

CHRISTIAN
POLITICAL
ACTION IN
AN AGE OF
REVOLUTION

By Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer

Translated by Colin Wright

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NOTES ON THE TRANSLATION

Text in square brackets may indicate several things: either the original word (in cases in which different interpretations of the word are possible), or the translation of a book or article title, or an interpolation by the translator or editor. Footnotes in the original text were entirely inadequate to modern scholarly standards, and therefore have been thoroughly reworked. Similarly, errors in the text have been tacitly corrected. Finally, the method of quotation did not always come up to modern scientific standards; we have done our best to bring them to those standards.

PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD

This is a description and defense of Christian politics. The writer, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801–1876) was a pioneer in this area, a leading Dutch politician and head of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, which he created.

The son of a medical doctor, Groen enjoyed a classical education and gained a reputation as an outstanding practitioner of languages, especially Latin.¹ He received doctorates in both law and letters at the University of Leyden, and soon thereafter became a member of King William I's cabinet. As the Netherlands and Belgium were then one country, he relocated to the court in Brussels with his newlywed bride in 1828. This was momentous for his further development: he there met proponents of the Christian revival movement known as the Réveil,² chiefly the court preacher J.H. Merle d'Aubigné. At this

1. These biographical notes are derived mainly from the entry written by Alexander de Savornin Lohman in the *Nieuw Nederlandsch biografisch woordenboek. Deel 2* [New Dutch Biographical Dictionary, vol. 2] (Leyden: A.W. Sijthoff, 1912), 508–520.

2. The Réveil was a 19th-century revivalist movement that mainly impacted Protestantism in France, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.

point his views shifted from a middle-of-the-road latitudinarian liberal Christianity to a committed Reformed orthodoxy, and he became a champion of the Dutch Reformed Church and the House of Orange. And his writing began to reflect that. He was appointed archivist of the royal archives, the volumes of which, published under his direction, lent him international fame. While continuing with his literary efforts he also entered into politics, forming the Anti-Revolutionary Party as one of the major factions in the Lower House of the States General, the Netherlands' legislative body.

Groen established this party to oppose the revolutionary movement that began with the French Revolution in 1789 and continued in various iterations throughout the nineteenth century.

This revolutionary movement was after more than just a change in leadership or reworking of institutions: it was a fundamental attack on the spiritual basis of Western civilisation, quite simply, the enthronement of man in place of God.

In its essence, the Revolution is a single great historical fact: the invasion of the human mind by the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of man, thus making him the source and centre of all truth, by substituting human reason and human will for divine revelation and divine law. The Revolution is the history of the irreligious philosophy of the past century; it is, in its origin and outworking, the doctrine that—given free rein—destroys church and state, society and family, produces disorder without ever establishing liberty or restoring moral order, and, in religion, inevitably leads its conscientious followers into atheism and despair. (p. 57)

Hence the need for a Christian politics. But what is that? Certainly not the modern sort of politics, which demands compromise

of principles in order to share power; rather, it is the transcendent sort, where principle is placed over expediency. As such, this book explains the necessity for Christianity in the public arena. For Christianity is a statement regarding the ultimate source of law and authority, and if Christianity does not posit this, some other religion will, even the religion of autonomous man, who knows no authority over himself, making himself the law.

So then, the state needs Christianity.

At this level, the struggle of both is against the same doctrine, one that is equally destructive of church and state, that is, of morality and law. We need to be aware of this connection and not attempt to sunder what are indissoluble bonds. We do not thereby sacrifice religion to politics, or politics to religion. Neither do we paralyse the living regenerative forces of society, or erect a barrier against the spirit of improvement and progress. Quite the contrary. We thereby ensure religion its rightful influence. We bestow on an enlightened politics a renewed vision. (p. 120–21)

On all sides one hears objections to Christian involvement in the public arena. But this involvement does not constitute the unwarranted mingling of church and state. Nor does it necessarily involve a descent into the horse-trading compromises of typical party politics. Christian politics is principled and prophetic; it is the reign of truth over opinion.

