yet reached his full height, for not till three days before his death he confessed with worship in the soul the full doctrine of election. But nevertheless Groen had this, that he did what no Bilderdijk did, and what even Da Costa did not dare to do, even that he deliberately left the paths of the error of the philosophers and stepped over to the old highway of our national past. With Groen we had again arrived at Marnix and Voetius, and partly even at Bray.

“Are we able to say now that then at least all the people of Beggar (Geuzen) nobility as by storm rushed to the support of Groen? Alas, my hearers, not that even. The rather it remains deeply disgraceful to hear this first precursor upon the ancient Calvinistic path complain that he felt like a general without an army, a joke among his enemies. They just could not be awakened, these heirs of what once was Holland’s glory! Even in 1881 on the occasion of your first official meeting of deputies only thirty persons had appeared with your Central Committee, and there were not even a score of Voters’ Societies in existence. However, since that day things have expanded. In 1905 the thirty deputies had swollen out to 2,500, and at present the whole country presents a solid phalanx of 640 Voters’ Societies. Five years after Groen’s death the revival began, and with rare momentum it has since gone on unabated. Glory in that—I do not grudge it to you. Only this: put away and avoid all self-exaltation because of your new-found powers. Looking back upon our past, beginning with Munster, we Calvinists have reason enough to vie with each other in

self-humiliation. When then you feel so rich to-day in what has become your portion, do not sing a dirge over the woes of your past, but rather give thanks and worship for what God in spite of your sinful sleep has laid away for you, not that you might be crowned but that His holy Name may be glorified." (Meiboom in *de Kap*, pp. 13, 14.)

IV

The chief work of Groen van Prinsterer is his *Ongeloof en Revolutie*, issued in 1847. A second edition, revised by himself, followed in 1868. In 1924 a fifth edition was issued under the editorship of H. Van Malsen. This issue has 489 pages of main text, an Appendix of 140 pages comprising Notes in fine print by the Editor with further quotations from Groen's writings, and an Index of 25 pages. The Editor says of the book: "It is a book for study. I have made it a special study for twelve years and am persuaded that even yet I stand nearer to the periphery than to the centre of Groen's thoughts."

Jhr. Mr. A. F. De Savornin Lohman has an Introductory article entitled "Why did Groen's *Ongeloof en Revolutie* appear and why does it still retain its value?" He points to the fact that Groen was an expert historian, who knew how to grasp the signification of the facts whereby history proves to be a living thing, its development and course as these proceed from definite origins and controlled by certain motives, being not haphazard but logical and natural. Groen was strictly impartial and fearless in expressing his opinions. Thus he gave offence by his rather sympathetic treatment of Catholicism as he felt he must present their view as honestly held by those that held them. Says Lohman: "He united in himself qualities which seldom are found united in one and the self-same person. He was brought up in earnest, old-fashioned Dutch surroundings. At the University he received a thorough classical education. Plato was the philosopher who especially attracted him. . . . Historical studies were his forte. . . . On account of his daily converse in the royal archives, continued for many years, living, as it were, with all the men of note in the days of our Republic, he found himself placed in a position where he could follow as it were day by day the spiritual development of our people and at the same time become deeply conscious of the

violent contrast between the revolution of the sixteenth century which rested on Holy Scripture, and the other revolution which rested on reasoning cut loose from Scripture, of which the first explosion occurred in 1789 and is still at work undermining the foundations of a healthy society."

Then follows a second Introduction written by the late well-known Professor Dr. H. Bavinck. "Since Groen's days history has been made and things have assumed a different aspect. But the old enemy remained. For the enemy which Groen fought has indeed changed his form but not his disposition. In both cases, forsooth, it is *man* who gives existence to language and religion, to right and morals, to state and society; in both cases God, His Word and His laws are left out of consideration. Viewed thus, conditions to-day have even become worse. There has been progress, but in the sense of further dissolution. Whereas in former days God was still regarded as indispensable for the origin of things, to-day His existence, or at least His knowability is denied. It is held to be unscientific to reckon with God. Science judges that as science she must be 'athée', or else deny herself. Family, society, state, religion and morality, language and thought, must be construed historically, or, if this is impossible, it must be done psycho-genetically, and in its extreme, mechanically.

