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Paternalism and Pietism.

Patricians and Parishioners in a Dutch provincial town, Woerden 1780-1930.*

* vertaling: Helen Bannatyne

The history of the Netherlands differs from the general European pattern in many ways. As early as the 17th century, Dutch culture displayed a marked bourgeois and Calvinist character, while in more recent times a distinctive feature has been *verzuiling,* an untranslatable term denoting the vertical divisions of the population into what are known as 'pillars' *(zuilen)* on denominational or religious lines, at variance with the horizontal lines dividing the social classes. The principal groups distinguished in this way are generally understood to be the orthodox Protestants and the Roman Catholics, sometimes with the addition of a non-religious grouping of Liberals and Socialists. They drew their members from several social strata.

Although many historians and social scientists have reflected on the problems associated with modernisation and 'verzuiling', their approach has in most cases been marked by *a priori* theories. To date there has been little or no specific historical analysis of the transformation of Dutch society between 1780 and 1930. This study attempts to assess the various approaches in the light of the history of a particular community in that period.

The community in question is the provincial town of Woerden, which lies beside the 'old' river Rhine, on the border between the modern provinces of South Holland and Utrecht. Situated between the Catholic south and the Protestant north, it is a mixed zone in religious terms. To this day, the area forms the geographic heart of orthodox Reformed Protestantism, the development of which is the central thema of the present volume. This book is not a study of Calvinism as an autonomous system of symbols or as a religious experience, but a historical analysis of a complex interplay of material conditions, mentalities and governing strategies in a particular time and place. An integral approach makes it possible to examine the links between material and mental changes, while also considering the modernising role, if any, played by religion and the Church.

The *petite histoire* of the Calvinist community in Woerden is a microcosm of the transformation of a pre-industrial *Ständestaat* into a modern society, with its concomitant vertical divisions. If the years around 1780 and 1830 can be seen as two turning points in the material and non-material conjuncture of the long 19th century, the years immediately surrounding 1865 and 1880 and those around 1895 and 1930 also marked decisive changes. These years saw the most significant shifts in the power structures and the chief political and ecclesiastical reorganisations.

The first changes took place during the revolutionary episode in the late 18th century. Woerden, a fortified town, became a military stronghold of the Patriot movement. Social conflicts were an important, though not a decisive, factor. The two parties – Patriots and Orangists as they were known – drew their adherents from several strata of the population and were led by scions of distinguished regent families. Political allegiances were largely determined by religious divisions. Most, though not all, Catholics and Lutherans belonged to the revolutionary Patriot movement, while the split within the Calvinist community

more or less coincided with the split between the more moderate followers of Johannes Coccejes and the stricter adherents of Gisbertus Voetius, two 17th century theologians. The great majority of the latter supported the Stadholder, the Prince of Orange. However, in time, dissension between Catholic and Protestant on the Patriot side, coupled with their common hatred of the French 'liberators', reconciled the opposing factions. This left an enduring stamp on public life in the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the early 19th century. King William I's regime was characterised by moderation and accommodation under the banner of 'God, the Fatherland and the House of Orange'.

The first fissures in the regime appeared at local level in 1830 or thereabouts. A political dispute about the administration of primary education nearly brought about the resignation of the enlightened mayor of Woerden and the majority of the town council. At the same time a conflict about authority in the Dutch Reformed Church congregation led to the dismissal of the consistory. The political and ecclesiastical crises in Woerden foreshadowed the national schools dispute, which bedevilled the nation's political life for nearly a century, and the campaign for a revival in the Church. The Calvinist revival reached its peak between 1865 and 1880. Such local developments confirm the emphasis placed by some historians on the pivotal role of the 1860s and 1870s in the 19th century Dutch history, while demonstrating that the real turning point had come 30 years earlier.

The resurgence of orthodox Calvinism can be explained by various factors. Firstly, the 1830s in Woerden brought an end to a long period of economic decline, which had been shared by all the maritime provinces. The decade ushered a new era of economic and demographic growth, principally due to the upturn in brick and tile manufacture along the 'old' Rhine. However, this growth took place within the framework of a traditional society. The pressure on the environment caused by the influx of workers made itself felt in a steady rise in the mortality rate and increasingly frequent epidemics. Cholera in particular claimed numerous victims. In the mid-1860s, Woerden was hit by one of the last and most virulent epidemics of the *type ancien*. However, the effect of these developments was not universal. The lives of the upper classes were scarcely touched by the epidemics, and even the petty bourgeoisie could escape their consequences. The majority of the victims were workers in the brick and tile works, who at that time were bound hand and foot to their employers and to the poor relief funds administered by the latter.

