

**THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW**

*Some reflections on the  
Nineteenth-century Revival of Calvinism  
in the Netherlands and its  
Relevance for Contemporary Australia*

**Given on 9 July 1993, as the Opening Address to the Second Reformed University Students' Conference held at The Reformed Church of Doveton, Victoria Australia.**

**Then a voice said to him,  
"What are you doing here, Elijah?"  
He replied, "I have been very zealous  
for the LORD God Almighty ... [but]  
I am the only one left ..."  
The LORD said to him,  
"Go back the way you came ... [for]  
Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel  
- all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal ...".**

In his stimulating first chapter to *A Church en Route*, the late John Vanderbom was right to remind us that the Reformed Churches in this land have their roots not only in the

Calvinistic Reformation of the sixteenth-century, but also in the renewal and resurgence of Calvinism that took place under the very different circumstances current in the Netherlands of the nineteenth-century.<sup>1</sup>

On this occasion I would like to discuss the great renewal of Calvinism in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century, and its possible significance for us as we are confronted by the plight of Christianity in Australia at the end of the twentieth-century. I am aware that there exist vast differences between ourselves and Reformed folk in the Netherlands one hundred years ago. And I am not going to be so unimaginative as to say that we should ape the trials and exploits of Christians of any other age and place - as if that were some sort of fail-safe formula for success in the modern world. All the same, I am going to point out ways in which I think that we are still confronting the same fundamental issues, even though the outward appearance of things might have changed considerably, so there will be some switching backwards and forwards between the Netherlands then and Australia now.

Foremost among the events of the intervening period (between the reformation of the sixteenth-century and the nineteenth-century) were those of the French Revolution and associated movements. Here many of the neo-pagan notions harboured within the bosom of the Italian Renaissance and refined and articulated in the circles of the enlightened (so-called, I would prefer to say neo-pagan) thinkers of the eighteenth-century burst with a terrible fury against the crimes, corruptions, and injustices of monarchies, hierarchies and aristocracies. All these institutions and power structures had for centuries claimed the sanction of Christianity for their continued use and abuse of inherited feudal privileges. At this critical juncture almost all of the leaders of opinion in the western and central Europe, and the aggrieved mob in the streets, rejected the principle and practice of reformation according to the Word of God, and opted for revolution in the name of human autonomy - that is, the presumed right of human beings to do whatever they liked.

---

<sup>1</sup> John H. Vanderbom, 'The Faith of Our Fathers', in *A Church en Route: 40 Years Reformed Churches of Australia*. J.W. Deenick (General Editor). Geelong: Reformed Churches Publishing House, 1991, 1-2, 4-11.

Now it must be admitted that there was much that was rotten in the Europe of the late eighteenth-century. And history is not simple. We need to recognise that Christianity presented a less than satisfactory face to the late eighteenth-century. The Protestant Reformers were not revolutionaries. Unlike the Anabaptists they had not desired the overthrow of the established order; they had wished to reform it. In my judgement they were right to adopt such a stance, but it may be argued that they under-estimated the extent to which that order itself was built upon ambiguous foundations; upon the supposed Christianisation of the Roman Empire at the time of Constantine and Theodosius; a massive set of changes that led to the Romanisation (and part-paganisation) of the Christian Church, rather than a true and thoroughgoing conversion of the society of late classical antiquity.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, the history of the so-called Christian West, at least from Augustine to Wesley, is replete with deep-seated spiritual ambiguities. We may say that the Protestant Reformation was not wrong, but I believe that we must say that it did not go far enough. It was not a sin of the late eighteenth-century that it cried out against injustice and oppression; the folly of that time was that men sought recourse against evil by adopting the course of *revolution* rather than that of *reformation*.

The scriptures were rejected and another (supposed) source of authority - human reason - was enthroned. But God is not mocked. Whatever societies sow, so shall they reap. And the attempt at the end of the eighteenth-century to right wrongs on the basis of man's supposed autonomy proved to be an utter disaster. Christianity was repudiated not only because its institutions had become discredited, but because the leaders of western thought, in their unbelief, presumed that the more advanced portion of humanity had outgrown its teaching. And the language was wonderful: liberty, equality, fraternity, and the brotherhood of man. The slogan 'No God, No Master' reflected the way in which

---

<sup>2</sup> I must confess myself to be less satisfied with the general view of the history of Christianity than most Church historians of my acquaintance. I am inclined to think that the massive changes that took place in the fourth century have served to re-shape our notion of what Christianity should be, and how it should properly function as an agency of change in the present age, and that this re-shaping has, in effect, pre-determined the manner in which we have viewed the history of subsequent Christian thought, practice and institutions.

official Christianity had become party to many oppressions and injustices. All this must be admitted, but deliverance does not come by unbelief and repudiation, it only comes through the gospel.