We are not a shade of opinion that with other shades of opinion make up a single party; we are a separate party in our own right; we are bound together by fundamental yet neglected verities, and by a *principle* that is opposed to a whole array of *opinions* that—whatever differences they might have or appear

P R E F A C E

My reason for publishing this study is the desire to provide our Christian friends in Switzerland, France and elsewhere with information about the current situation in the Dutch Reformed Church, particularly with regard to the views and labours of the party to which I have the honour of belonging—known as the confessional party, and as often referred to as the orthodox or Anti-Revolutionary Party.

While it might appear impossible at the present time to resolve the confusion that reigns among us, or the deplorable consequences it has for the nation's religious and moral interests, I do not believe that this impossibility is on the whole the result of serious differences, among those who are united by the bond of faith and have long marched together in fraternal agreement, about the nature of the church.

In 1856, at the height of the crisis brought on by the re-organisation of primary education—at precisely that moment when everything seemed to point to imminent success—we were forsaken by many who had previously made common cause with us. The

consequences of this regrettable split were not long in surfacing. A year later, in 1857, a law was passed that outlawed all expression of Christianity in the public schools, established mixed schools, and declared a strict neutrality with respect to all religions, existing and imaginary. It dashed our hopes and rendered all our efforts useless.

After such a disappointment, which all at once rendered me inactive and returned me to private life, I withdrew into historical research. I was only too happy to continue with the publication of the archives of the House of Orange with renewed zeal and studiously avoid controversy. Such a bitter experience, I told myself, may (by leading us to re-think) be the means of reconciliation and turn to our advantage. But if we were to achieve this goal and come to a mutual and just appreciation of our conduct and motives, it was vital that we did not return to squabbling. We had to avoid impassioned reproaches and recriminations. We had to give, and be given by, our opponents, time for serious and quiet reflection; and thus to aspire to consider our own actions and those of others with the severe impartiality of a judge and the trained eye of an historian.

Those who abandoned us at the crucial moment have not seen fit to pursue such a course. On the contrary: the more the consequences of our disunity have unfolded, the more effort they have made to shift the whole responsibility for it onto the confessional party. The irreligious reaction—which now threatens us on all sides—is, we are assured, nothing but the natural and inevitable result of our exaggeration, our narrowness, our intolerance, our antiquated views, our outdated mentality, our numerous shortcomings, the manner in which we engaged in warfare and sought strife, our commitment to a creed long since out of touch with the times, and our propensity to confuse religion and politics. Disunity, they add, is certainly regrettable; but to have persisted with a false and dangerous system would have been even more fatal. If we complain, they gasp at our

CHAPTER I

The Orthodox Confessional Party

THE ULTRAORTHODOX CIRCLE IN THE WALLOON COMMUNITY IN THE HAGUE

The following is Mr Trotter's description of the thinking of *ultraorthodox circles* in the Reformed Church in general and in the Walloon community in The Hague in particular.

The spirit of the Canons of Dordt still drives the ultraorthodox circles in the church. Of such is the Walloon congregation in The Hague, which remains closed to any whiff of progress. It has increasingly cut itself off from the populace and deprived itself of the means of influencing it. So we end up with a closet piety, a schmaltzy Christianity, the fruit of a

hothouse plant. This party—and it is a party—refuses to face the issues that confront it, preferring to remain undisturbed in its peaceful reverie, while it falls back on traditional dogma and creed rather than engage in life and faith. What is of importance, it appears, is the endless recitation of its *credo*; and it is not uncommon to witness the preference for an abrasive loveless orthodox person over a pious Christian whom gospel and conscience debar from subscribing to a narrow formula.

The picture is not flattering. But before I examine it, I think there are some issues of competence and propriety to be settled. Is a twelvemonth residence sufficient for making such hard and fast decisions about such sensitive issues? Should he not have refrained from making a final assessment so soon? Should not prudence and charity, if not mere social convention—which the Christian is bound to respect in a gospel spirit—have cautioned this pastor against denouncing thus a whole section of the congregation before the Christian world? Did he have to treat these members of the flock as incorrigible? Could such an article ever be the means of restoring them to the fold? But I do not want to dwell on such things, persuaded as I am that Mr Trotter now regrets his hasty approach and is sensible of how much cause he had to write (to the editor of the magazine): “If I was adequately to respond to your request, I should, perhaps, have held back until I had had time to acquire a more thorough knowledge of the men and things about whom I have spoken to you.”