"This development of the revolutionary principles did not escape Groen's observation. He had studied Plato and believed in the reality of ideas. The Evangelical Réveil which had originated in Switzerland had captured his heart. Through the preaching of Merle d'Aubigné he had come under the influence of the Réveil and had learned to esteem everything but loss for the excellency of Christ. Finally, as the archives of the House of Orange were opened to him as Cabinet Secretary, in the history of our struggle for national existence he had seen faith in action and the fruit of doctrines in a holy life. As this constantly became clearer to him, a new and surprising light was shed upon the nature of Revolution. He now had learned to understand it as a work of systematic unbelief. He traced its logical development, but he likewise saw that the revolutionary theory had never yet been fully realized due to the insuppressible claims of human nature and the divine ordinances for life.

"And likewise the Christian-historical standpoint made Groen able to comprehend the nature and the tendency of the

French Revolution. Under this Revolution he understood not only one of the many occurrences through which a re-allocation of public authority was brought about ; not alone the revolutionary storm which raged in France, but the inversion of thought and disposition manifest in all Christendom ; the development of a full-blown scepticism through which God's Word and law was laid aside. And along with the revolution-conceptions he had his eye upon the principles of liberty, and equality, popular sovereignty, social contract, conventional regeneration, which were honoured as the corner-stones of civil law and constitution. Of *this* Revolution Groen averred that, since it was born from a rejection of God's Word and law, it showed its native character not only as political but social as well ; that it aimed not only at a change of political forms but a change of society ; that in it there appears not only political error, which has happened often enough before, but that at the same time a social misconception was in evidence. For when God's sovereignty is denied and fades away, where will the origin of authority be found, of right, of every holy and binding sanction in state, society and family ? What basis remains for the differences of rank and position ? What reason can be given why I obey and another commands me, why one is poor and another rich ? Every institution, right and liberty, all religion and morality, all property-rights and life, lose their foundation and become subject to the sovereign will of the people, of the majority of one-half plus one.

“ The correctness of this view of the nature of the Revolution has been confirmed during Groen's life and after his death in the history of peoples from year to year. Everywhere, in family and society, in science and art, in jurisprudence and history, the consequences have been drawn which Groen saw as contained in the principle of Revolution. When this did not fully appear, it was not owing to the absence of this principle, but only to powers which God has placed in nature and in history over against it ; owing to a return to the Gospel which His Spirit has brought about in parts of Christendom. The Gospel was therefore the only but also the efficient remedy for the ills of the world. . . . Out of the Gospel he deduced principles which could not but bring blessing to all the ranks of life. The power of the Gospel to work out order, liberty and prosperity was, as a matter of fact, demonstrable from history.

“ While then the aim is to release the State from all higher, religio-moral principles and to place over against this the cultivation of all kinds of material interests, Groen steered in the opposite direction. He defended the divine right of civil authority and could not imagine a well-ordered state which stood indifferent or hostile over against the Church. . . .” He did not identify Church and State, but simply maintained the Divine ordinances for all the walks of life, each and all according to their specific nature and operation.

V

The contents of the book, *Ongeloof en Revolutie*, are briefly as follows: I. Introduction. II. Science Opposed to the Civil Law of the Revolution. III. Anti-revolutionary Principles. IV. Historical Forms of Government. V. Abuses. VI. Degeneration of Civil Law. VII. The Reformation not the Cause of the Revolution. VIII. The Doctrine of the Revolution a Manifestation of Unbelief in Systematic Form. IX. Ditto. X. The Doctrine of the Revolution in Conflict with Nature and Right. XI-XIV. A Study of the French Revolution in its Principles as Reflected in Practice. XV. Conclusion.

Says Groen: “ The standpoint of our study is that of the Christian, who desires to glory in nothing but in Christ and Him crucified; who, in religion, morality and right, in family and in state, recognizes no wisdom or truth which does not begin with submission of heart and mind to Revelation; who, with the Deist in history likewise traces out and takes notice of the leading of a Providence, but true to the confession of the Gospel, with firm conviction, recognizes and expects in the coming of the triumphant Saviour the solution of the riddles of the history of mankind; who loves the appearance of the Saviour because therein he perceives with the historian Von Muller ‘ the accomplishment of all the hopes, the point of perfection of all philosophy, the explanation of all revolutions, the key to all the apparent contradictions of the physical and moral world, of life and immortality ’.

“ After the labour which I have given to the study of history it would be unanswerable if I did not now give witness to the truth as it is in Christ by showing that the history of the last sixty years [this is written in 1847] in the outpourings of wickedness has been the fruit and manifestation of systematic unbelief.”

