

NETHERLANDERS IN THE NETHERLANDS

Gordon Spykman

To even the casual observer this title clearly covers too much ground. Holland may be a small country, but there is, nevertheless, just too much going on too fast in that land behind the dikes for one person to handle in a single brief report. As evidence, ask those who emigrated from The Netherlands about a quarter century ago. Upon returning for a visit, they hardly recognize their homeland for what it used to be.

So certain limitations must be imposed upon these rambling reflections. There are three, in fact, which I ask you to bear in mind. *First*, these observations come not from a native, but from the son of an emigrant, a rather frequent sojourner in Holland. *Second*, they come from the pen of a theologian and therefore undoubtedly betray a theological point of view on Netherlandic developments. Accordingly, in the *third* place, I shall focus my comments on just a few aspects of life in its two largest faith communities, the Roman Catholic and the Reformed - recognizing, of course, that there are various wings within both.

POLITICS

One of the most significant recent developments is the newly formed political alliance known as the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA). This fledgling coalition is now in place. In fact, it exercises controlling power in Dutch government. At the moment, however, it is still little more than a fragile experiment. It has been in operation for barely a year. Its strength and stability is already being tested in the face of some knotty domestic and international problems. Shortly it will have to compete in the national election campaigns.¹

Though the CDA is a political newcomer, it has deep roots in Dutch history, going back to before the turn of the century. Holland has long been a prime model of a truly pluralist society. In its political parties as well as in its church life, school structures, mass media, and labor organizations it has sought to honor the identity and integrity of the various religious bodies within its social order and its public policies. Thus Holland has long stood for principled politics developed along the lines of confessional commitments.²

Throughout this century, therefore, there was a strong Catholic People's Party (KVP), and strong Reformed political parties - mainly the Christian Historical Union (CHU) and the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP). In recent decades, however, under the impact of growing secularization, their own dwindling influence, and the modern ecumenical spirit, these Catholic and Reformed political parties were led to seek closer affiliation. The decade of the 1970's witnessed concerted efforts to hammer out

a plan of unification. Now in the 1980's these dreams of merger have become reality. Catholic and Reformed people find themselves joined organizationally in a single political party, with other confessional parties as satellites moving in orbit around this political newcomer, the CDA.

CHURCH

A similar ecumenical spirit is also blowing strongly through many Protestant and Catholic churches. In some localities these groups share the same building. They sometimes cooperate in Bible distribution and evangelism. Theological students and their instructors from Catholic and Reformed universities hold regular conferences and have joint discussions. In some communities special days on the church calendar - such as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost - bring believers and their pastors from both communions together in communal worship.

Thirty years ago already there was a deep-seated widespread longing on the part of many Dutch Christians to share their faith across denominational lines. At that time this ecumenical impulse was born largely out of nostalgic memories of common wartime experiences under Nazi occupation. Catholics and Protestants alike had often stood shoulder to shoulder, one in faith and in hope, despite their differences, in mutual opposition to a common enemy. They wondered, therefore, how this rediscovered spiritual unity could be kept alive.

Now, with a second, and almost a third generation on the scene, ecumenical contacts appear to be driven by a different spirit. A new common enemy has arisen, more formidable than the Third Reich, namely, the tidal wave of modern secularism. Secularism is no respecter of denominations either. Its overwhelmingly powerful grip on people has thrust Catholicism and Protestantism alike into a crisis situation. So now, to meet this common foe, Christians are building bridges from both sides, hoping that by meeting somewhere in the middle, they can erect a common front to withstand this common adversary.

EDUCATION

Signs of a similar ecumenical response to the secular challenge of our age are apparent also in Dutch education. Traditionally Dutch schools and universities have been both academically strong and confessionally distinctive. But now change is underway. Standards of scholarship are shifting - they are cutting back, for example, on general language requirements - thus creating concern

among many educators.

Also confessionally there are dramatic changes. Many schools which formerly were distinctively Reformed now identify themselves simply as Protestant-Christian. In response some new schools are being organized to preserve a more forthrightly Reformed perspective. In the southern Netherlands, which is predominantly Catholic, there is pressure to break the Catholic school monopoly in some communities by organizing some public-secular schools as an alternative form of schooling.

Secularization, together with tight government controls, has also defused the confessional character of Dutch universities. Take, for example, the Free Reformed University of Amsterdam. At its one hundredth anniversary, in October 1980, officials of "the Free University" announced publicly their intent to drop the designation Reformed from the

name of the university. This would be more in keeping with present reality, it was argued. For, after all, the Free University has now, in fact, become evangelical-ecumenical in its emphasis.

All in all, the Netherlands remains not only the most densely populated nation in the world, but also a fascinating, gutsy, and problematic little country.

NOTES

(1) This article was obviously written before the last national election. As you may know, the CDA weathered its first major test and retained its number of seats and its leading position.

(2) Contrary to popular opinion, the development along the lines of confessional commitments called *verzuiling* or pillarization did not only take place in the Netherlands. Belgium and Switzerland showed much the same picture.

(Comments by Remkes Kooistra)