Economic fluctuations and epidemics fostered lethargy and passivity among Woerden's proto-industrial proletariat. In religious terms, this attitude found expression in form of pietism *(bevindelijkheid),* an ultra-orthodox, mystical movement characterised by the individual's search for personal experience of conversion or election. Its roots went back to what is known as the 'Further' Reformation. In Woerden, 19th century pietism was linked to a popular culture shared by a close-knit network of tile workers, bargees, small shopkeepers and farmers. It was a class-based *culture* which should be clearly distinguished from a class-based *ideology*. The gnawing uncertainty about 'rebirth' reflected the insecurity of the lives of the godly. Faith meant their world turned upside down.

Paternalism and pietism were natural opposites. This explains the occurence of two developments at the same time, from about 1830 onwards: the acquisition of political and ecclesiastical power by the 'liberal' elite of manufacturers and the growing significance of the pietist faithful, who met in conventicles outside the offical Church. Each of these movements was reacting in its own way to the prevailing spirit of moderation and accommodation, typified as it was by the enlightened theology of the mainstream Reformed Church and the cultured conservatism of the rulers in power. This reaction manifested itself in two ways. Firstly, the balance of power in the town council shifted, as

the manufacturers and their supporters gained more and more influence at the experience of the enlightened conservative patricians. Secondly, the reaction took the form of the Secession *(Afscheiding)* of 1834. Some members of the conventicle movement found a new home in the denomination created by the Secession, which looked back to a tradition established by the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-1619. This new denomination provided an orthodox Calvinist alternative to the official Reformed Church, which had been regulated by the State in 1816. In Woerden, the Secessionists drew support of the old patrician elite, who had been superseded by the manufacturers. Soon, however, there was a secession within the Secession. From 1840 onwards, the secessionists in Woerden formed themselves into the 'True Reformed Church under the Cross' *(Gereformeerde Kerk onder 't Kruis),* a more pietist grouping which had distanced itself from the Secessionist Church.

In this way, Woerden compels us to reconsider current views as to the links between the material and the mental conjuncture. Nor do more structural interpretations, such as the notion of an age-old 'anti-regent' tradition which is said to have fostered a growing aversion among the artisans and petty bourgeoisie to the liberal patricians and their modern outlook, fully reflect the complexities of what was a constantly changing situation. The conflict about orthodoxy in religion was not a class struggle in disguise. Religion was both a divisive and a unifying force. Initially, the schools dispute and the quarrels about Church government, instead of causing the local community to disintegrate, reinforced its social cohesion. The leaders were drawn from the patrician class, not from 'the people'. In other words, the Calvinist emancipators themselves formed a paternalistic elite *par excellence.* The social paternalism of Woerden's manufacturing elite was not an inherited tradition, but a vigorous ethic which was strengthened rather than weakened by 19th century economic developments.

The religious conflict could thus be interpreted as an effective form of social control. But Confessionalism – a movement which strove to restore the confession of faith to a central place in religious life – was not merely an instrument of the ruling class. In fact, the success of this doctrine as a strategy for social control lay in its appeal to the culture of the middle classes. It could be said that there was a 'midcult', a section of the population which mediated between the culture of the elite and that of 'the people'. Accordingly, Woerden was not the scene of a one-sided civilising campaign, whereby the upper class imposed its own cultural model on the passive masses. The reality was more complex. The hegemony of the manufacturers concealed a radical power shift, which showed itself in a tightening of the grip of ecclesiastical discipline on the faithful, initiated not by the patricians but by the petty bourgeoisie and artisans themselves. It is therefore not surprising that discipline was strictest in the Calvinist sects, where the lower middle classes met without the supervision of their social superiors.

In addition to social and economic factors, the Calvinist revival in Woerden can be explained in terms of oppositions to a process of political and ecclesiastical centralisation. The religious disputes of the 1830s were partly about local autonomy. This was not just a straightforward conflict of interests between national and local authorities. Popular pressure forced the local secular rulers into a confrontation with the synodal authorities. Under the fictional slogan of restoring the Church to its true Reformed foundation, an alliance came into being in the late 1860s between the liberal patricians' desire for autonomy and the morality campaign of the orthodox lower middle classes. The fusion of these two objectives, which had been quite seperate in the 1830s, was manifested in the idea of a Confessional Presbyterian Church, in opposition to the hierarchical and synodal structure of the official Reformed Church. The orthodox sought to reform the established

Church, that creature of the state which had been created in 1816, to bring it into line with the directives issued by the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-1619.