Wealth of material forbids us to do no more than furnish translations of characteristic portions of the book.

“ In order to estimate the fatal influence of this age, it must be borne in mind that it even turned good into evil. I do not refer to the abundance of material prosperity which it has not seldom squandered, rich as it was in promise, but richer still in disappointments ;—I mean the concepts of right, liberty, tolerance, humanity, morality, in which, as an angel of light, the age has originally arrayed itself. Fruits, raised not on its own domain, but on Christian bottom. In the Gospel alone they can be found in their genuineness. Classical antiquity but faintly foreshadows it. Only the proclamation of the Gospel gave it a popularity which was unknown in the heathen world. This rich inheritance which was not preserved by orthodoxy, has fallen into the power of philosophy. What has this made of it ? In spite of boasting, these treasures have, under her dominion, come to naught. No wonder. They desired to retain the conclusions, whilst they rejected the principles. As though one should reckon upon the enjoyment of water whose fountain-head has been blocked, or enjoy the shadow of trees which have been cut off at the roots. This reckoning has always been a misreckoning. So in this respect. Plants which throve along the banks of the stream of the Gospel withered when transplanted to a land dry and without water. Or really, no. Even thus our comparison suffers from weakness and inaccuracy. On the poisonous acre of atheism, they degenerate into deleterious vegetation whose fatal poison is concealed under brilliant colouring and attractive exhalations. Words to conjure with by means of which the perfection of wisdom and happiness would be ushered in, ever so many times trumpeted forth, remained mere sound. The result has been the contrary of the illusion. Instead of justice, injustice ; instead of tolerance, intolerance ; instead of humanity, inhumanity ; instead of morality, corruption of morals.

“ Guizot, who at first thought favourably of the eighteenth century, wrote about it afterwards as follows : ‘ The eighteenth century has been certainly the greatest tempter and the most seductive of centuries, for it has promised all at once satisfaction to all the heights and to all the weaknesses of humanity ; it has at the same time elevated and enervated ; flattering by turns its most noble sentiments and its most earthly propensities,

intoxicating it with sublime hopes and lulling it to sleep with soft complacency.' He also said: 'We live in an epoch of confusion and of obscurity, moral as well as social.'

"The Revolutionaries, especially those whose condition of private means and individual glory affords no cause for despondent complaint, comforted themselves with an immovable confidence in the future. Thiers, who does not belong to the impoverished, concludes his history of the Revolution with the dictum: 'Liberty has not arrived: it will arrive.' At present, twenty years later, he certainly has the courage to express the same enheartening promise. There is no more fitting song with which to rock a deceived humanity to sleep. But we, my friends, who are concerned not with slumbering on, but with being awake, beg leave to surmise that liberty will never arrive in that way. Never, without abjuring the revolution-principle and returning to the Gospel."

"Remarkable is the testimony of Guizot in 1836: 'The efforts of our epoch have met with much disappointment; hopes were immense, excessive; they have been far from being realized; there has not been obtained for the human race all the happiness which has been promised. Then I do not know what discouragement, what chilliness has taken possession of the hearts. After the great labours for the amelioration of the lot of humanity, it seems to-day that nothing has been accomplished, that there are no further hopes. That love of humanity which has so honoured our age, has made way for a frozen timidity; more of devotion, more of hope, more of ambition for that great and holy cause. Do not believe that equal discouragement ever touched Christian love, that love which is directed to the soul of man and to his eternal destiny more than to his condition on earth. There the claims, certainly of the highest, are less vast and less proud; a reformed soul, saved, suffices to fill up the hope and to sustain the courage of the Christian. It is to that focus that they ought to come so as to warm again the chilled hearts of our times. It is to the religious spirit that it will be given to rekindle the torch of the love of men, to direct anew towards the welfare of humanity some of the ardent and devoted efforts, to revive, finally, amongst us that confidence, that thirst, that hope of betterment which are the life of the human race. Immense is the service that our time calls for and which the religious spirit alone is able to render.'"

“Afterwards Guizot has himself confessed that in the anti-Christian erroneous notions lie the cause also of his disappointments. He says, e.g. : ‘We have lived and acted from 1840-8 in the presence of and under the ardour of many false ideas. Contemporaries of our great revolution, born in its cradle, or from its influence, these ideas which should have been combatted, still were, among the greater part of the spirits, implicitly admitted and tied up to their cause.’ Elsewhere : ‘We are left to the surface of society, while at the same time corrupt ideas and wicked sentiments break out from the bottom.’

