

# Herman Bavinck's Foreword to *Unbelief and Revolution*

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## Introduction to Bavinck's Foreword

The foreword that Herman Bavinck wrote for the third edition of Groen van Prinsterer's classic work *Unbelief and Revolution* testifies both to the enduring significance of this work and to the state of mind of its writer.<sup>2</sup> The text gives us an unexpected glimpse into Bavinck's outlook at the beginning of the twentieth century as he reflects on the challenges facing the church of his day, as well as the importance of remembering and rehearsing the basic principles of the neo-Calvinism of which Groen was an undisputed precursor.

Bavinck grew up in the home of a Secession pastor where deep appreciation was cherished for Groen van Prinsterer, the champion of freedom of religion and conscience against the government which undermined the civil rights of the Seceders, who in 1834 separated from the national church and soon pioneered ventures to establish and operate separate Christian schools. Although Bavinck Senior and his colleagues never quite understood why Groen had not also joined them in abandoning the official latitudinarian denomination, nevertheless he stayed in their gallery of heroes of the faith who maintained the truth in the face of perennial opposition, obstruction, and derision.

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<sup>1</sup>The introduction to Herman Bavinck's "Foreword" is by Harry Van Dyke. The translation of the Dutch text of Bavinck's "Foreword" is by Andrew Kloes. He would like to thank Marinus de Jong for kindly reviewing the translation and for his helpful comments. Harry Van Dyke also edited the translation.

<sup>2</sup>Herman Bavinck, "Voorrede": *Ongeloof en revolutie. Eene reeks van historische voordrachten*, 3rd. ed., by G. Groen van Prinsterer (Kampen: J. H. Bos, 1904), v–xiii.

In this atmosphere young Herman must have embraced the basic direction of the author of *Unbelief and Revolution* and imbibed its lessons for life as a Christian community in a secularizing society. Reinforced no doubt in his outlook by the remarkable activity on the national stage and in the academic world by Abraham Kuyper, who by 1904 was his colleague and friend, Bavinck was well equipped to glean the cardinal points and salient message from Groen's often controversial book. His eight-page foreword reviews all the seminal ideas found in each of its chapters and gives them his well-considered endorsement. Speaking here is the author of the 1894 magisterial oration on "Common Grace." With a paraphrase of one of his favorite texts, Bavinck underscores the meaning of the Christian faith, not only for eternity but also for temporal life in all its aspects (1 Tim. 4:8). He warns against restricting the gospel to church and theology, to conversion and moral living, however primary and crucial these are, because he wants his fellow believers to be on guard against what he calls "the dangers of pietism and separatism." These words foreshadow his inspiring address of the following year: "Christian and Secular Politics."

The reprint of Groen's book was well served by this pointed, powerful foreword.

### Foreword to *Unbelief and Revolution*<sup>3</sup>

[v] Groen van Prinsterer's classic work *Unbelief and Revolution* has no need of a long, laudatory introduction from me. The book is already well-known and its author is greatly respected. Yet, a brief description of the character of this work can help explain why a new edition deserves our hearty recommendation and support.

It is almost sixty years since the first edition of this work was published, and more than forty years since the second edition appeared. Over

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<sup>3</sup> Bavinck, "Voorrede," v-xiii. The original page numbers of the Dutch text appear in brackets in this English translation, e.g. [v].

these years the world has changed in many ways. Almost all of the enemies against whom Groen took his stand are now gone. The ideas that he fought against have almost no defenders any longer. Who now still speaks enthusiastically about the Declaration of the Rights of Man? Who still praises the ‘heroic deeds and blessings’ of the French Revolution? Who is still infatuated with the slogan ‘liberty, equality, and fraternity’? And who still dares to declare that the state and society, language and religion, law and morality have all been created by the will of man, through man’s own conscious deliberations and negotiations? All of the theories that infatuated earlier generations and that were once seen as solutions to the riddle of life, have passed away. Just like the mist that disappears with the [vi] rays of the sun, they are gone. With the turn of the twentieth century, a change has taken place in the lives and aspirations of all the nations.

