

Groen van Prinsterer:

At Its Deepest, History Is Church History*¹

J. G. Barnhoorn

Also along the path of history, may God's Word be a light for our feet (Psalm 119:105). Without the Holy Scripture, world history remains a mystery. By faith we know its content and goal: the fulfillment of the original promise in Paradise (Genesis 3:14-15), the triumph of the Messiah over the tempter. Christ, who came to offer His soul as a ransom for many, will return to judge the living and the dead. The fortunes of persons and nations, throughout all generations and ages, are subservient to the formation, maintenance and glorification of His Congregation.

His Reign

The above citation borrowed from chapter ten of G. Groen van Prinsterer's (1801-1876) dissertation, *Amicitia Christiana*, in turn generated a dissertation at the Free University in Amsterdam last year by the Reformed emeritus clergyman J. G. Barnhoorn. In his chapter "The Meaning of History"² he treats the historiography of Groen van Prinsterer and Isaac da Costa.

"It is highly remarkable," says Dr. Barnhoorn (77) at his home in Nunspeet, "disappointing actually, that during the defense of my dissertation not a single question was raised about this chapter. For me, this chapter constitutes the bone and marrow of my book. To say it with Hendrik Pierson, "The Lord reigns! His Kingdom is established; His reign comprises the succession of the ages." This is **the** conviction by which van Prinsterer and his co-Revivalists lived. When it comes right down to it, for Groen all history is church history.

What is your position?

¹The interviewer is A. de Heer, while the interviewee is Dr. J. G. Barnhoorn, pastor emeritus of the Hervormde Church in Nunspeet, the Netherlands. He wrote his doctoral dissertation at the Free University about G. Groen van Prinsterer's (1801-1876) dissertation *Amicitia Christiana*. In this chapter Barnhoorn treats the philosophy of history of both van Prinsterer and Isaac da Costa. Trans. Dr. Jan H. Boer. Original title: "*Groen: Historie ten diepste kerk-historie.*" *Reformatorsch Dagblad*, January 8, 2010. The original can be accessed at: <https://www.rd.nl/groen-historie-ten-diepste-kerkhistorie-1.140350>

²Original chapter title: "*De zin van de geschiedenis.*"

There is much to be said for that. I am of the opinion that if you don't believe that as a Christian historian, you need to ask yourself as to the quality of your Christian faith. I am not suggesting that a Christian historian carries out his Christian historiography with the bible in hand as an arsenal of proof texts. With the Reformers I say: I confess that the Lord reigns, but that is not always that easy to point out. But we are allowed to let this console us.

Is neutral historiography possible?

No, that does not seem possible to me. I can't even imagine that there are people who think it *is* possible. You always carry yourself along.

In an article in the book *Geleerd en gelovig*³ I read that historiography during the Communist era was almost exclusively in the hands of Communists and ex-Communists. That tells us much. However, I am under the impression that through the years it is increasingly accepted that neutral historiography is not possible.

What of Christian historiography?

Yes, that is possible. But that does not mean that we humans can easily point to the hand of God in history. People tried this in the past. For example, in 1588, when the Spanish Armada went under, it was said that God's hand had destroyed it.

But even in the events associated with the various Dutch church schisms, such as the schisms of 1834 and 1886 and even of 1944. Others have raised the doubtful question how it was possible that people could create a church schism during the darkest point of World War II.

On the other hand, when, in the context of our recent public discussion about minarets, Van der Vlies argued that we must not forget that God Himself had a hand in the formation of our nation, I accept that as completely legitimate. Nevertheless, Christian historiography is and remains a matter of faith.

Caution

On the whole, even van Prinsterer was very cautious in pointing to God's hand in specific events, more so than is generally thought, says Barnhoorn. Some of his friends, for example, have taken it ill of him that in his *Handboek der geschiedenis*

³Possible translation of the title: *Educated and Believing*.

*van het vaderland*⁴ he failed to make even the slightest reference to the alleged “double ebb” of July 1672 that others regard as a miracle.⁵

In this context, I myself am led occasionally to the words of Ecclesiastes 5:2 in the Old Testament: “Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.” Striking is, for example, that during pastoral visits, people see God’s hand much easier in positive events than in adversity.

But can you nevertheless name any event from the past in which you recognize God’s hand?

I can’t think of anything except the Reformation, of which it can be said, “That was God at work.”

I also think about the end of WW II. I was still a child, but it made an immense impression on me. The title of a sermon preached by K. H. Miskootte on May 9, 1945, during a thanksgiving service in the Nieuwe Church in Amsterdam, was “God’s Enemies Perish.” I find it simply perplexing that at the Memorial Day here in our town I seldom meet any of my fellow pastors.

Asia Minor

As this theme of “God’s hand in history” surfaces, Barnhoorn says, “I often think about the possibility, originally posited in *Zohar*, a book about Jewish mysticism, that human misbehavior could be a reason for God to withdraw from them. He who forsakes God can expect grief upon grief. What is left of Christendom in Asia Minor and North Africa, where the church blossomed during the first centuries of our era?”

⁴Possible translation of the title: *Handbook of the History of the Fatherland*.

⁵The “double ebb” or “*dubbele ebbe*” refers to an alleged low tide of double length along the northern coast of The Netherlands in 1672, when the British sought to invade the country but were prevented by storms and an unusually long low tide. Many declared it a divine miracle, but van Prinsterer does not even mention it. For an interesting account for Dutch readers, I refer you to R. Fruin, “*Over de dubbele ebbe in het jaar 1672*,” in *Is. An. Nijhoff and P. Nijhoff, thans door R. Fruin, Universiteit te Leiden. Nieuwe reeks; tiende deel. s’Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1880, pp. 125-138*. Among other things, the chapter reports on the controversy generated by van Prinsterer’s almost stony silence on the subject.

- **Links to the original Dutch interviews:**
- [Goddelijk geheim in de geschiedenis](#)
- [Voorzichtig omgaan met moreel oordeel](#)
- [Vershil tussen historicus en gelovige](#)
- [Groen: Historie ten diepste kerkhistorie](#)