The Revolution everywhere resulted in a vast increase in state-power, what the French came to call *etatisme*. The revolution crushed diversity with its own ideologically driven prescriptions for political, social and economic correctness. Even as liberals proclaimed the freedom of humanity and nations, there arose the modern phenomena (reminiscent of the absolute pagan empires of biblical times) of the conscription of the entire resources and manpower of the state for the purposes of aggression, war and imperial aggrandisement. The tendency was for education to become a state monopoly; and for the state to demand that all education be practical and in line with the ‘national interest’ as defined by the political leadership, ideologically acceptable experts, and the state bureaucracy. The intensely (false) religious passion of the revolution speedily drove it to the reversal of its own much vaunted ideals. Soon citizen was denouncing citizen; action begetting reaction.

Moreover, as they reacted against the principles of the revolution, many Christians in lands such as England, Scotland, the Netherlands and Prussia found themselves becoming increasingly Conservative in their political outlook. And out of the chaos there arose yet another, altogether too familiar modern phenomenon: the great dictator, initially in the form of Napoleon, who under the guise of restoring order proceeded to try and impose his version of the original error on much of Europe.<sup>3</sup> The inevitable reaction came with Napoleon’s final defeat in 1815; and the ‘white terror’ followed the ‘red terror’: but it soon became clear that the revolution had marked a fundamental change in the fabric of European life and thought. There was no going back. Moreover, even the conservatives

---

<sup>3</sup> We have yet to see a full historiographical demonstration of the close systemic parallels - all things being done in the name of the people - between the dictatorships of Napoleon, and those of Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Mao and Pol Pot. However, some important issues were raised quite some years ago by a Jewish writer, J. L. Talmon, in his *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1952.

found themselves shaped by the new public philosophy. Many contented themselves with a merely reactive response.

The inadequacy of such a response, from a Christian standpoint, became apparent in the Netherlands as the conservative ruler Willem I sought to impose his will upon the national church as part of his rationalising agenda. To this there followed protests, official oppression, and much suffering. Even at this early stage it became apparent that at least some conservatives were willing to resort to revolutionary methods if it suited their policies and aided the imposition of their agenda upon the whole of society. This tendency was later to be amply exhibited in the manner in which Bismarck accomplished the expansion of Prussia and the formation of the German Empire between 1862 and 1871.<sup>4</sup>

All this exercised the Dutch aristocrat Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876) deeply.<sup>5</sup> He was among those influenced by the *reveil*, a trans-national movement of renewal that combined aspects of the older Calvinism and eighteenth-century evangelicalism. Although a man of high rank, Groen received no great support in his lifetime. Yet he did not stagnate, and his insight deepened considerably during the course of his public and literary life. In the long run he surpassed and transcended the limits of his initial conservatism. He came to see that traditionalism, as well as revolution, could also involve profound forms of spiritual disobedience. His masterpiece was *Ongeloof en Revolutie*, published in 1847.<sup>6</sup> By this time the principles of the revolution were most consistently presenting themselves in Dutch and European life in the form of liberalism. And it is at this point that certain of the features of the situation begin to look familiar to

---

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to observe the way in which the more recent twentieth-century historiography can exhibit an unintended confirmation of Groen's thesis. In this context see Lothar Gall, *Bismarck the White Revolutionary*. Translated by J. A. Underwood. Volumes I and II. London: Unwin Hyman, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> For a useful introduction to the life and work of Groen van Prinsterer, see the essays by J.L. van Essen and H. Donald Morton in *Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer: Selected Studies*. Jordan Station: Wedge, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Now available in an English edition edited by Harry van Dyke and published as *Groen van Prinsterer's Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution*. Jordan Station: Wedge, 1989.

those of us who have studied the Australian situation, and that is why I believe that we should not forget the work of Groen in our attempts to formulate an obedient political response in our present circumstances.

