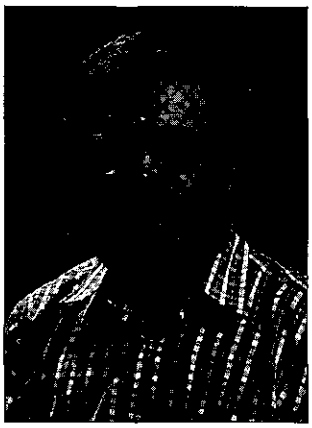
The Impact of WW II on the Reformed Dutch in The Netherlands and Canada: A Comparison



by Harry A. Van Belle

From 1947 to 1957 many Reformed men and women emigrated from The Netherlands to Canada as part of a larger wave of Dutch immigration to that country. Upon arrival most of them settled in Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia, where they joined the Christian Reformed Church. Today this community consists of three generations—an elderly, a middle-aged, and a young adult generation. Together with their children they number about 100,000.[1]

Dr. Harry Van Belle is Associate Professor of Psychology at Redeemer College, Ancaster, Ontario. His special interests lie in the relationship between ethnicity and adult psychological development.

One of the salient features of the Dutch-ethnic sub-group is the centrality of the Reformed religion in their lives.[2] That religion is central to their lives does not mean that they attend church every day of the week, but rather that they take seriously during the week what they preach, pray, and sing about in church on Sunday. For them life is religion. This fact about these immigrants is especially noteworthy since it differentiates them from their Reformed relatives in The Netherlands, among whom church attendance has dropped drastically since the early 1950s. Among the Reformed in The Netherlands, religion no longer plays the dominant role it once did and still does in the lives of the Reformed Dutch in Canada.[3]

What are some of the socio-historical factors that caused these two groups of Reformed Netherlanders, who prior to the time of emigration shared a common historical background, to diverge so sharply? Specifically, what impact did the two major historical events of their lifetime, World War II and emigration, have on them? In this article I will sketch Reformed life as it was lived before, during, and after the war in Holland, and I will also relate what life was like among the Reformed Dutch once they had immigrated to Canada.

My comments are based on a series of interviews I did a number of years ago among the Reformed Dutch in Canada and among their close relatives in The Netherlands. Specifically, in order to gauge the impact of emigration on three generations of post-war Reformed Dutch immigrants to Canada, I interviewed a young adult group, a middle-aged group, and an elderly group. I asked my respondents to relate the story of their lives from their earliest

memory to the present. I also interviewed an identical age-graded sample of their relatives in The Netherlands and drew some conclusions about the impact of emigration from a comparison of these two sets of interviews. I have written in more detail about the method and results of my research elsewhere.[4] Suffice it to say here that what I did was qualitative research in the oral history tradition.

Based on these interviews I intend to argue the following:

1) that pre-war Dutch life was characterized by "religious pluralism,"

2) that the war profoundly disrupted the communal life-style of the Dutch in general, and the lives of the Reformed Dutch in particular,

3) that the impact of the war is largely responsible for moving communal life in post-war Holland from "religious pluralism" in the direction of "religious ecumenism,"[5] and

4) that immigration allowed the Reformed Dutch in Canada to continue their traditional Reformed life-style in an almost pre-war fashion.

History of the Reformed Dutch In The Netherlands

In order to put some content into the terms "religious pluralism" and "Reformed life-style" we will first look at life as it was lived in The Netherlands before the war. From its inception as a country in the sixteenth century, Holland has had a reputation of religious and ideological tolerance.[6] People of radically different faiths co-existed more or less peacefully alongside one another and to this day Holland is a haven for political refugees. During the nineteenth century this religious tolerance became institutionalized as religious pluralism. This not only meant that individuals were free to believe what they wished, but also that religious communities were allowed to form their own religiously or ideologically based institutions in order to preserve their unique identity. The Reformed community played a major role in establishing and maintaining this system of religious pluralism. By the beginning of the twentieth century this social system had become fairly well entranced in Dutch communal life, and the Reformed community had developed a unique life-style of its own.

