

Christian Views on Historiography

Five Interviews with Historians

Back in 2010, the Society of Christian Historians in The Netherlands held a conference about Christian historiography in Utrecht. During that same week, the Christian daily *Reformatorsch Dagblad* (*Reformational Daily*) interviewed five Christian historians. All five of the interviews together make up this article in the order in which they were published. The title of each interview is marked with an asterisk (*) for easy location.

Interview No. 1

The Difference Between a Historian and a Believer*¹

Beatrice de Graaf

Should a historian strive for neutrality in historiography?

You can approach historiography in two different ways: As professional historian or as believer. In the first place, you adhere to the methods of the academic discipline of history. In the second case, you present a reflection on history on basis of your own worldview. For Christians this means that you believe that Christ has revealed Himself in human history and that that history will one day conclude with His return.²

You are a Christian and a historian—How do you combine these two?

As professional historian I do not automatically deal with issues of meaning. Certainly not when you are still at the beginning of your career. It is only recently

¹The interviewer is Enny de Bruijn, while the interviewee is Dr. Beatrice de Graaf, Chairperson of the Society of Christian Historians and associated with the Centrum voor Terrorisme en Contraterrorisme van de Leiden Universiteit (Centre for Terrorism and Contraterrorism of the Leiden University). Trans. Dr. Jan H. Boer. Original title: "*Vershil tussen historicus en gelovige.*" *Reformatorsch Dagblad*, January 4, 2010. The original can be accessed at: <https://www.rd.nl/vershil-tussen-historicus-en-gelovige-1.139182>

²Note from translator: I am surprised at such a disjunction from whom I expect(ed) to be a Reformational historian.

that I busy myself more with this sort of philosophical reflection, even though I have already been in this discipline for about ten years.

In the meantime I am increasingly recognizing the value of Robert Fruin's attitude.



According to him, a historian must try her hardest to understand each party in the story and to acknowledge the good and the true in their standpoints. Fruin calls that “the historical glance.” Thus, this attitude contains a robust ethical portion, for what is the good and the true? I do appreciate that the historian must indicate her involvement with the intentions and standpoints of historical persons and parties.

Does your worldview play a role in your historiography?

The choice of a specific period or person is always subjective. Of course, sometimes that choice is determined simply by the coincidence of available research projects, something about which we should not act too grandiosely. But at a certain stage a specific preference may crystallize.

I am writing increasingly about the history of conflict, war, espionage, and terrorism. Not in order to acknowledge the good and the true in terrorists but its opposite, to discover when and why people or states choose death and destruction.

And to determine how such a spiral of violence operates. For me, this is also a function of historiography: to provide insight into patterns of fear and violence, with a view to countering it.

Can you name a historical event that makes God's acts in history concrete for you?

As a historian I know how difficult it is to determine meaning in history. Nothing is as changeable and subjective as historical interpretation. What we see as a blessing may not be so for another. Divine providence does not allow us to see it clearly, fortunately not. Furthermore, are we then talking about blessings or also about suffering in history? This last one is even more awkward and often more painful when it comes to meaning.

It is a little easier for a believer. In that capacity we can make a faith declaration and bear witness to God's actions, for example, in our own lives, in the lives of our ancestors or our nation. In this context, I love to tell the story of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Even non-Christians speak about 1989 as the "*annus mirabilis*," the year of the great miracle. However, speech about divine action in history becomes much more awkward when terrorism is the subject. Why does that occur? I can reconstruct and interpret, but not explain.

Interview No. 2

The Divine Mystery in History*³

J. L. Vermeulen

Must a historian strive for neutrality in historiography?

I find “neutrality” an incorrect term. It does not exist. I agree with Groen van Prinsterer⁴ who once said, “The only one who can be neutral is the one who makes a choice.”⁵ Everyone has his own worldview, whether he is Christian or not. That worldview shows up in your description of history.

How does your Christian worldview influence your work?

I have written a small book about a century of the Reformed Church in Ouderkerk aan den IJssel. That emerged from my master’s thesis about the two 19th-century Reformed⁶ churches in the village. It is interesting that around the Secession of the 1830s the preachers of both churches were of the Enlightenment modernistic type, while at the end of the century they were orthodox. I then further wrote about the period of 1905-2005 in the book. Then you see that the life of the *Gereformeerden* in Ouderkerk was exemplary for Gereformeerd life in the country as a whole. Everywhere they took the same steps. In the meantime the churches in Ouderkerk have accepted children to take communion. My worldview is especially influential in my selection of topics. As Christian, I have a special love for church history, because that’s where people express themselves about their relationship to the Lord God. It is enjoyable to hear what they say about that.

Was the commission that requested you to write the book not worried that it would be written according to a certain colour or perspective?