However, the anti-synodal merger on which the 'Confessional Association' of 1864 was based was not strong enough to unite Woerden's Reformed congregation for ever. In the early 1880s, there was a change in the nature of the conflict with the national authorities. The local elite drew back when it became clear that a break with the synod could mean the loss of Church funds and property (which, since 1880, had included a Protestant school). The decisive factor was not, however, the attitude of the elite but that of the middle classes. The exercise of Church discipline reached its height in the 1870s, in both the official Church and the secessionist congregations. Shortly afterwards, it declined in significance quite suddenly. In 1880 or thereabouts, lines were drawn within the Church reform movement which had a decisive influence on later developments. The exercise of discipline had alienated the orthodox artisans from both the upper and the working classes. The realisation of this fact sowed dissension in the Confessional middle classes, leading to the decisive parting of the ways which soon produced the *Doleantie* of 1886. In Woerden thereafter, the exercise of discipline served to distinguish the 'Gereformeerd' followers of Abraham Kuyper from the orthodox who remained within the official Church and were inspired by the 'Confessional' theologian Philippus Jacobus Hoedemaker.

This, the second major disruption in orthodox Calvinism (the first having been the Secession of 1834), was not an isolated development. The 1860s and 1870s were a period of economic decline in Woerden, coming to an end around 1880, with a reversal of recent economic and demographic trends. The 1880s and 1890s, on the other hand, which are usually referred to as decades of agricultural depression, in Woerden represented the beginning of an era of economic and social modernisation. Income from grazing rose in the surrounding countryside where the farmers made cheese for themselves and marketed it in Woerden, which became a centre of cheese trade. The mechanisation of the manufacture of bricks and tiles helped to put an end to centuries of wage inelasticity. The standard of living rose and epidemics were soon a thing of the past. The result was definitive break with the Malthusian model.

This also helped to reduce the worker's dependence on the poor relief doled by the manufacturers. The official Church likewise lost its hold on the labouring classes as the importance of diaconal poor relief decreased. However, the disappearance of the official Church's practical role led not to secularisation but to religious diversification. The majority of those who supported the *Doleantie* in 1886 were brick and tile workers. Their objection to the established Church was not its lack of discipline but the absence of genuine pietistic preaching. By removing themselves from the ecclesiastical paternalism of their bosses, the workers automatically fell under the cultural paternalism of the middle classes who held office in the *Doleantie* congregation. Liberation thus imperceptibly evolved into social control. In this congregation, the moral campaign which the middle classes had waged within the official Church turned into a far-reaching process of acculturation. The orthodox elite made every effort to transform the apathy and passivity of the members into an active neo-Calvinist faith. This created a new source of friction.

A break with the past came in 1892. When Kuypers *Doleantie* movement merged at national level with the older secessionist movement to form the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands *(Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland)* – a move supported by only some of the secessionists in Woerden – there arose a genuine alternative to the official Church. From the mid-1890s, when, in Woerden as elsewhere, the *Doleantie* movement had evolved from a sect into a church, its links with the pietist current within the official Church

were broken. The voice of the 'faithful without a Church' fell silent until the early 20th century, when it was heard again with the emergence of the 'Orthodox Union' *(Gereformeerde Bond)* in the Dutch Reformed Church. The *Doleantie* movement, on the other hand, developed into a well-organised minority with a clearly-defined ideology, preparing themselves for confrontation with the mainstream Church.

It is generally held that the creation of the Protestant *zuil*, as a political and religious grouping in the Netherlands, was the work of Kuyper and his ecclessiastical and political adherents. The situation in Woerden, however, prompts a reconsideration of the organisation contribution of the Confessionals in the Reformed Church. In Woerden it was the members of the liberal manufacturing elite who initiated the Protestant grouping, thus forcing the more orthodox middle classes to fight for a place in a Confessional network which was already in existence. Although Confessionalism may have lost much of its power to integrate even before the *Doleantie*, it was the consistory of the official Church which took the initiative in the establishment of a branch of the Anti-Revolutionary Party in 1892. However, the ecclessiastical reorganisation of the *Gereformeerden*, put an end to the Confessionals as a political force. At national level, the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) split into the followers of Kuyper, the party leader, and those of A.F.de Savornin Lohman, the more moderate leader of the Parliamentiary party. At local level, the schism between the ARP (Kuyper) and the Free ARP (De Savornin Lohman) followed the demarcation lines laid down by the *Doleantie*. Thereafter, Woerden's Anti-Revolutionaries were predominantly *Gereformeerd*, or inclined to the Orthodox Union, while the Free Anti-Revolutionaries, who later became the Protestant Historical Union (CHU), largely belonged to the official Reformed Church.