To live in a Reformed community in pre-war Holland was to live in a community that was institutionally complete to a degree that very few communities are.[7] It had its own churches, schools, university, media, political parties, and social organizations. Moreover, in this it was not alone. Other faith communities such as the Roman Catholics and other ideological camps such as the *Liberalen*[8] also had their own institutions. Religious pluralism governed Dutch private and public life, with each community contributing in its own unique way to the common task of running the country. So, alongside others the Reformed were a force to be reckoned with in pre-war Holland. They formed an indispensable constitutive part of the Dutch religious mosaic, and their influence, especially as it pertained to the maintenance of religious pluralism, was considerable.[9]

Life inside the Reformed community was lived in terms of a pattern of rituals to which every member adhered. They prayed before and after every meal and read the Bible morning, noon, and night. They attended church twice every Sunday, as children they went to a Christian school, and as young people they participated in their youth clubs. These clubs were primarily discussion groups. In them young people learned to apply Reformed principles to their lives, and in learning this they formed their own Reformed identity. Finally, as adults they were actively engaged in the work of the church, of their political party, and of their Christian organizations. Thus, in every way they participated in the life of the Reformed community. The presence of the Reformed religion was pervasive in their entire life.

This type of lifestyle meant that as persons they were quite isolated from what was happening in the rest of the world. They associated almost exclusively with one another, intermarriage between members of differing faith communities was rare, and whatever business they had with the outside world, they conducted as members of their Reformed community, not as individuals.

They were financially poor, but they were embedded in a network of satisfying relationships. They had some control over their lives. As members of the Reformed community they had a measure of political power to conduct the affairs of state in accordance with their Reformed principles. Most importantly, they had an almost childlike faith in a benevolent God, whom they trusted to help them through whatever difficulty they might have to face, and they saw it as their mission in life to serve Him with the whole of their being. This childlike faith

was the centerpiece of their entire existence. In all their decisions they waited for the guidance of their Lord. Schama[10] has given a beautiful example of this religious attitude in his description of the "eleventh hour rescue." It depicts the conviction that God tends to rescue precisely when the need is the greatest and all seems lost. All the evidence suggests that they were a people content with their lot. Some might think their lives rather dull and their outlook narrow, but they truly felt religiously, socially, and politically secure.

The Effects of the War

Then came the war. It totally altered their life. After the Germans, whom they had always viewed as their good neighbors, treacherously invaded their country, their lives became focussed on resisting the oppressor, fending off starvation, and protecting human lives from the terror of the Nazis. I will not here recount the heroics and the hypocrisy of the Dutch during the war. That has been done extensively in other publications.[11] Instead, I want to highlight how the war struck at the heart of the Reformed community. Perhaps for the first time they were confronted with the incredible atrocity some human beings are willing to inflict on other human beings. They were confronted with humiliation, torture, and unprovoked murder, acts totally beyond the bounds of decency. How could God, they wondered, allow this to happen? For many Reformed Dutch men and women the war experience evoked a crisis of faith. The war, as an unintended historical event, scarred their conscience and consciousness.

The war also severely disrupted the religiously plural social fabric of pre-war Dutch life and with it the religious and ideological isolation of the Reformed Dutch. People of every religious and ideological stripe were thrown together indiscriminately and found themselves forced to live together and to work alongside one another to resist a common enemy. Jews hid in Christian households. Protestant children were protected by Roman Catholic neighbors. Reformed resistance fighters found they had to trust Communists with their lives and to their surprise they discovered that this was possible. Later this experience proved to be one of the more lasting effects of the war because it challenged a longtime belief that they had about communal life.

Changes after the War

That the old order of religious pluralism was on the way out became apparent soon after the war. At first the existing faith communities tried to re-establish themselves as power blocks attempting to do business as usual within a religiously plural framework, but in the long run this proved to be impossible. Too much had happened during the war. Thus, politically after the war the two Reformed political parties, the *Anti-Revolutionaire Partij* and the *Christelijke Historische Unie*, began to work toward a rapprochement with the Roman Catholics and they eventually merged with them in the late 1970s to form the *Christelijk Democratisch Apel*.