“Only through the reviving of Christian love and evangelical opinion can sufficient power against unbelief be obtained. Only through faith in the Son of the living God is *the* Revolution to be conquered.

“The ideas in which the captivation of philosophy lay were of Christian origin ; salutary in as far as they were *derived* from the Gospel, pernicious because they were *torn away* from it. Also in France this is being recognized by able men, as Guizot, more and more. There obtains modification with regard to 1789. E.g., St. Marc-Cirardin writes : ‘The great maxims of justice, equality, liberty, which French society had learned in the Christian school, she wished to learn anew in the philosophical school. But I cannot at all regret that there was always lacking in the spirit of the eighteenth century, in the spirit of ’89, the virtue which vivifies and consolidates the great doctrines, those relating to religious faith, that virtue, and, to speak truly, that power which might have given it either the Protestants or the Jansenists, or Fenelon, and what it cannot give it, viz. the eloquent and almost Christian deism of J. J. Rousseau.’

“‘*Almost Christian.*’ In this *almost*, in this *seeming* Christian, lies *par excellence* the *anti-Christian* character of revolutionary philosophy, of the modern tendency. In one of my writings (1850) I have given some striking remarks on this matter from the learned and acute Professor Neander, of Berlin, as follows : ‘Truly, Christianity has not by any means done enough through the fault of those who acknowledge themselves as Christians but in whom it has not really become flesh and blood. What in a true and sound way should have come forth from Christianity, now *appears as a caricature against Christianity*. That which in Christianity is a world-upbuilding and world-upholding power, becomes, when torn loose from its roots, in

conflict with everything existent, with all healthy historical development, trampling upon all fresh characteristic life, only a *power of wild destruction* which will bring European humanity back to *barbarism* if it be not restrained and overcome by the higher constraint of Christianity. We cannot regard the threatening danger great enough; we stand at the brink of an abyss; in that dark violence which we have described, everything threatens to be broken up.' Neander continues further on: 'It is the time for such to come to other thoughts and to repent, and in their struggle to choose sides to stake everything upon that in a firm and positive manner. Because', he adds, 'the greatest struggle is preparing which has ever been indicated in the books of history. Defeat or victory decides the further course of the history of the world.' "

VI

In this connection Groen has good words to say for Great Britain. We quote him again: "Let us take a look at the times in which the Revolution triumphed. Be it noted, meanwhile, that autocracy was never so complete but what it met with dissent. The truth at all times had its devotees. But we are also acquainted with the high pretensions of the advocates of the various kinds of new wisdom each fast succeeding the former; we know that they have constantly followed the advice 'strike hard rather than fairly' with boldness and impudence of assertion. . . . But positive language was also used in favour of religion, morality and right. . . .

"Besides, although elsewhere, e.g. in Germany and in France, such testimony was largely smothered, this was not the case everywhere. There is one land, England, where, although it also had been the seat and cradle of unbelieving philosophy, opposition to that philosophy prevailed. There the light of political science stood upon the candlestick; there there was more than one splendid protest. There there was no lack of men who, occupying high position, resisted with word and deed. I shall not mention many of them. I may not keep silence in respect of two because they more than others are entitled to admiration and gratitude. You have already named them: Pitt and Burke.

“ This is not the place to set forth the merits of that statesman, who, what seemed impossible, has excelled his father, Lord Chatham ; who, not yet twenty-three, was deemed worthy to hold, especially in those days, the severely strained helm of the British ship of state even above men who had become grey in public affairs ; who, through the perseverance of his character, disarmed the spirit of revolution in England, who held his ground against Napoleon single-handed, and, under the pressing burdens of war, constantly renewed and embracing almost all seas and lands, brought his country to unprecedented prosperity and glory. I should indeed point to what is extant in his orations ; all the more because he set forth political questions of his times in the clear light of general principles ; so that in these noble publications (faint copy of his incomparable speech) the high earnestness of true knowledge was associated with that vivacity of presentation which is found so seldom in writings where readers and not listeners are in view.