According to this liberalism, individual human beings know best what to do with their lives and how to live. They have sufficient reason to make rational choices in the course of life. Although the bible warns us that there is a way that may seem good to men, but the end of which is death, the assumption that human beings best know what is good for them, that they and their reasoning are the final court of appeal - that they are autonomous, a law unto themselves - these are the key notions of the French Revolution. This is the **religious basis** of the (so-called) 'enlightened' philosophy that drives liberal theology; liberal political principles; and the foundation of so-called 'free market' (or 'economic rationalist') economic theory. With such a creed to live by men delight in their insights, but repudiate all need of a divine revelation. They see themselves as needing adjustment and re-organisation, not faith, repentance, and deliverance. This was the spirit with which Groen struggled, and it is - with many a variation and permutation - the spirit with which we struggle in our own day. A profound internal contradiction is to be detected in those who insist that we in some sense be conservative in our theology, but yet liberal (that is, individualistic and capitalistic) in our politics and views on society and economics. Such a profound, and such a prevalent, inner contradiction should be driving us to a deep, extensive and multi-disciplinary analysis - an analysis that should never exclude a painstaking, meticulous, open-hearted self-examination. As we address questions of wealth, scarcity and poverty, we need to examine with great care the starting-point from which we are operating as we formulate the questions in the first place. And we also need to understand that contemporary Evangelical style individualism (you in your small corner and I in mine) also has its eighteenth-century Enlightenment origins. It is at this point that it becomes clearer that the formulation of a distinctively Christian understanding of these issues cannot dispense with a biblically shaped and philosophically rigorous understanding of the creation order.

Abraham Kuyper understood this. He was born in 1837 and lived until 1920. Among men he was a giant, bringing to the articulation and implementation of his vision of a renewed Calvinism a prodigious drive and energy. His enemies called him ‘Abraham the Terrible’. It is hard not to conclude that if he had flourished in a German or English speaking nation he would have enjoyed a reputation among us comparable to that of a Luther or a Wesley. His published writings, which have never been fully collected, appear to have been greater in volume than those of Luther. He was too much of a Calvinist to be a true mystic, although on occasions he could speak in a mystical manner.

A man of great intensity, on occasions he brought himself to the point of sheer exhaustion. I suspect that there were times when he, not unlike other great leaders, made overwhelming demands on those around him. He was the kind of person that some are tempted to idolise. It was Kuyper who was to refine and bring to public prominence Groen’s critique of the revolution and liberalism.

Kuyper entered the Leiden University Theological Faculty in 1858 where he studied under Scholten, the increasingly liberal theologian. Although the beginnings of Kuyper’s conversion may be detected in the mid-1850’s, the definitive turning point only came in the mid-1860’s, by which time he had obtained his doctorate, and was in his first pastorate at Beest. Here the young minister, still with liberal proclivities, was taken in hand by a remnant of true believers, and especially by a lady named Pietronella Baltus. Her influence was decisive.<sup>7</sup>

Henceforth Kuyper’s life would be lived by the creed aptly summed up in a memorial tablet to Oliver Cromwell: CHRIST, NOT MAN, IS KING. Accordingly, in the

---

<sup>7</sup> It was her presentation of the old teachings that cut away the remaining influence of liberalism in his life and thought. It is worth reflecting on how very different his life, and that of many other individuals and institutions, would have been if Kuyper - with his doctorate in theology - had been unwilling to receive instruction from this godly woman.

ecclesiastical issues of his day, Kuyper was soon to be found opposing liberalism and arguing that the revolutionary idea of popular sovereignty had no place in the church - contrary to what we are repeatedly told by those advocating man-centred views of doctrine and worship here in Australia. Moreover, consistency moved Kuyper to apply this principle also to the areas of school and university education, and public life generally.

Groen finally broke with conservatism in 1871, and there followed a comprehensive reconstruction of the Anti-Revolutionary Party that he had done so much to establish. This Christian political party now emerged as taking a stand in political life that was not driven by the ideologies that were derived from the Revolution or the resulting Reaction. It was *reformatorisch* rather than revolutionary. And it showed Christians how to engage in political life in a principled way in a pluralistic society.<sup>8</sup>

It is not always appreciated that the Anti-Revolutionary Party of Groen and Kuyper was the first popular political party to emerge in the Netherlands, and as such it set the tone of political life in that country even unto the third and fourth generations. Indeed, it is often not understood that the Australian Labour Party has performed a comparable role in the development of the party politics in Australia.

