

Neo-Calvinist organisations for farming, business, tourism and so forth

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Introduction

After reading my previous articles on reformational organisations operating in education, politics or labour relations one might get the impression that such organisations are not for the “common people” but mainly for highly qualified professionals, academics and so on. One could reply that the people who vote, join unions or buy newspapers are precisely the *common people*. Nevertheless, let us move to a few (reformational) organisations in which the farmers, the travellers or the shopkeepers play the key role. Let us start from organisations operating in the field of farming and gardening.

Christian farming and gardening?

A bit of orientation

Is there a Christian way of farming and what does it entail? What about a Christian way of planning and keeping a garden? Some of our readers will answer that there are farmers who are *Christians*, but there is no such a thing like *Christian farming* or gardening.

We shouldn't forget, however, that there is a vast literature about gardening, exploring and reporting on the different styles, motivations for and views about gardening. History brought to light, for example, the Romantic garden, the Muslim garden, the Renaissance garden, the Modern garden and so forth. Some gardens look very rational (the paths designing square blocks) others look very useful (fruit trees and vegetable areas), still others invite to meditation. All of them are expressions not only of regional and environmental conditions,

but also of fundamental commitments, emphases, preferences and values.

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Some gardens reflect Christian beliefs. For example, the gardens of Villa Barbarigo in Valsanzibio (Padua) contain (among many other symbols) a labyrinth, as it was fashionable for the noble families of the time. Apart from providing entertainment, labyrinths were symbols of the helpless “wandering” of humankind, before finding salvation in Christ. When planning a labyrinth, Roman Catholic gardeners used to situate the exit exactly “in line” with the entrance. Why? They wanted to illustrate the message that present and future redemption (symbolised by the exit), is not simply a return to creation (i.e. to the entrance) but is nevertheless “in line” with it and actually does not “deviate” from it. A deep message indeed!

Although symbols play a more modest role in farming, basic commitments play a role even there. Different methods, goals and approaches to farming are adopted on the basis of personal and communal convictions, values and beliefs. So we have for example modernist agriculture, pragmatic agriculture, organic agriculture and so forth. But before exploring some of the differences, let us add a few more historical notes on the Christian organisations for farming and gardening. The next sections are based especially on John Paterson's work on the topic.

From the Netherlands to North America

In the Netherlands, after the Christian Social Congress of 1891, the reformed communities established an association called "Boaz" (in 1892). Boaz was a generic association of Christian employers but it included 343 farmers. A few years later (1918) the farmers founded the *Christelijke Boeren en Tuindersbond* (CBTB – Christian Farmers and Gardeners Union). In the following years the CBCT became one of the three major national associations of farmers, together with the Dutch Catholic Farmers and Gardeners Union and the (secular/humanist) Royal Dutch Agricultural Committee. After the Second World War many Dutch Calvinists migrated to Canada, especially to the province of Ontario, and a good number of them were farmers.

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In 1954, twelve immigrant-farmers founded the **Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario** (CFFO). One year later it already counted almost 300 members. Like its Dutch counterpart the new organisation united several local organisations. The difference with the CBTB lied mainly in the fact that it didn't support specific educational institutions for agriculture, and it was less of a union. The CFFO was a kind of "meeting point" in which immigrants farming in a new and strange land could support each other, learn from each other (some had never farmed before), invite speakers and so forth.

The CFFO was not the only reformational organisation for agricultural purposes. "Independent sibling organisations" were created in Alberta and Iowa (USA). The Iowa agency is not mentioned often and must have been rather small. But the **Christian Farmers Federation of Alberta** (CFFA), established in 1974, was a solid and well-organised outpost for Christian farming.

Before exploring more recent developments, however, let's have a look at some of the convictions and practices of the federations of Christian farmers in Ontario and Alberta (CFFO and CFFA).

Christian and modernist farming

In an article celebrating the first 25 years of activities of the CFFO, the then secretary general, Elbert van Donkersgoed, reported that when the organisation was founded "there was no fanfare, no public announcement, no detailed plan of action, no immediate impact on society. There was only the feeling of the great necessity of it."

Why would such an organisation be regarded as *necessary*? The CFFO was an association of people who wanted to farm according to God's will, to care for the land, and (as their first Constitution stated) "to carry out God's Word also in Ontario". For those people farming was a way of confessing and witnessing their Christian faith. Their Christianity was not simply flying *above* farming or taking place *before or after* farming. On the contrary, it was expressed also *through* farming, and farming boiled down to "carrying out God's Word"! Of course such a mission cannot be achieved individually, and this explains why the CFFO was regarded as necessary. One of its first achievements of the federation was a critical assessment of the "modernist trends in agriculture".