“ So seldom ! Sometimes, however. Then especially when in a mighty genius the warmth of conviction and the glow of imagination has not been cooled by the accuracy and thoroughness of investigation. No more brilliant example than Burke is known to me. Do you desire to know the nature and operation of the revolution, and the means whereby it could have been combatted with success, read his writings : the appeal to the Whigs of former days, where he brought to light the contrast between true and false freedom, the liberty of which William III was the defender, and that of which Jacobin lust of murder was the protagonist ; the treatise on the French Revolution in which he hurled with the power of a Demosthenes the curse upon what had been hailed as a blessing ; his remarks on the statesmanship of the Allies, why their measures must necessarily fail because of the wrong spirit behind them ; the Letters on the peace with the regicides in which towards the end of his life he gives vent to his indignation over the rapprochement to the revolutionary government with undiminished energy. Read and reread his writings : you will find in them never excelled clarity of argument whereby certainty at once emerges instead of what for others had been guesswork and conjecture. Earlier even than Pitt, Burke discerned the tendency of the errors which also in England were praised too largely. Pitt did not regard peace impossible when in 1792 war was unavoidable ;

but for a long time already Burke had affirmed the inevitableness of a struggle for life or for death."

Groen introduces the detailed examination of the French Revolution (in four chapters) with a recital of the life-history of the revolution, giving some prominent lines which repeatedly reappear therein :—

" 1. As respects theoretical origin and course, the Revolution cannot be compared with any occurrences of former times.—Change of rulers, re-allocation of authority, change of forms of government, *political* controversy, many a difference of religious conviction—all these have, in principle, nothing in common with a *social* revolution whose nature is directed against every government, against every religion ; with a social, or rather yet an *anti-social* revolution which undermines and destroys morality and society ; with an *anti-Christian* revolution whose chief idea develops itself in systematic rebellion against the God of revelation. So Stahl: 'I take the Revolution in its world-historical idea. It did not exist in its complete form before 1789. But since then it became a world-power and the battle for or against it fills history.' 'The Revolution is a unique event. It is a revolution of beliefs ; it is the emergence of a new sect, of a new religion ; of a religion which is nothing but irreligion itself, impiety, atheism, the hatred of Christianity raised into a system.'

VII

"The revolution of the United Netherlands has been compared with it ; also the revolution in North America. As respects the Netherlands I appeal to what I have often said, that 'liberty of Christian exercise of religion was its chief object as oppression of the Gospel was the chief cause of the war'. As respects America, I appeal to the remarkable work of Baird, who said : 'In separating themselves from Great Britain and in reorganizing their respective governments, the United States modified their institutions much less than one would be able to expect there. King, parliament and Britannic justice were replaced for president, congress and the supreme court ; but it was at bottom the same political system plus independence.' Still less may I recognize in the English revolutions a likeness of the French. If you find agreement between the revolutions of

1688 and 1789 read Burke on the similarity in outward appearance, the contrast in essence and principle. He says: 'The present Revolution in France seems to me to be quite of another character and description and to bear little resemblance or analogy to any of those which have been brought about in Europe upon principles merely political. It is a revolution of doctrine and theoretic dogma.' Even with 1640, with the democratic tendency and with the tyranny of Cromwell, no comparison can be allowed in its chief conception. Says Tocqueville: 'Nothing could be more dissimilar. . . . In my opinion the two events are absolutely not to be compared.' And Stahl remarks: 'The liberty of England and of America is permeated with the breath of the Puritans, the liberty of France is permeated with the breath of the Encyclopedists and the Jacobins.'

"2. The Revolution is a *European* revolution, one in Christendom. Says Tocqueville: 'That great revolution was ready at the same time over almost all of Europe.' Mallet du Pan observes: 'The revolutionary system is applicable to all nations. It is, so to speak, *cosmopolitan*.' The careful study of history confirms also here what appears from the nature of things. . . .

"3. The doctrine of Revolution undermines and destroys the foundations of right. Everywhere it regards right as mere convention, a product of the human will; it locates in arbitrariness the constantly changing origin of right. . . .

"4. The revolutionary theory *has never been realized*. This proposition has been confirmed in history without an exception." We doubt not that if Groen had lived to-day he would have pointed to Russia as the first real application of the theory in every direction. "The theory was not realized", Groen continues, "because its realization was an impossibility. 'It has failed because it *had* to fail; because the system itself is false, impracticable, contrary to reason, and because the all-powerful force of nature is opposed to its bringing into execution.'

"5. Everywhere there obtains identity of the revolution principle.—Infatuation with anarchy which is called liberty, or with an arbitrariness which recommends itself as powerful and brilliant rule, or with representative forms under which the aspiration after an unattainable equilibrium hides itself. Jacobinism, Bonapartism, Constitutionalism are branches of the same tree.