Neither has it been fully appreciated that both traditions responded to the distress that liberalism caused with its dogmatic worship of 'market forces' and 'unrestrained competition', irrespective of the socially destructive consequences. (Liberalism arose from the view that man is and should be free - autonomous - a law unto himself).

---

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that the results of Kuyper's struggle to establish justice and equity in the Netherlands are attracting serious attention in Australia, as we are becoming a more obviously pluralistic society. See, for example, the report by Donald Anderson on *Privatisation of Education in the Netherlands* in the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia *Newsletter* (June 1992), and the entry by Hans Krabbendam and Hillie van de Streek, from the Adelaide published *Newsletter* of The International Association for the Study of Christianity and History (May 1993), on *Pillarization: A Typically Dutch or a European Phenomenon?*

In making this observation I am **not** saying that we should all become socialists. Kuyper never preached a 'social gospel', but he repeatedly emphasised the social implications of the gospel, as his powerful addresses to the 1891 Christian Social Congress clearly demonstrate.<sup>9</sup> We need to keep in view that all of the various types of socialism have attempted to address the socio-economic ills of liberalism, but without discarding its false starting-point; for over against the notion of the autonomy of the human individual, socialism has time and again posited its own notion of the autonomy of human society - so the left side of politics is also driven by the neo-paganisms that arose during the so-called enlightenment.

Kuyper deepened and refined the insights of Groen. Kuyper grasped that while the state had to do with all things, from the standpoint of its public-legal responsibilities, nevertheless, the state was not all things, and that the totality of human society (comprising marriages, families, companies, and so forth) did not amount to so many segments of the state. Our children, for example, do not belong to the state! Very early on Groen had become involved in the Christian Day-School struggle - the struggle to break free from the claim of the revolutionary state to monopolise schooling and education at all levels; and later the struggle to implement the principle that all taxpayers should receive proportionate state assistance in meeting educational costs irrespective of the religious standpoint reflected in their educational choices.

Kuyper continued that struggle, and although some might doubt the relevance of this to contemporary Australia, the truth is that we in this country can and have benefited greatly from the structural insight that was gained in the Netherlands a century or so ago. One of the great contributions that Reformed people have made to the life of this country has been the founding and development of Christian Day Schools, even though we have yet to gain fiscal justice for tax-paying/fee-paying parents. It has been shown **that non-**

---

<sup>9</sup> Kuyper's Opening Address to the First Christian Social Congress in the Netherlands on 9 November 1891 has recently been re-translated and edited by James W. Skillen of the Center for Public Justice (Washington D.C.) as *The Problem of Poverty*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991.

**state education does not have to be elitist.** We have drawn strength from the insight that a school has its own distinctive basis and calling, and that it cannot properly fulfil its task if it is run as an extension of the institutional church. Both Church and School should be Christian, and should certainly live, and work, and serve together, in the Kingdom. But when we try and run the one according to the agenda of the other, even if we do so in the service of God, disillusionment, failure and collapse may be waiting in the wings. Not only do I know this to be true in principle, I have seen it to be so in practice. With these principles in view we are entitled to entertain with great circumspection the proposition that an embryo-university or proto-university can be built 'out of' or 'developed from' structures designed to provide what is in fact professional training for ministers, such as theological colleges, or for teachers, such as teacher training colleges.

Mention of university education brings me to what is in fact Kuyper's greatest achievement: the founding and establishment of the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880. Of course, he was not the only person involved, but I think it right to say that he was foremost in the development of that vision. **He saw that the religion of the bible entailed a Christian worldview that was bound to stand over and against all scientific and scholarly endeavour that investigated the same creation order, but that did not share its starting point.** In implementing this view Kuyper broke the secular monopoly on higher education in the Netherlands, continuing the process that started with the Day-Schools. Since that time his example has been an inspiration to Christians in various parts of the world. I hope and pray that we in Australia are moving in the same direction, notwithstanding many problems and not a few disappointments.

