

Theology on *the Web.org.uk*

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes.
Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit
or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the
copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the
ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the
links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbadshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH.

By THE REV. F. E. KEAY, M.A., D. Litt. Lond., British Chaplain, Amsterdam.

WE are living in days when a great deal is being spoken and written with regard to the Reunion of Christendom. The pressure of attack on the Christian faith makes it increasingly desirable that Christians should not be content to acquiesce in our present unhappy divisions. The goal of a re-united Church may still be far distant, but meanwhile we can do much to promote friendliness and understanding with fellow-Christians, and seek, as far as this is possible, to co-operate in efforts for the extension of Christ's Kingdom.

Living on the Continent one discovers that not only have continental Protestants generally a very small knowledge of what the Church of England is and stands for, but that most members of our own Church are very much in ignorance as to religious affairs on the Continent. Our Anglo-Catholic brethren have done much to promote friendliness with the Old Catholics and have brought about intercommunion with them. But the Old Catholics are (in Holland at least) a tiny and insignificant body, and show little sign of increasing in numbers or influence. It is really time that Evangelicals should do much more than they have hitherto done in getting into friendly relations with the great continental Protestant Churches. With this in view, it is important that we should try to become acquainted with the history, and also understand the present position of those Churches.

In Holland there are two large and influential churches, namely, the Dutch Reformed Church and the Roman Church. There are, besides, representatives of certain secessions from the Reformed Church, as well as numerous small sects. At the census of 1920 (the figures for 1930 are not yet available) the Roman Church had more than 35 per cent. of the population as its members. This may surprise many people living in England who often think of Holland as a "Protestant country." As a matter of fact there are parts of Holland that have always remained predominatingly Roman Catholic. The Roman Church in Holland appears to be vigorous and well-organised. So far as buildings are concerned (churches, schools, and hospitals), it has spread in most parts of the country and carries on active propaganda. Whether it is increasing in numbers at the expense of other churches is very doubtful. The census figures for 1930, when published, will perhaps throw some light on this.

The Reformed Church claimed more than 41 per cent. of the population in 1920, and if one adds bodies closely akin, which have seceded from it, just over 50 per cent. It came into being during the struggle for freedom against the power of Spain in the six-

teenth century in which William the Silent was the great national hero. It received its inspiration from Geneva and was formed on Calvinistic lines. Its formation and early history as a Reformed Church are very much interwoven with the national history. But though it has the most claim to be regarded as the national church of Holland, and the Queen and the ruling family are members of it, yet it is not established. It receives state aid towards the salaries of its ministers (as do other churches in Holland), but these grants are largely paid out of funds which were derived from the endowments of the Church before the Reformation.

The doctrinal basis of the Dutch Reformed Church consists of the so-called "Three Formularies of Unity." These are as follows : (1) The Confession, which has thirty-seven Articles. It was drawn up by a certain Guido de Brès, a martyr who was put to death at Valenciennes in 1567. After being accepted by many synods these articles were confirmed at Dordrecht in 1619, and again in 1816 recognised as the official confession of the Dutch Reformed Church. (2) The Catechism, which is a translation of the well-known Heidelberg Catechism. (3) The Five Articles framed by the Synod of Dordrecht in 1619 in opposition to the teaching of the Remonstrants, who were the followers of Arminius. In the General Rules for the government of the Church adopted in 1816 provision was made for the maintenance of the doctrine of the Church, and a new formula for subscription was drawn up which may be translated as follows : "We accept in good faith and heartily believe the doctrine which, in agreement with the Word of God, is contained in the Formularies of Unity of the Dutch Reformed Church." This led to great discussion. Did it mean that the Formularies should be accepted *quia* or *quatenus* they are in agreement with Scripture ? After long years of debate another formula was drawn up in which the subscriber is required to give his adherence to the doctrine which constitutes in its nature and spirit the essence and substance of the formularies. This also is ambiguous and the discussion still goes on. Modernists interpret the subscription as requiring adherence only to the fundamental principles of Reformed theology and claim the greatest possible freedom. The parties of the right, however, are very strong on the maintenance of the confession in letter as well as in spirit.

The government of the Dutch Reformed Church is Presbyterian, but its present form has been greatly criticised. Since 1852 the Church has been free from state control, but the number of members of the Synod which is the ultimate authority is small, and it is regarded by many as not being truly representative and as being hampered in other ways. Some attribute much of the weakness of the Church to this defective constitution. Each of the schools of thought would like to see re-organisation, but each according to its own ideas, and all attempts at reform in this direction have so far failed.

Just as no one could rightly understand the situation in the

Church of England without knowing something about its various schools of thought, so is the case also with the Dutch Reformed Church. Like many other branches of the Church it has its modernist school. This began about 1860. Among its earlier leaders were Professors Scholten and Kuenen. This school of thought is said to include somewhere about one-third of the clergy to-day. Very often the views of those who belong to this party are practically Unitarian. It passed through a negative period, when it sought to oppose the acceptance of miracles, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the Divinity of Christ, and other orthodox Christian doctrines. The results have often been disastrous in driving many to complete irreligion and materialism. At the present time the outlook is said to be more positive, and preachers of this school often speak with deep religious feeling and use much of the orthodox terminology. But there is a good deal of pantheist philosophy in their thought, and their ground is religious humanism.

A school of thought which arose earlier than this (about 1830) is the so-called Evangelical or Groningen school. Its first leader was Hofstede de Groot, a pupil of the Christian humanist Professor van Heusden, who regarded Christianity as being the education appointed by God to bring men to the highest revelation of Him. This school sought to get back to the Christ of the Gospels and to make its teaching Christocentric. But in so doing it departed from orthodox views as to the Person of Christ, and rejected orthodox views of the Atonement, Regeneration, etc. It still exists, but this group has now only a small following.