Rousseau has yielded way to Darwin, Kant to Hegel, deism to pantheism, rationalism to mysticism, and optimism to pessimism. While man was formerly envisioned as an angel, he is now looked upon as a clever animal. Formerly it was attempted in vain to construct, in a Pelagian manner, all institutions and relationships by the sheer force of human will and chance. Now it is proposed that everything is determined by unconscious urges and explained by fate. After repeated failed experiments, the Revolution has given way to Evolution.

Nevertheless, Groen’s work has not become outdated in the least. This is because the enemy that Groen fought against has merely changed its appearance but not its essential attitude. In both cases, it is still *man* who imparts meaning to language and religion, to law and morality, and to the state and society. In both cases, God with his Word and his law is excluded. From this viewpoint, nothing has improved; indeed, the situation has worsened. There has been progress—but only progress in the sense of further dissolution. There has been development—but only in a downward direction. While in former days God was considered essential for explaining the origin of things, his existence, or at least our ability to know Him, is now denied. It is said to be ‘unscientific’ to take God into

account when discussing such things. Science believes that it must either be ‘non-theistic’ [*athée*] or else be untrue to itself. Family, society and the state, religion and morality, language and thought have to be explained as the products of their historical development, or when that proves impossible, they are to be explained psycho-genetically or, in the final analysis, mechanically.

Groen was not unaware that revolutionary principles would unfold in this manner. After all, he had studied Plato and believed that ideas were real. After Groen heard the preaching of the [vii] Gospel by Merle d’Aubigné, he became influenced by the Réveil movement and learned to count all things as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. As the King’s secretary he had access to the historical archives of the House of Orange, and he beheld in the history of our national struggles faith in practice and the fruits of doctrine in real life. In this way he was prepared to guide the wonderful religious life of the Réveil movement into a historic, national, and Reformed channel. In following a Christian-historical compass, Groen did not strive to lead the Awakening movement backwards, but to move forward and make progress.

During this period of preparation, Groen developed both a clearer understanding and a more sincere attachment to the unchanging truths of the Reformation. At the same time, he gained new and unexpected insights into the essence of the Revolution. He now recognized the Revolution as a product of systematic unbelief. He regarded the Revolution, with all its vicissitudes and disasters, as the fruit of revolutionary notions; the natural unfolding of these disastrous ways of thinking was according to him the cause of these events. Groen even believed that one could interpret the phases of this development in advance. Because the revolutionary ideals proceeded in such a logical order, they would inevitably pass through phases that manifested the essential character of the Revolution and so one could set down ahead of time an outline of what their history would be.

Yet this should not be construed to mean that Groen believed that ideas had the power to realize themselves, as if facts were nothing other

than embodied thoughts. Groen himself recognized that what takes place merely reflects the continual outworking and revealing manifestation of the spirit of the age. Also, the development of the doctrine of the Revolution never goes unchecked; it always meets objections which, because they arise from how God has ordered the nature of man and his needs, cannot be overcome. These objections and the revolutionary doctrine together make up the *two factors* of history. Nature and history come into conflict with the ideas of the Revolution. The historical emergence and development of states, the sacred origins of law and authority, the supreme sovereignty of God, the mutually independent relationship between church and state: one may well decide that all these truths are the results of errors and prejudices. Nevertheless, they are and remain the foundational pillars of basic constitutional law. For this reason, the life course of the Revolution is a continual struggle of its principle against the immutable ordinances of God. And despite the uniformity of principle and direction there are also manifold differences; the course of circumstances in different countries was not the same. However, the revolutionary theory was never fully realized, because its realization is quite an impossibility.