I agree with Herman Bavinck when he said that **the development of Christian university education**, committed to biblically-directed learning, research and teaching, **was the key field of Christian endeavour in the modern world.** Bill Deenick is right to insist that "Australia still needs a Christian university",<sup>10</sup> and **I believe that our response**

---

<sup>10</sup> J.W. Deenick, 'Doors Opened and Closed: 1961-1978', in *A Church en Route*, op cit, 67.

**to this challenge is going to constitute a unique test of the quality of our discipleship.**

Moreover, while others may follow us in such a venture, we need to remember (as John Vanderborn would not want us to forget), that the ball is in our court, and that to strive for a biblically-directed Christian higher education in this land is intrinsic to our character, and one of the marks of our distinctiveness. This insight is part of our inheritance in a manner, and with a clarity, that is not shared by the Reformed Anglicans, Conservative Presbyterians and diverse Evangelicals of this land. This is where we Reformed should give a lead. It is we, more than any others, who are the custodians of such a vision in Australia.

Of course, when this is said, there always seem to be people quick to tell us that we are hopeless visionaries, as if God is against us. They are quick to observe that the times are tough.<sup>11</sup> There are always such people.<sup>12</sup> And genuine misunderstanding also abounds. For example, we are told that universities must needs be vast institutions beyond anything that we can expect to manage. "That was then" I have heard it said, but "this is now" and everything has to be big and expensive.

Careful reflection can help to disabuse our thinking of many such falsehoods. We should not forget that the great and ancient universities were founded not by governments but by *scholars*, and they flourished because they attracted *students*. Moreover, when we think of size and resources, we must remember that it is often the principular basis of beginnings that is decisive, rather than the initial size of such an endeavour. Great projects do not necessarily require large beginnings. The normal processes of growth are gradual - even from seeds as small as a mustard seed. The great universities were not big when they

---

<sup>11</sup> See my address *A High Challenge for Tough Times* given as the closing address to the First Reformed University Students' Conference held at the Reformed Church of Box Hill in July 1992.

<sup>12</sup> It is worth recalling that the Free University of Amsterdam was established in the teeth of a severe economic downturn that affected all European economies from the mid 1870s through to the 1890s. Such periods can be times of opportunity for those with vision and insight.

started. Moreover, the bigness of some universities has not aided their effectiveness, but has served to encumber them with a heavy bureaucracy.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than choke on questions of size and resources, it is much more important to grasp the principles that Kuyper was expressing. He realised that Christian science and scholarship - the whole enterprise of Christian theoretical reflection, if it is to be fruitful, needs to be both corporate and public. It could not be carried on by isolated if gifted individuals, however well intentioned, or via behind-the-scenes networks which can degenerate into semi-private cliques - and in which insight can become monopolised and a whole school of thought run to seed. For Kuyper the university should be *public* and *free*. Moreover, by talking about a free university he positively declared that a university that was subservient to the church, or the state, or to industry and agri-business, or to commerce, could not fulfil its divine calling.

We need to keep this in view as we consider the way in which the Federal government has been imposing its anti-scholarship, anti-philosophy, anti-literature, anti-classics, anti-humanities, anti-history, anti-pure research agendas upon the universities of this country in the name of *its* notion of what constitutes the so-called national interest. At the same time, in the Netherlands, opposition came from the liberal-ecclesiastical leadership of the day. At the founding of the Free University opposition was so great from certain quarters in the state-church that the first classes were held, our Presbyterian brothers and sisters please note, in the Scots Mission Church of Amsterdam.<sup>14</sup>

But what was it that drove Kuyper, and his followers? Churches and Missions have done many mighty things in the history of Christianity, but why was that particular

---

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as the secular university in Australia loses any kind of coherent unifying principle, and lurches towards becoming a disjointed multi-versity, the administration is itself becoming the unifying principle!