Between these liberal groups and the orthodox school stands the Ethical school. Its spiritual father was Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, who in 1872 was a Professor at Groningen. It lays emphasis on the ethical character of the truth and on Christian life. It emphasises personal belief in Christ as a Living Saviour. Its adherents usually accept the so-called critical views of the Bible, but they are for the most part nearer to the orthodox than to the modernist point of view. They have much in common with the Liberal Evangelical group in our own Church. They are represented probably by more than a quarter of the clergy of the Dutch Reformed Church.

The orthodox groups are organised in two societies. The Confessional Union is almost as numerous as the Ethical school. It owes its inspiration to Groen van Prinsterer. While emphasising very strongly the need of adhering to the old standards it is also keen on preserving the unity of the Church and is therefore opposed to separation. It has as its ideal a united Church for a united nation and stresses the national character of the Church as the historic church of the Dutch people. While accepting the recognised formularies it would not be opposed to their modification provided this were done by a united church in a properly constituted synod and in accordance with the teaching of Scripture. A smaller group is more rigidly Calvinist, and would rather see the Church divided than depart from strict principles. Most of the ministers

of this group refuse to use hymns in their services and sing only psalms.

A survey of parties would not be complete without some reference to those who have seceded from the Church. The earliest secession was that of the Remonstrants, who opposed the rigid Calvinist standpoint at the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-19. They are nowadays a very small but intellectual group, and have drifted for the most part into extreme modernism. Other secessions in 1834 and 1887 were of those who opposed liberal tendencies in the Church. The later secession under the able leadership of Dr. Abraham Kuyper has a large following and has had many gifted men in its ranks. It has founded the Free University at Amsterdam.

It is often said that the Protestant view is more individualistic and less concerned with the corporate idea of the Church. This is only partially true. Certainly in Holland views of the Church are often very definite, though the standpoint and outlook is in some ways different from our own. The difference is specially noticeable in two directions. First, there is very little regard for the continuity of ecclesiastical succession. In Holland the Reformed Church seems to regard itself as a new beginning, having little or no connection with the Church of pre-Reformation days. Secondly, the organisation of the Church is regarded very much as a national concern. The idea of the Church universal seems to be that of a collection of national churches having little or no organic connection with one another. Even the Reformed Church in the Dutch colonies has no organic union with the Church in the homeland. Aspirations for the Reunion of Christendom therefore meet with very little enthusiasm in Holland.

In matters of worship also the outlook differs considerably from our own. Even the "lowest" type of Anglican service is regarded by most of the members of the Dutch Reformed Church as savouring far too much of Rome, and Anglicans of all schools of thought would not feel happy at a Dutch service. A strong reaction against medieval superstitions led to an excess of iconoclasm at the time of the Reformation. The interior of most Dutch churches gives one the impression that no pains have been spared to make them as ugly as possible. People remain seated for the singing and do not kneel for prayer. A few stand during prayer, but most remain seated. There seems to be little thought of worship, and the sermon occupies the chief interest. This is a carefully prepared, well-thought-out discourse, often lasting for an hour, or an hour and a half, but usually divided in the middle by the singing of a verse or two. Ministers in Holland have a fairly stiff intellectual training, and there are many able preachers amongst them. The attitude towards sacred buildings differs also from ours. I remember once the shock I felt at seeing some Dutch ministers enter a church with their hats on, smoking cigars, and also, when once present at the opening of a new church, at hearing the loud chattering amongst the congregation right up to

the time when the service began and seeing some people even reading newspapers. One must remember however that Calvinist ideas of the transcendence of God make those who hold them unwilling to think of God dwelling in a "temple made with hands," or of His presence as being in any way localised. Yet residence in Holland has made one feel more than ever thankful for our Anglican *via media*.

For outsiders to gauge the strength or weakness of another church is very difficult. It is certain that the Dutch Reformed Church provides a spiritual home for multitudes of earnest, devoted people, who are deeply attached to it. It is strong in the country districts, but in the large towns it is generally admitted to have lost its hold on the masses of the population. It is unfortunate, to say the least, that in Holland Socialism is not only largely non-Christian, but very often definitely anti-Christian. This is aggravated by the Church being closely connected with politics, and the strongest Conservative parties (in Holland there are very many parties) have Church labels attached to them. The Oxford Group movement has made some progress in Holland, but it has been welcomed by hardly any of the ministers or officials of any of the churches. In England the Keswick platform receives its chief support from Evangelicals of the Church of England, but in Holland any movement of the Keswick type has received scarcely any encouragement from ministers of the Dutch Church. It is mostly represented in so-called Evangelical Free Churches, which are nonconformist. In many orthodox circles people are very much afraid of anything which approaches to what they call "methodism." Holland has produced many able theologians, but apart from Dutch works, most of the theology studied comes from Germany. The Barthian movement is making some headway in Holland. English theology of any type is very little known.

However much our standpoint may differ in many things from that of the Dutch Reformed Church, there is very much that we hold in common and much gain would surely result from closer fellowship. It is therefore greatly to be hoped that in days to come more will be done than in the past to promote such fellowship.

P.S.—Though the figures for the whole of Holland are not yet available, those for some of the cities have, since the above was written, been published. They show a serious weakening of the Protestant position. In Amsterdam, for example, the number of Protestants (of all denominations) was in 1920 just over 43 per cent. of the population. In 1930 it was under 32 per cent. Those who were shown as belonging to no church were in 1920 about 22 per cent., but in 1930 had increased to 35 per cent. The Roman Church lost only slightly. In 1920 it claimed just over 22 per cent. and in 1930 just under 22 per cent. These figures are most significant. They emphasise the need of our stretching out brotherly hands of sympathy and fellowship towards continental Protestants.

F. E. K.