“ 6. Though much controversy obtained, issue was never taken with the essence of revolution. Many attempts went for being anti-revolutionary but they were not. The false theory has been attacked in its development, never in its origin and root.

“ 7. As unbelief is the principle, the cure must lie in the faith.—If anyone regards this most weighty lesson of history rather as a sentimental aspiration than as the advice of statesmanship, he forgets that the power of the Gospel to effect order, liberty and prosperity is proved in the history of the world. Let him consider that all that is beneficial and salutary for man, is furthered by the fear of God and is antagonized by the denial of God. Let him consider above all that the revolutionary theory is the development of the germ of unbelief, and that the poisonous plant is fostered by apostasy, and wilts and is smothered in the atmosphere of a revived faith.”

The Editor of the book, H. Van Malsen, in effect says that *Ongeloof en Revolutie* can be regarded as a challenge to the Science of History. As such it is an invaluable document and shall remain a shining example of historical investigation. But Science has not taken up the challenge. The book has thus far been a stillborn child. If Groen has not gained what he was after, he has at least disturbed the lethargy of his times. Future generations will understand him better and be willing to learn from him as is already largely the case in Holland to-day, where Kuyper and others repeatedly refer to him and conduct its politics in Groen's spirit and with much success.

If one desires to study a character with many qualities of true nobility, that of Groen van Prinsterer furnishes the opportunity. Who so truly and disinterestedly sought the honour of his God, of his king, and of his country? Who has like him endured alone, unsupported even by the ministers of the Gospel, a life-long struggle for the greatest principles of civil and religious well-being? He shows no traces of rancour in the disappointments in a career full of disappointment and darkness. His relation to his chief opponent, the eminent Prime Minister, Thorbecke, reveals a spirit of true Christian charity. They were bosom friends at the University, but Groen's conversion brought a radical divergence of views, which Thorbecke often violently assailed in his parliamentary tilts with his old friend. Nevertheless Groen respected him, honoured him and even warmly defended him on occasion. On Thorbecke's death

Groen joined in the universal grief and his residence put on mourning. And he wrote of it : " No one will be surprised that I have been silent for a time as I share the general sorrow. Reverent reserve is befitting all in judging of such a statesman. Especially in my case. Thorbecke was always my victorious opponent in measures which I had judged best for my country and the Crown. But even so, a sweet reflexion of the friendship of our youth remained. Less than ever will I now be untrue to a relation which I have valued with melancholy gratitude even in the midst of determined conflict."

VIII

We may, in conclusion, be permitted to observe that the burden of Groen's book furnishes food for thought in our own trying times. Groen has emphasized the antithesis between religion and irreligion which in state and in society find their poles in reverence for constituted authority and in anarchy. Revolution is the process or deed which leads from the one to the other. While the principle of Revolution has ever been in evidence more or less, its acceptance and use were never complete, due to an intuitive fear of the consequences of going too far, this again being due to what is called " common grace ". The fullest exemplification of the revolutionary idea has been seen in France, in its first great explosion of 1789 and in its subsequent flare-ups in 1830, 1848, 1871. We have to-day in Russia as perfect an example as need be because of its complete and professed denial of God and His ordinances. Is there any danger that the rest of the world may follow this lead ? Signs are multiplying ominously. The Communistic headquarters of the world at Moscow carries on an energetic propaganda and finds conditions such as to be sanguine of success. The liberalization of Christianity is going on apace. There obtains a cutting loose from the Word of God which the work of our theological seminaries is furthering by graduating class after class with this poisonous idea. True religion as it is founded on the knowledge of sin, requirement of repentance, faith in the atoning blood, etc., is fading. Looser morals are tolerated, regard for its sanctions is weak, and crime is alarmingly prevalent especially among the youthful. Many of our colleges are no longer Christian as they once were, and unsettling things all the way to

rank atheism are taught. The United States lives on the Christian capital of the past which is not yet fully spent, but if incompetency in government, self-seeking politicians, miscarriage of justice, mounting taxes with dwindling incomes will continue, it would seem that we are right on the track of revolution. Thus far secular and religious ideas seem to have little in common, but it becomes a grave matter whether distress and degeneration in civil affairs will not issue in despair and entail professed adhesion to anti-Christian beliefs, by reason of the evaporation of the regulative power of the revealed Word of God.

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