<sup>14</sup> I hope that we are long past the days of a systemic opposition to Free Christian Universities from churches and seminaries. In our highly differentiated and complex society it should be abundantly clear that churches and training colleges, while they doubtless have vital callings to follow, are not alone sufficient for the tasks that lie before us in Christian higher education.

generation and its successors so willing to make such an effort for the sake of Christian higher education? The answer lies in a key point that I believe we are in danger of losing sight of, a key point that Kuyper and his generation recovered and started to develop further; and it is this: **that the Calvinistic and Reformed understanding of the Christian Religion** not only broke in principle with every form of unbelief and idolatry, but that it necessarily **gave rise to a distinctive world-view**. Now, we need to understand that Kuyper was not always in a position to articulate that distinctive world-view with any great theoretical or scientific depth, but he foresaw the route, and articulated the principles - already present or implied in traditional Calvinism - that would need to be followed.

The breadth of Kuyper's vision is bold and clear in his *Lectures on Calvinism*, delivered at Princeton University in 1898. Here Kuyper made it abundantly clear that the Calvinistic understanding of the Christian Religion, while it never slavishly adhered to Calvin himself, gave rise to a distinctive understanding of the place of religion in the life and history of all humanity, of law, politics and the state, and of art and science.<sup>15</sup> In all this we can see a majestic breadth of vision. Authentic Christianity, in the full flower of full discipleship, is here not in any way restricted to churchly life and private devotions, even though church and piety are never to be abandoned. What we have here is a Christianity that is believing and fervent, but not improperly other-worldly. It takes the order of creation and every feature of our lives seriously.

This is a Christianity that does not have to strive after relevance, because it *is* relevant. It is relevant because it understands and integrates into the structure of its thought and action a fundamental realisation that all things are created by God, and are now under the kingly rule of Jesus Christ. It is a Christianity that is never neutral, but one that always

---

<sup>15</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931. The six lectures in the series were on 'Calvinism a Life-system', 'Calvinism and Religion'; 'Calvinism and Politics'; 'Calvinism and Science'; 'Calvinism and Art', and 'Calvinism and the Future'. In some ways these lectures are now somewhat dated, reflecting as they do the state of knowledge and thinking at the end of the nineteenth-century. At the same time, the validity of argument and strength of articulation remain unimpaired.

has a scripturally informed perspective on the issues of the day. And more than that: it is a Christianity that, although capable of offering its own response to the issues raised on the agendas of others, is also capable of formulating its own agenda.

It was its full view of the sovereignty of God and the order of the creation that gave this Christianity its world-view, **and as a result its capacity to be world-formative.** This was a Christianity able to 'mix it' with those who were drawing up the agenda: and not continually forced to react on their terms to their definition of the issues. For all the differences between us and those folk a century or so ago, they got something right that I believe that we still need to bring home to ourselves: that the choice is really between a Christianity that is lost because it is shaped by the world, and a world that is won because it is shaped by an authentic Christianity - **and the only Christianity that can do that is one that has a scripturally directed world-view.**

Compare this with the parlous state of Christianity in this land. Why is it that, without being viciously anti-Christian, we appear to be among the most secularised of western-style countries?<sup>16</sup> Why is it that Christianity seems to cut so little ice here? Does the Gospel itself lack authority among us? In order to *manufacture* a certain relevance there are those who would have us adopt a modernistic approach to this question, even though they would never recognise themselves as old-style liberals. 'Give the people what they want, and then the Church will be popular' they say. If the people want to be entertained: then entertain them. If they want short chats rather than sermons: then give them short chats. If they want positive-self-image-affirming counselling: then give it to

---

<sup>16</sup> Some qualifications are appropriate. No nation is non-religious, as all peoples and nations live out some kind of inherently religious vision, even though that may not be distinctively Christian. Accordingly, we should reject the view that something is non-religious because it is 'secular' in the sense of being non-ecclesiastical. Moreover, I would *not* want to subscribe to the view that Australian culture is totally un-Christian. Cf. Ian Breward, *Australia: "The Most Godless Place Under Heaven"?* Melbourne: Beacon Hill, 1988.

them and throw in a few 'Jesus loves you' bits on the way through. If they want singing: then give them singing, and lots of it, with repeats.<sup>17</sup>

We need to see that all of this is an expression of the basic idea of liberalism that Groen and Kuyper exposed a century and more ago: these developments are in line with the view that humanity should autonomously call the shots - and if in the church - so that *we* can feel good - then why not everywhere else? This, *at root*, is a man centred world-view, as if everything should be for *our* convenience and not for the glory of God.<sup>18</sup> Such an approach may seem to work for a while, but in the longer run it can be expected to run out of steam - exhausted by its own lack of integrity - and because we were not actually created to be autonomous, not constituted to achieve fulfilment by constantly pleasing ourselves.<sup>19</sup> With such a prospect before us, I believe that we should seriously reflect on why the Christian religion holds no relevance for many Australians.