> *Among the Reformed in The Netherlands, religion no longer plays the dominant role it once did.*

Ecclesiastically Holland's two main Reformed denominations, the *Gereformeerden* and the *Hervormden*, also began in the 1980s to seek ways of merging into one Protestant denomination, through an action called *Samen Op Weg* (On The Way, Together). Theologically the Reformed tradition had always emphasized the acts of God in the history of mankind. The heart of the Reformed religion had been an unconditional surrender to the guiding and providing presence of God in one's life. The new theology that arose after the war emphasized human responsibility instead. Bonhoefer instead of Berkouwer became the theologian of choice. Shocked by the events of the war, this new "political" theology urged Christians to protect the rights of the poor, the weak, and the oppressed everywhere. This theological stance further got the Reformed out of their pre-war isolation, for example, as they eventually joined the World Council of Churches. To avoid misunderstanding it should be noted first of all that the changes I have just described pertain only to the subjects of my research. These are, or were, members of one of Holland's largest Reformed denominations, the *Gereformeerde* church. Dekker (23) calls them the *synodaal-gereformeerden* (the synodical Reformed). Members of other, much smaller, "Reformed" denominations appear to have

been far less affected by the socio-cultural changes that swept The Netherlands after the war. In fact, Dekker identifies the so-called *vrijgemaakt-gereformeerden* (the liberated-Reformed church) as currently the most orthodox Reformed group in The Netherlands (50, 81, 109, 123).

Secondly, even today there are still many regional differences among the Reformed churches (*synodaal-gereformeerden*) in The Netherlands themselves. In a number of outlying, mostly rural areas of Holland, Reformed life appears to continue in an almost pre-war fashion.

Finally, in describing the changes that have taken place in Reformed Dutch circles after the war, I in no way mean to disparage the faith that may live in the hearts of the Reformed people I interviewed in The Netherlands. However, the trust in a providing Deity that was so obvious in the lives of the pre-war Reformed Dutch was not in evidence in the descriptions my interview respondents gave me of their current lives. What I found instead was a strong ethical sense of caring for the weak, the poor, and the oppressed. It seemed to me that while they carried the burdens of others on their shoulders, they did not experience themselves as being held in the hollow of God's hand. This led me to characterize them as a people who have a religion without romanticism, an obedience without comfort, and a faith without grace.

Whatever may be the case for the Reformed in The Netherlands as *individuals*, it is clear from my interview material that as a *community* they have moved a considerable distance away from their pre-war religious and socio-cultural isolation. And these changes they themselves attribute to their experiences during the war.

Not only in Reformed circles, but everywhere in Holland after the war the move was on to seek unity *between* faith communities rather than *within* faith communities. Thus there was a slow but sure move away from religious pluralism toward what is best described as "religious ecumenism." In this ecumenical mindset religion remained the primary category structuring Dutch public and private life, but its function had changed. What formerly was the *condition* for participation in Dutch public life was now seen as an obstacle to it.

The History of the Reformed Dutch In Canada

These changes in the socio-cultural life of post-war Holland did not occur overnight. It took several decades for them to take effect. Those who immigrated to Canada left before religious ecumenism became the dominant theme in Dutch society. At the time of their emigration Dutch life was still governed by religious pluralism. But by immigrating to Canada they had to adjust to a new kind of society, one characterized by cultural pluralism.[12]

First Generation Reformed Dutch-Canadians

Why did they emigrate? They did not leave to escape the rising tide of religious ecumenism. Nor did they leave to bring the Reformed way of life to North America. None of that was in their minds. They left for other reasons: because they needed room to live—there was a housing crisis after the war. They left for economic reasons—farm land was scarce and bureaucratic restrictions were legion in post-war Holland. They left because they were afraid of another war—they had lived through the first World War, the war that was to end all wars. Then a mere two decades later, they experienced a second war, more terrible than the first. Presently Communist Russia had advanced halfway through Germany and was practically at their doorstep. What was to prevent a third world war from erupting soon? They were afraid and wanted to escape to the land of their liberators—Canada. Finally, they left merely out of a sense of adventure—after the war, emigration was in the air. Every Dutchman had to decide whether or not to emigrate and the more adventurous among them decided to leave.