³The interviewer is Jan-Kees Kareis, while the interviewee is J. L. Vermeulen (MA), lecturer at Driestar College. Trans. Dr. Jan H. Boer. Original title: “Goddelijk geheim in de geschiedenis,” *Reformatorsch Dagblad*, January 5, 2010. The original article can be accessed at: <https://www.rd.nl/goddelijk-geheim-in-de-geschiedenis-1.139388>

⁴For the identity of van Prinsterer see Interview no. 5 in this file as well as in the category “Pioneers of Reformational Philosophy” towards the beginning of this website page.

⁵“Onpartijdig kan hij alleen zijn, die partij kiest.”

⁶The two Reformed churches are the former national Reformed Church and the *Gereformeerde* Church associated with Abraham Kuyper and his followers, the church that baptized me, the translator, and eight of my nine siblings.

The Chairperson of the commission writes in the Foreword that the book is more attractive precisely because the author does not live in Ouderkerk and does not belong to the *Gereformeerde* church. Thereby greater distance is achieved along with greater objectivity. Besides, I worked as member of this commission and thus was not in a position to add negative passages that might reveal how badly things have gone in the *Gereformeerde* church. I would not have wanted that. Let history speak for itself.

Can you name a historical event that concretizes God's acting in history for you?

In "*Bronwijzer*," a method of Christian history teaching in which I participated, we paid extensive attention to the Middle East. We were keen to show how a Jewish state was established there in 1948. For me, this is one of the clear examples of God's acting in history. Of course, the method is to write the facts along with the role the Zionists have played. But the Jewish state remains a divine miracle.

How explicit are you in pointing out the hand of God in history?

For pedagogical reasons, not too explicit. It can evoke a kind of resistance. It is more important to know that we humans can understand the eternal God only in a very limited sense. On the one hand, I affirm Article 13 of the Belgic Confession that God rules the world. That is non-negotiable for me.

On the other hand, it is difficult enough for people to point to or discern God's leading in their lives. Let alone that God uses people who themselves have no idea that they are being used. You soon run into obstacles when you indicate exactly where God is at work. That is why I would rather speak about the divine mystery in history.

Interview No. 3

Be Careful with Moral Judgements*

Bart Wallet (MA)⁷



Must a historian strive for neutrality in historiography?

I don't find "neutrality" a good term. Besides, neutrality does not exist and you don't need to have a worldview background to say this. I attach more value to the concept of objectivity. I cherish objectivity in my work.

Neutral historiography is impossible. When you write about anti-Semitism or the Holocaust you cannot avoid moral judgements, but *an sich* that is not so bad.

The most important task of a historian, however, is to pursue his research into a deeper level where others don't go, to dig up facts from below and to assign a proper place to the spread of responsibility.

You are a historian and a Christian. How do these two work together?

For me, the relationship between Christian and historian is of the same order as that of a Christian and a farmer or a mayor. It is especially a Christian historian who has the duty to stick to his historian profession, which means to interact

⁷The interviewer is Jan Mark ten Hove, while the interviewee is Bart Wallet (MA), researcher in Hebraic, Aramaic and Jewish Studies at the University of Amsterdam and lecturer in Jewish History at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. Trans. Dr. Jan H. Boer. Original title: "Langzaam omgaan met moreel oordeel." *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, January 6. The original can be accessed at <https://www.rd.nl/voorzichtig-omgaan-met-moreel-oordeel-1.139663>.

honestly with the sources, be faithful in your daily work and to weigh the whole picture of the various interpretations of the past.

You have specialized in the history of Jewry. Can a Christian write neutrally about Jewish history?

Last year I attended a congress in Los Angeles with eight American and one European scholar. As Europeans we delivered perfect historically embedded presentations. My Jewish-American colleagues however found it very difficult to decide how to proceed further with Israel, Zionism and the Jewish issue. For them, historiography not only demanded doing justice to the past, but also emphatically to be involved in what currently plays itself out. Here a characteristic difference of opinion revealed itself.

A Christian believes that general history is part of salvation or sacred history. Do you utilize this insight in your work?

As Christian you cannot leave your identity behind. I am very conscious of this. Because of my Christian background I tend to recognize religious components earlier, while other historians are inclined to emphasize social, economic or political motives.

Religion plays an important role in the lives of people. That is why it is relevant to involve that fact in scholarly research.

How explicit are you in pointing to God's hand in history?

I find it dangerous to point to a specific event. This leads to the danger of minimizing God's acts to a few crucial moments. I believe that God is involved in all of history; everything is in His hands.

Interview No. 4⁸

Neutrality Undervalues Historical Revolution*

Ewald MacKay



Which concrete historical events do you associate with the acts of God in history?