John Paterson explains that modern agriculture, unfortunately, is very often based on an ideology of economic efficiency and rationality and is characterised by increasing mechanisation, a considerable use of fertilisers and pesticides, biotechnology and capital intensification. It is a "reductionist" type of agriculture, reducing the biotic complexity of life to its physicochemical components and reducing human culture to a narrow set of economic considerations. People are regarded as separate from nature, and nature is regarded as a mere production-factor. Modernist agriculture is probably one of the main factors behind the environmental crises and socio-economic problems of the contemporary world. But of course criticism was not

the only aim of the federation. What positive proposals did they offer?

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Principles and applications

According to the Christian farmers of Ontario and Alberta, three principles are fundamental for Christian farming: stewardship, justice and compassion. In this short article I will focus only on stewardship.

Adam was given the task to care for the garden as a steward. On the one hand, this excludes absolute ownership and on the other, it emphasises wise management of resources on behalf of others. In Christian circles, however, the stewardship-principle has been understood in two different ways. On the one hand is a dominion-view, implying that the stewards of creation receive the task of developing the earth *to meet human purposes*. On the other hand stewardship is sometimes understood as “earth-keeping”, implying that creation has *inherent value* (apart from its usefulness for human purposes). In this case the steward’s role includes the protection and preservation of the earth and in some cases it may be suggested that people refrain from development or exploitation for the earth’s sake.

Three principles are fundamental to Christian farming: stewardship, justice and compassion.

Initially, the CFFO viewed stewardship in terms of both dominion and earth-keeping, but it gradually moved towards the second ideal. The CFFA embraced the earth-keeping ideal from the start. Stewardship was expressed in three main directions:

stewardship of the soil, of the family-farm and of foodland.

Concerning stewardship of the soil, the Christian farmers began supporting a range of alternative agricultural methods long before they were even considered in other farmers’ organisations. Although no official position was adopted, even today a significant number of members practice ecological or low-input agriculture, while others have minimised their reliance on chemicals.

Regarding family-farm stewardship, the medium-sized farm was considered “the most-stewardly structure for agriculture” and the best way to resist the negative sides of industrialising agriculture.

Thirdly, the federations were determined to promote stewardship of food-land, to protect Canada’s scarce agricultural land from urban and industrial encroachment. Many public submissions were made on land-use planning matters, with the purpose of preserving the best farmland without blocking urban expansion completely.

These principles and guidelines are declared in the constitutions of the farmers’ associations. It might, however, be more interesting to read what John Paterson reported about the convictions of the individual farmers that he interviewed. He summarised their opinions in the following statement:

The earth belongs to God and it is God who has given me a small part of it to use and take care of for what is really a brief time in the earth’s history. The generation which comes after me should receive the land from me in as good conditions as, if not better than, when I first receive it. My task as a farmer is to produce food or fiber in a way that maintains the fertility of the land and does not deplete it. Plants and animals are also given to us to use for food and fiber, although we should pay attention to the comfort and well-being of animals. Whatever tools, methods or skills I use, must be used responsibly and carefully, and not wastefully. The way I farm, how I treat other people with whom I deal, how my produce is marketed, should be characterised by fairness, compassion

and justice. Farming is a service to God and to other people, whose interests are as important, if not more important, than my own.

According to Paterson the interviewed farmers “would all agree with the whole statement”. In the following section we will follow more recent developments of the two Farmers Federations of Ontario and Alberta.

Further developments

Knowing that the CFFO initially experienced several difficulties due to lack of full-time personnel, the CFFA decided to hire a full-time employee from the start and two years later two researchers were employed as well. The Alberta federation embraced the earth-keeping principle from its foundation and started presenting public submissions (which became its “specialty” during the 1970s and 1980s). At the beginning of the 1980s the membership of CFFA reached the peak of 380 member farms, and its attention was expanded to both financial and environmental issues in agriculture. At the end of the 1980s, however, it was apparent that the CFFA “could no longer address each major agricultural policy issue as it arose”.

In 1992 the federation was reoriented “toward broader issues shared with an urban constituency”. The name was changed to **Earthkeeping** and the membership stabilised around the 200 mark. Although it is not (only) an agricultural organisation anymore, it remains a valuable organisation in the Kuyperian tradition.

In that same period, by contrast, the CFFO decided to stick to its initial vision and mission and its perseverance was rewarded a few years later. In fact, its membership (which had reached a top of 640 in 1979) increased dramatically since 1994, when the legislation required all farmers in Ontario to join one of the agricultural organisations. The CFFO had a strong and positive reputation among the farmers, and at that stage many among those who had just been “watching and waiting” decided to join the CFFO. The latter experienced a sudden 500% increase in membership (thus reaching 3 200 supporters), addition-

al staff was employed and the federation became much more solid. The membership has continued to grow even in more recent years, and today it is above the 4 300 mark.

The CFFO and Earthkeeping are at present the only farmers’ organisations in the reformational tradition. In fact, in the Netherlands the Christian Farmers and Gardeners Union (CBTB) decided to conclude its activities in 1995, after some 75 years of existence. What happened? The three main farmers’ organisations in the Netherlands decided to amalgamate in view of a stronger political influence within the European Union. In addition, many within the CBTB felt that some of the reasons for founding the CBTB (e.g. opposition to Calvinism) were no longer urgent.