In any case, they did not emigrate with the conscious resolve to transplant their Reformed Dutch lifestyle onto Canadian soil, and yet, this is precisely what they did once they got there. Soon after their arrival they built their own churches, established their own religiously-based educational institutions, and formed their own religiously-based social, political, and charitable organizations. Moreover, within their community they continued to practice the rituals of their way of life as was their custom in The Netherlands. Why did they do it, especially since their counterpart in The Netherlands appeared to be headed in the opposite direction?

They did it first of all because, having been raised as Reformed persons in a religiously plural country, they knew of no other way to live. In Canada they simply continued to be who and what they were in Holland.

They did it, secondly, because they were lonely and felt like strangers when they first arrived in their new country. Being able to worship God in Dutch together with other compatriots eased the sense of dislocation that inevitably attends migration from one country to another. For them church was more than the familiar Sunday worship in a familiar language. For them church was the company of like-minded people who all felt like strangers in a foreign land.[13] Church was a piece of home. Out of this initial church activity the other institutions grew: the school societies and other social, charitable, and political organizations. Just like in the old country.

Thirdly, they did it because in multi-cultural Canada they were free to pursue their unique way of life. If they had tried it in The Netherlands, which at the time was headed toward religious ecumenism, they might not have succeeded as well as they did.[14]

The irony of their emigration is that because of the reasons mentioned they were able to continue their Reformed lifestyle in an almost pre-war fashion, whereas if they had remained in The Netherlands they would in all likelihood have had to change their ways to suit the prevailing mood of religious ecumenism. The further paradox is that these same reasons kept at least the first generation of these Reformed Dutch immigrants[15] from becoming Canadian as well! Those Reformed immigrants who came when they were in their mid-forties and who are now elderly never had to accommodate their Reformed lifestyle to a changed environment. Emigration is usually said to change the lives of immigrants, but in the case of these immigrants it had a preserving effect on their way of life. It sheltered them from the forces of historical change occurring in both their home country and their host country. Moreover, because they were able to continue their traditional life-style, they are also far more content with their lot than their same-aged counterpart in The Netherlands. When you listen to these elderly Reformed Dutch-Canadians, you can hear echoes of a pre-war total trust in God, as the following interview excerpts illustrate:

> "The Lord helps in difficult times when you pray." "You step back and let Him work it out." We should ". . . be satisfied with what he gives us." "Looking back, we see how He worked beside, behind us. He knows what is good for us." "I don't know what will happen, but I am blessed." "I can't do it by myself, I depend on the Lord, if you believe this, the Lord will make it, even in difficulties." "He prepared the way for me." "We can never be too thankful." "Put it in the Lord's hands, we have to take what comes, then you don't worry. That's how I lived."

Discussion

Two main historical events, the war and immigration, brought about a divergence of life-style between the Reformed Dutch in The Netherlands and the Reformed Dutch in Canada. How did these events relate to one another? It would seem that they mutually opposed one another. The war brought about a change in the life-style of the Reformed in

> *To live in a Reformed community in pre-war Holland was to live in a community that was institutionally complete.*

The Netherlands, and immigration counteracted this change among the Reformed in Canada. The continuation of a community enhancing traditional belief and life-style among Reformed Dutch-Canadians would appear to be a purely ethnic phenomenon, brought about by immigration, evident in first-generation immigrants, but destined to disappear in subsequent generations.

This conclusion seems to be inevitable, but is it consistent with the facts? Not entirely, because it assumes that the war and emigration as historical forces operated independently from one another, whereas, in fact, they did not.