I recognize the hand of God in the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. During the immediately preceding period of total darkness, namely World War II, God appeared absent. During this war, diabolical evil received maximum room. The demonic power in this global conflagration

⁸The interviewer is Rudy Ligtenberg, while the interviewee is Dr. Ewald Mackay, lecturer in the history of culture at *Driestar College*. Mackay received his doctorate in 1997 on basis of his research in the relationship between Christian faith and historical reality. Trans. Dr. Jan H. Boer. Original title: "*Neutraliteit miskent historische revolutie.*" *Reformatorsch Dagblad*, January 7, 2010. The original can be accessed at:

https://www.google.ca/search?q=Neutraliteit+miskent+historische+revolutie&rlz=1C1AVNG_enCA658CA662&og=Neutraliteit+miskent+historische+revolutie&ags=chrome..69i57.2998j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

so viciously flailed around itself that it almost turned into an utterly final happening.

Nevertheless, within this context a new epoch –making direction broke through. I refer to the 20th-century exodus of Jewish survivors back to Israel three years after that war. From a world-historical perspective it is actually inconceivable that a nation that has throughout the centuries suffered so heavily and was oppressed and persecuted so heavily, still exists and perseveres. It is equally inconceivable that this people return after twenty centuries.

That this nation subsequently is attacked by the entire Arabic world with the intention of driving it into the sea but wins this war with a minimum of means, is special indeed. As historian one needs to search for an explanation. I find that as historian you may interpret this in terms of God's intervention in history. This does not prevent criticism when Israel goes beyond the bounds of morality, as has definitely happened since and continues to happen.

How does your Christian worldview come to expression in your work as historian?

I am convinced of a unity between faith and knowing, namely “methodical theism.” I reject the so-called theoretical separation or “methodical atheism, in which faith and knowing are separated from each other.

The background to this is that I refuse to live in a partition of faith and knowledge that leads to speaking about God in private on Sundays, but on Monday only about human factors in the public sphere. Such an arrangement seems to me similar to when as a biologist you speak on Sundays that God created in six days, but on Monday it took a process of five and a half billion years by pure coincidence.

This dualistic type of thought is simply a sin against the rule of consistency of life, faith and thought. Unfortunately, many Christian historians entertain this partition perspective. They base this on their humility, but I find this a doubtful kind of humility. It “solves” the problem too easily.

Besides, there is no need at all for such partition, for all science and scholarship starts off with an assumption and reasons consistently from

that assumption in its explanation for the world. That being the case, a religious assumption is as legitimate as any other.

Currently, I am occupied with a rather comprehensive assignment, namely the writing of a handbook on the subject of the history of European thought. Here I try to give form to my theory in the practice of historiography. Aside from that, my theory is much broader than the question of the hand of God. The question is always wrongly restricted to that issue. It is much more an issue of a Christian worldview out of which one interprets history. I really do not speak about God's hand on every page, but sometimes it cannot be avoided. I try to understand history from other notions of causality; e.g., the synchronicity of mysterious "coincidences."

Is neutral historiography possible?

I have already explained that neutrality is not my ideal. Neither does it exist. It is an absurd principle. It would mean, for example, that when you speak about the Holocaust, you may not use that word, for it is a moral term. Neither can you treat terrorism, for the identity of a terrorist depends on your vision.

A simple analysis, for example, of the images through the ages of Charlemagne or of Luther that have passed muster, shows that each image depends on the colour of its own assumption. Historians who strive after neutrality, simply have missed the historical revolution.

Naturally, truth is always the central issue. As historian, I believe in truth, but not a single historian possesses truth, only God. We have our limited perspectives on truth and that is also a grandiose element, for it offers enormous multi-colouration and development. History is a spiritual discipline and deals with the form and formation of the spirit.

The historian Huizinga put it this way, "History is a spiritual form in which a culture gives account of its past." For a historical interpretation it could not be said more beautifully nor deadlier for the neutrality principle. If Huizinga is correct, then it is my duty to give account out of my Christian horizon of the past with an eye to the present.

With this I have not said all there is to be said about history. I choose a middle position. On the one hand, I reject the modern concept of neutrality. On the other, I do not go along with postmodernism that denies the very

notion of truth. Between modernism and postmodernism there is the position of “knowing in part” *and* a searching for truth. I would like to typify this as a new, non-naive form of pre-modernity: classic-Christian thought in rapport with the times.

Interview 5

Groen van Prinsterer:

At Its Deepest, History Is Church History*⁹

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"¹⁰ 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?

⁹The 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>

¹⁰Original 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*¹¹ 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*

¹¹Possible translation of the title: *Educated and Believing*.

*van het vaderland*¹² he failed to make even the slightest reference to the alleged “double ebb” of July 1672 that others regard as a miracle.¹³

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?”

¹²Possible translation of the title: *Handbook of the History of the Fatherland*.

¹³The “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*](#)