With his conception of history Groen van Prinsterer stood diametrically opposed to that of historical materialism, which came after him. Groen believed in the reality and operation of ideas, not as powers with a substance of their own, but as they are able to wield influence on persons, who become their bearers and supporters, and through them, on the course of the history of mankind. He believed not only in the laws of nature but, without fatalism, also in the laws of the moral world. And this belief he had in common with all great historians. Because there is no history in the proper sense if, alongside factors of economics, the existence and power of factors of ideas are not taken into account. And in distinction to many historians, Groen was still animated by his profound conviction that, according to the words of Scripture, righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to the people. Groen believed in the blessings of Christianity, and still more particularly in those of the Reformation. He was on guard

against the Renaissance and unbelief, and equally against the expansive activities and arrogance of Rome. And while Rome associated the Reformation with the Revolution, Groen demonstrated that they are polar opposites, because the Revolution [ix] had plunged the civilized world into an abyss of disbelief and misery, while the Reformation had led Europe out from superstition, while also rescuing it from unbelief.

Therefore, Groen did not face the events of his time with a neutral disposition. He saw and judged from a certain, consciously adopted perspective. And this was the position of a Christian, who desired nothing other than to glory in Christ and in Him crucified. Groen was a Christian who in religion, morality, and law, in family life and in affairs of state recognized no wisdom or truth that does not begin with the subordination of the heart and mind to revelation. In history he not only, along with the deist, detected and observed the leading of Providence, but he also trusted with the strength of his conviction in the profession of the Gospel and in the coming and triumphant return of the Savior. In Him, Groen looked forward to the resolution of all of the riddles of the history of mankind.

And yet, in spite of, or rather, precisely because of this position, Groen was in the highest degree an unprejudiced and impartial historian. This was born out in both his assessment of the Reformation and in the Revolution. Groen cannot be charged with anti-papism; he did not conceal the flaws and faults of the Reformers and their followers. He had an open eye towards that which was Christian in Rome and he was even sharply and undeservedly blamed for extenuating the Romanists' crimes during the Reformation. But he also warned Protestants against neglecting the pledge with which they have been entrusted; that they, while knowing that on their side not everything has been excellent, they might surrender themselves to an ill-conceived magnanimity, which tilts the scales in favor of their opponents and of injustice, *if they did not investigate the issues more deeply*. He wished to be impartial and wished it completely. He adhered, as much as anyone, to the principle of *audiatur et altera pars* [let the other side be heard as well], so long as the other party is heard and, after careful

consideration, judgment is passed. He warned against the danger [x] that, through *ignorance of the facts*, Protestants might underrate the excellencies of the Reformation in the character of the Reformers and in the course of events.

Likewise, the Christian-historical perspective enabled Groen van Prinsterer to understand the essence and character of the French Revolution. By this Revolution, he did not understand one of the many events, by which public authority is removed, nor just the revolutionary tempest that has raged in France, but the overturning of the way of thinking and of religious disposition throughout all of Christendom, along with the development of an utter skepticism in which God's Word and law were laid aside. The revolutionary concepts that he had in mind were the basic theses of liberty and equality, the sovereignty of the people, the social contract, the refashioning of conventions, which men honor as the cornerstones of constitutional law and state-building. This Revolution, Groen argued, was born out of a rejection of God's Word and law, and it had, from its outset, not merely a political but also a social character. The Revolution intended not only to change the form of the state but also to alter society. It manifested not only a political aberration like that which, indeed, also occurred in earlier history, but also a misconception of society. For when God's sovereignty is rejected or denied, what then remains as the source of authority, of law, of every sacred and obligatory relationship in the state, in society, and in the family circle? What ground remains for the distinction of rank and position? What reason is there why I obey and someone else commands me? Why one is poor and another rich? All institutions, law and liberty, all religion and morality, all property and life lose their foundation and become dependent on the sovereign will of the people—that is, on the majority of half, plus one.