Dissension spread ever further among the ranks of the Liberals. Some severed their links with the Church, becoming more progressive in their views; others broke with Liberalism and joined the CHU. It was this dissesion and not, as is sometimes assumed, the Liberals' preference for moderation and compromise, that paved the way for public life to take on a denominational tone. Instead of a single, tightly-knit ecclessiastical-political bloc, Woerden was the home of no less than three rival groups, all of which embraced various smaller associations. The façade of Protestant unity thus concealed internal diversity. However, there were still many orthodox Calvinists among the Liberals. Indeed, one might well ask if a Protestant – or Calvinist – *zuil* really existed. If *verzuiling* – to echo many social scientists – is to be regarded as 'a tendency to internal schism, particularly along religious lines', than Protestant sectarianism is the finest example of such a tendency. But *verzuiling* was more than just a process of social, cultural and religious fragmentation. The diversity within Calvinism produced not isolated units – *verzuiling* was not like apartheid – but a number of different groupings, which, after a period of wrangling, succeeded in reaching a rapprochement. Thus, despite a constant tendency to fragmentation, the Calvinists nevertheless formed a recognisable community, which was related to and profoundly influenced the community at large.

Accordingly, the evidence of Woerden seems to show that primacy should be give to religion rather than politics. Religious and ecclessiastical developments were by no means irrelevant or simply a derivative of political modernisation. On the contrary, doctrinal conflicts constituted the driving force, or rather the lubricant, of the processes of governmental change. During the long 19th century, political forces were divided along lines which were not fixed but were in fact constantly shifting. This was equally true of the revolutionary episode in the early years of the period under review, the later Calvinist revival and the eventual development of the Protestant *zuil*. Although the ultimate

outcome could be described as a process of politicisation, the original aim was in fact the reverse, namely to place religion at the centre of the life of the community.

The distinctive nature of *verzuiling* in the Netherlands, which prompts many commentators to define it as an exclusively Dutch phenomenon, stems from the fact that, unlike the Roman Catholic Church in many other countries, the official Dutch Reformed Church never became an autonomous power bloc in opposition to a secular State. Its failure to do so originated in the age of the Batavian Republic and French rule, when it became obvious that the Church, with its virtually autonomous provincial synods, classes and consistories, would never unify itself. Unification would have to be imposed by the State. Thus the national Church was placed under the care of the national government. In the Netherlands, the general European conflict of interests between Church and State therefore took place on the church's territory. Church government was thus automatically an issue in the contest between Church and State. The struggle to control the churchgoing public merged into the struggle to control the institutional life – the schools and hospitals, for example – of the local community.

Verzuiling may now be regarded as a substitute for the loss by the Church of its public role. The competition between Church and State, which was at its fiercest at local level, focused on the spheres of society where the Church was traditionally closest to the people and was most directly threatened by the process of political centralisation (which to some extent operated through the State control of the official Reformed Church). As a result, traditional class structures made way for the vertical divisions symbolised by *verzuiling*. Religion was not only a vital factor in this transformation, it underwent a fundamental change in the process.

From the end of the 19th century onwards, paternalism and pietism gradually disappeared from Woerden. This psychological break with the past reflected an economic transformation: the 'traditional modernisation' of the community from a centre of clay-based industry to an agricultural market centre. The decline of brick and tile manufacture and the dissolution of the associated communities of bargees and workers, with their distinctive cultures, meant the end of pietism as a form of popular religion. Thereafter, pietist Calvinism developed into a purely religious doctrine, without class links. The same process deprived the artisans and lower middle classes of their role as a 'midcult'. As the petty bourgeoisie became more assimilated into the 'official culture', they increasingly became props of the new denominations. The trend that thus emerges from the Woerden evidence was diametrically opposed to the ideal society envisaged by the founders of the modern Netherlands in the first years of the 19th century. Instead of uniting in Protestant ecumenicalism, the nation had disintegrated into fragments. On the threshold of the modern age, religion had left a deeper mark than ever on the political evolution of what used to be a stronghold of enlightenment and the Patriot ideals. By destroying the balance of paternalism and pietism, the new political denominations prevented the growth of modern class consciousness. It was belief, not unbelief, which opened the door to the modern world for the people of Woerden. Paradoxically, tradition acted as the vehicle for modernisation.