I know that the human heart is desperately wicked and that without the work of the Holy Spirit we are incapable of faith and repentance, but we should not use the human

---

<sup>17</sup> Of course, the point here is not that we should not worship our God in singing. The present writer has a certain fondness for the singing of psalms. But singing can, like much else, become compulsive, and be a substitute for something much more fundamental, perhaps for a firmness and depth that has been lost, or is now missed, and the absence of which leaves a void that must be filled somehow. Moreover, I am inclined to think that perhaps the Almighty is not going to allow us Reformed people to settle so easily into the bland secularity of urban routine. And we should not think that we have broken the patterns of this urban secularity by a round of fellowship meetings and the hype of weekly singing, singing, and more and more singing *fest*s that, with all their emotive pitch, cannot deal radically - that is, in the heart - with the crises and challenges of these times. We must never forget that the prophets of old had from the LORD heavy things to say to those who went through the public-worship motions with gusto yet conformed themselves to what was false and empty in the surrounding cultural *milieu*.

<sup>18</sup> It is this viewpoint, in both its individualistic and socialistic forms, that has greatly fuelled the environmental degradation of the earth in recent history. In this context it is worth noting that Calvinistic thinkers in the Netherlands were among the first to discuss this question with unromanticised cogency, a fact that cannot be divorced from their positive scripturally-informed view of the order of creation.

<sup>19</sup> I have in mind here the words of Augustine in Book I, Chapter 1 of his *Confessions*: "And man, being a part of Thy creation, desires to praise Thee, - man, who bears about with him his mortality, the witness of his sin, even ... this part of Thy creation, desires to praise Thee. Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou has formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee". *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. Translated by J.G. Pilkington. Edinburgh: Clark, 1876, 1.

condition as an excuse for our own failures. What I want to focus on is why Christianity is not even considered to be relevant; why it is not seen to even present a challenge.

The answer, I would like to suggest, is that for many the Christian religion is not relevant because it is not seen to have any significance for almost all of their lives. Without a biblically-directed world-view, Christianity in Australia will continue to appear to be escapist, whimsical, sentimental, obscurantist and generally irrelevant. At best, the churches appear to be places of escape - and Australians cannot afford escapism because they are increasingly **forced** to deal with environmental, financial, economic, social, familial, marital, parental, educational and political problems, and their impact, whether they like it or not.

If the truth be told, **what Australia really needs, is world-formative Christianity, not a Christianity that conforms to the world, or a Christianity that would seek to escape from this world, which God loves so much.** We need to teach and live and exhibit a Christianity that is not restricted to matters ecclesiastical, but that undeniably grips the rails in every legitimate field of human experience and endeavour. We need to make clear that Jesus Christ is the king of all human culture, and that he brings healing and restoration to every inter-personal relationship and every kind of social structure. And we need to be articulate in demonstrating that our scripturally directed world-view really does yield scholarly and scientific insight across the full encyclopaedia of the sciences, and that such insight can of itself be of immense benefit to all humanity.

When we take all this on board, we can appreciate the importance that Kuyper attached to the establishment of the Free University, we can see that this concern was not an eccentric hobby-horse that one man happened to be in a position to ride, and we can grasp why others have spoken of the *necessity* of Christian universities.<sup>20</sup> The basic

---

<sup>20</sup> *The Necessity of Christian Universities* by Dr Jan Dengerink, lately of the Free University of Amsterdam, is now available from ACHEA in a new, revised Australian edition.

conditions that applied **then** still apply **now**, and we should not give way to the temptation to narrow our vision in times of distress. Before us lay mighty decisions. Are we to draw upon the best insights given to us in times past, to forge a formative world-view in an era of massive change, or will we duck the challenge and allow ourselves to become more and more part of the contemporary problem? It is my prayer that together, and by God's grace, we will resolve to respond positively to this challenge, to the glory of God, and for the lasting good of this nation and its neighbours. In this, as in all else, may we say with the psalmist: *Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made the heavens and the earth.* Psalm 124: 8.