The accuracy of these insights into the essence of the Revolution was confirmed every year by the history of nations both during Groen's life and after his death. Everywhere and in every sphere of life, in family [xi] and society, in science and art, in religion and morality, in law and in history,

the consequences of the principle of the Revolution have been drawn, which Groen saw in their incipient form. If these consequences are not, or not fully, implemented in life, this is not thanks to the revolutionary principle itself, but only thanks to the forces that God has placed in nature and history to oppose it, and to the return to the Gospel, which his Spirit has awakened in a portion of Christendom. Supported thereby and with hope in his heart, Groen did not despair, even though he often had a pessimistic take on the future. The Gospel was the only adequate remedy for the ills of the age. Neither a dead orthodoxy nor old-fashioned forms were what Groen desired, but rather sincere faith, personal repentance, submission to God's Word and law, to every truth that is deduced from God's word, to every authority that is derived from God's authority, and a heartfelt embrace and experiential knowledge of the unchanging truths of the Reformation. Looking around with this perspective, he found his sympathizers and supporters among all of those who professed Christ. He never sought only defense, but always also recruitment. Even in the pagan world, he found support for the principles of authority and liberty which he promoted. In the final analysis it was not he who stood alone, like a field marshal without an army, but it was the Revolution that was isolated by its atheism. He was offended not only by the Revolution's unchristian character, but equally by its thoroughly unhistorical nature.

Groen did not, however, stop at this demand for a personal return to the Gospel. However much he emphasized individual, true conversion, he was always on his guard against the dangers of pietism and separatism. From the Gospel he derived principles which would bring blessings for family and society, for law and state-building, and for the arts and sciences. The power of the Gospel to effect order and liberty and prosperity was, after all, substantiated by world history. [xii] The fear of God promotes whatever is beneficial and useful to man, while the denial of God thwarts and obstructs the same.

While at present there exists a particular desire to release the state from all higher, religious-moral principles and against these more and



more to assign to the state the promotion of material interests, Groen moved in the opposite direction. He defended the divine right of the government and could think of no well-ordered state in a Christian land that was indifferent or hostile towards the Church. Indeed the sovereign, whether that is the prince in the monarchy, or the body politic in a republic, is called to act. This action must observe the rules of morality. For morality to have a foundation and meaning, it must have its basis in religion, which, when faithfully exercised, is protected and supported by the sovereign in the interest of justice, morality, and the public order.

But this divine right of the government is not of such a nature that the will of the sovereign is identical with the will of God. Nor is regal authority omnipotent. It serves not only to *confirm*, but also to *regulate* and *restrain* the highest power. It belongs not only to government officials but also to all who among men have been entrusted with any authority. It is the same doctrine that safeguards the throne and the home of the most insignificant subject. The rights and liberties of the people cannot be ignored without destabilizing the right of the sovereign.

The divine right is also the foundation and guarantee of a free society, of the independence of its constituent spheres of life. In former days, every family head, every corporation, every class was, within the bounds of its own competence, entitled to wield authority over persons and property, to apply the law to those who were under them, to govern their affairs at their own discretion, and to wield a power that differs from the sovereign's authority only by lacking independence, which is the hallmark of sovereignty. The common welfare was deemed inseparable from the free development of the *estates*, that is, the *states within the state*. There was, despite disparity in rights, equality before the law. This principle of association and corporation Groen regarded as applicable even today, if amended according to circumstances. He was convinced that solving the social problems was the key to the future, also for international conflicts. But concerning this he paid more attention to the organic growth of society than to manmade institutions. Upon the sovereign he placed above all

the obligation to set no obstacles in the path of the historical workings of nature, by which, starting from the simplest members of the community, society crystallizes itself into a variety of outlines and forms.

In all of these ways, Groen's work is significant not only for the past and the present, but also for the future. There are, as Groen agreed with Francis Bacon, a small number of books that possess a consuming power like the staff of Moses against the staffs of the Egyptian magicians. This is also true of his own work: his book devours many others.