Is this a true picture? I make no pretensions to drafting a panegyric of my friends; but by appealing to the good faith of those around me, I can happily issue a formal denial of these undoubtedly sincere but nonetheless thoughtless statements.

CHAPTER II

The Anti-Revolutionary Principle

WHAT IS THE REVOLUTION?

Coming as it does from *Christian* friends, this charge gives us good grounds for astonishment. The Anti-Revolutionary Party, they say, injures both religion and politics, because it insists on confusing what should be kept distinct and separate. Now, why—after having wholeheartedly embraced evangelical beliefs—why do they not see that the prevailing spirit of our times has its origin and *raison d'être* in a rejection of *revealed* truth?

Why do they not see that the overthrow of the religious, political, and social order was not the result of a revolutionary *blip*, but of a revolutionary *condition*, and that *perpetual revolution* always has

been and always will be the inevitable consequence of the denial of man's dependence on the God of nature, history and the Gospel?

Why do they not see that this evil cannot be brought to an end by attacking merely its symptoms? It has to be torn up by the roots.

Why do they not see that the only antidote for systematic unbelief is faith?

Why do they not see that the anti-revolutionary principle is nothing other than the Protestant Christian principle, the *Reformation* principle? It alone—*standing on revelation and history*—can successfully combat this anti-religious, anti-social principle. It alone, *through the Gospel*, can realise whatever there is of truth and goodness in these revolutionary utopias, and so save both church and state.

The easiest way of bringing out the nature and meaning of the anti-revolutionary principle is to answer the question: *What is the Revolution?* For, if we can come to an understanding of *that*, then we can draw from its features the distinctive traits of the principle needed to combat it.

Someone recently said, and with a good deal of truth:

The historical sciences seem destined to replace the abstract philosophy of the schools as a solution to the problems that now most passionately engage the human mind.... The history of the human mind is the true philosophy of our time. Nowadays any question quickly sinks into a historical debate; every exposition of principles becomes a history lesson. Each of us is what he is only in terms of his historically-formed system.

So said Ernest Renan;¹ and I have no hesitation in applying even the last sentence to my situation, because for him the Christian

1. *Essais de morale et de critique* [Essays on Morality and Criticism] (Paris: M. Lévy Frères, 1860), 82, 83.

CHAPTER III

Our Parliamentary Opposition

AN OPPOSITION OF PRINCIPLES

About fifteen years after I had retired from public life, the Revolution of 1848 tore me away from my quiet life. In 1849, I was dragged back into the parliamentary fray. Under the pressure of political upheaval, the constitution had undergone considerable change. The leading lights of liberalism were at the head of affairs. In the special session of the Lower House of the States General for the revision of the constitution, the anti-revolutionary principle was defended with integrity and ability by my friends; but they were not re-elected in the direct elections, and I found myself alone in the new assembly.

I reflected on the adage *Tu ne cede malis, sed contra audentior ito quam fortuna sinet*.¹ I saw myself as being especially called upon, on account of this solitary position, to make a determined stand that was fully consistent with our convictions, and to remind myself—with a lively sense of my weakness—that the truth is powerful and that even a single representative faithful to the principle forms the seed of a party.

As soon as I was presented with the opportunity, I had no hesitation in resolutely flying our flag. We are divided into three parties, the Minister of Justice said in the House: reactionary conservatives, moderate progressives, and extreme progressives. No, I answered, your calculations are wrong. These are just shades of opinion; the different but inevitable applications of the one anarchic principle; three opinions that revolutionary activity always brings to the surface: Movement, Resistance, and Via Media. None of you can reconcile order and freedom, and your disagreement is about the means for resolving the problem. It haunts you. But at bottom you are all of one mind in opposing the immutable laws of society, and on that account you are our common enemy. There are really only two parties: yours, which in one way or another serves the Revolution; and ours, which opposes it in all its manifestations.

My opposition, which I announced with this battle cry, was systematic. It was not an opposition that merely indulged in criticising; rather, while essaying at every opportunity to support and praise whatever was good in its opponents, it was an opposition unwavering and uncompromising on matters that were distinctive and fundamental.

It was a matter of principle, not of this or that ministry.

1. "Do not yield to misfortunes, but, on the contrary, resist them with increasing firmness." Virgil, *Aeneid*, book VI.