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Personally, I think it was a pity. But let us conclude this section only by adding that in 2007 a candidate from New Zealand, P. Simons, was awarded a Ph.D. (Potchefstroom Campus) for completing a thesis on Christian farming.

Let us now look at organisations in other fields.

Business and economics

In this particular field one has to mention the **Canadian Christian Business Federation** (CCBF), an organisation founded in 1983 in Southern Ontario and nowadays articulated in ten local “chapters”. The simple purpose is to allow Christian businessmen to meet regularly (i.e. monthly, over breakfast or lunch) for “mutual encouragement, prayer or discussion” in order to learn to “apply biblical principles to their roles within their businesses or professions”.

Slightly different in nature, the **Association of Christian Economists** (ACE) is based in the USA and has two purposes,

namely “to encourage Christian scholars to explore and communicate the relationship between their faith and the discipline of economics, and to promote interaction and communication among Christian economists”. Currently it has approximately 300 members: “Christian economists in academia, business, and government, drawn from around the globe.” The ACE was formed in December 1982, during a meeting of the Allied Social Science Association, hosted by Hope College, Holland (Michigan, USA).

Seeing that even in this field the role of academics is not irrelevant, I would like to mention three of them who have worked (in the Netherlands) from a Kuyperian perspective, namely Bob Goudzwaard, Harry de Lange and Maarten Verkerk.

More should be done to promote reformational art in today's context, in music, architecture, painting and so on.

Organising Christian artists

Among the “deceased” institutions I just would like to mention the Pathmos Art Gallery, which flourished in Toronto during the 1970s and 1980s. This institution helped Christian artists exposing their works and discussing the principles of Christian art. Unfortunately, this is not operative anymore and at present I am not aware of any other organisation of artists in the Kuyperian tradition. Of course in many Christian Colleges artistic items are produced and exposed (the journal, *Pro Rege*, presents photos of such artistic items regularly in its special “art issues”). But it remains regrettable that specific associations are not available. In Canada we can mention the organisation **Christians in the arts**, which is the closest to a reformational approach.

Apparently, the modesty of the achievements in the artistic field (with notable exceptions, of course) is a sensitive spot since the beginnings of Calvinism itself. I am thinking of Kuyper's *Lectures on Cal-*

vinism, for example, where he discussed the influence of Calvinism on politics, science and other cultural activities. In all these “spheres” Kuyper could mention astonishing results and developments. When art was discussed, however, he had to admit that the results were not equally impressive.

Concerning the past, his “apology” was based on the fact that the Calvinists did not have at their disposal the huge financial resources available to the (Roman Catholic) princes and clergymen who supported the great Christian artists of the past. Yet more should be done to promote reformational art in today's context, in music, architecture, painting and so on. A positive development in this field has been the elaboration of a philosophy of art by academics like Hans Rookmaker, Calvin Seerveld or Lambert Zuidervaart.

A tourist organisation

Group travel has a long tradition in Europe, and it goes back to the journeys that members of religious orders took to sacred places. The **Dutch Calvinist Tourist Association** (NCRV) was founded in 1922 and directed for almost 40 years by Arie Van Deursen (1891-1963). Organised group travels were very popular among Dutch Christians and before the Second World War the membership of the NCRV was around 14 000. For many years Van Deursen was a tireless organiser of thousands of group-travels all over Europe and the Middle-East. For example the travel program of 1958 listed over 600 tours with a participation of 10 000 members (in addition to the “normal” tourists).

Van Deursen based his work on a biblical understanding of entertainment, travel, rest and recreation. He explored different views of tourism, including those developed in the socialist countries of the time, in Nazi-Germany, in Hindu literature and in neo-Calvinism. He often reported his reflections and experiences in the journal of the NCRV, *Ons reisblad*.

In more recent decades, the increase in the number of cars somehow made travels more family- or individual-oriented. The

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importance of NCRV was gradually re-sized, but the organisation still exists today; it has its headquarters in Alphen aan den Rijn and it publishes a *NCRV-Reis-magazine*. One wonders whether it would not be possible to rearticulate the goals and activities of this organisation to focus more on the needs of the present-day tourist?

Conclusive remarks

It would be interesting to dedicate some space to other reformational organisations (in particular charity and help-institutions). One should also enquire about the professional organisations of Christian lawyers, journalists, medical doctors and nurses. We find psychiatric institutions which are tuned to a reformational understanding of

man, mental and emotional life, health, therapy and so on (see the network **Homestead Christian Care**, dealing with mental illness).

However, I trust this series of articles has helped us forming an idea of the organised work of the reformational movement worldwide. Such associations should be regarded as outposts of the coming kingdom and it would be time that they receive the due attention, recognition and support from churches as well as from individual Christians. But this type of considerations will be part of our next article, in which I will D.V. provide a few reflections on the six previous reports on Christian-reformational organisations.