For one thing, the war contributed to the decision to emigrate. Without the war few would have felt the need to leave the safe haven of their familiar surroundings.

For another, the war facilitated an ecumenical spirit of sorts among these Reformed immigrants. Upon arrival in Canada, it allowed *Hervormden* and *Gereformeerden* to unite into one Reformed denomination in Canada, the Christian Reformed Church, something that would have been unthinkable in Holland prior to the war.[16] In this manner the war indirectly contributed to the cohesion of this immigrant community.

Furthermore, the cohesion of this religious-ethnic community around a traditional life-style cannot be

explained by immigration alone. At best it only provided the *occasion* for an already existing tendency. As James Bratt has pointed out, the Reformed in the North America were originally a community of Seceders (in 1834 from the *Hervormde Kerk*), who displayed a tendency toward isolation long before they came to this continent. It is in their blood, so to speak, to separate themselves from others.[17]

In addition, Isajiw has argued that cohesion around an ethnic culture, far from representing a lack of assimilation, may in fact help people to retain their unique identity in the face of the anonymity of an increasingly technological society.[18]

Finally, and quite apart from any of these sociocultural factors, we need to consider the intrinsic value of a given ethnic-religious culture. Perhaps the Reformed Dutch in Canada maintained their cohesion around a Reformed lifestyle because it was worth preserving and is capable of transcending cultural contexts. They certainly derive much comfort and energy from their convictions.

Are we then to conclude, the assimilation forces of immigration notwithstanding, that the Reformed Dutch in Canada are destined to remain a closed community, akin to the stereotypical Hutterites?

Not necessarily. This tendency to congregate around Old World values, as Li has called it,[19] may characterize its first, now elderly generation, but their middle-aged children feel decidedly uneasy about their ethnic isolation and they increasingly seek out contacts with individuals outside the Reformed community. Moreover, *their* young adult children, who represent the third generation, in turn freely associate with non-Reformed Canadians. These young adults acknowledge their Dutch-ethnic background and, in fact, are proud of it, but as native-born Canadians they rightly do not consider themselves immigrants. They also feel quite free to criticize the existing institutions and rituals of the Reformed community. They seem to be the first generation of Reformed Dutch-Canadians to fully integrate themselves into the mainstream of Canadian life. Thus, whether their generation will perpetuate the old Reformed way of life and will leave the institutions of the Reformed community unchanged is open to question.

However, on two important counts their behavior shows a continuity with the ways of their forebears. First, they restrict their contacts with non-Reformed Canadians mostly to Christians from other, Evangelical denominations. Secondly, they continue to adhere to the essence of what it is to be Reformed. When they talk about their religion, one can hear echoes of the "eleventh hour rescue" faith that has characterized the Reformed throughout the ages.

The continued presence of this faith was illustrated by one of my youthful respondents when she said: "There is an eternal part of you, to which you return like a compass, that incredible sense of: no matter how bad things get, you are not alone!" This religious attitude, I would wager, will continue to differentiate these Reformed Dutch-Canadians from their same-aged counterpart in The Netherlands, many of whom no longer appear to have a total trust in a providing, personal Deity.

NOTES

1 This figure was obtained from the office of the *Christian Reformed Churches in North America*, Burlington, ON., Canada.

2 H. A. Van Belle and M. Disman, "Ethnic and Religious Ties as Manifestations of Ethnic Identity" (unpublished paper, Redeemer College, Ancaster, ON., 1990).

3 G. Dekker and J. Peters, *Gereformeerden in Meervoud* (Kampen: Kok, 1989), 129.

4 H. A. Van Belle, "From Religious Pluralism and Cultural Pluralism: Continuity and Change Among the Reformed Dutch in Canada" (unpublished paper, Redeemer College, Ancaster, ON., 1989). See also Van Belle and Disman, 1990. For more information on the "life history" method, which I used in my research see: C. Buhler, *Der menschliche Lebenslauf als psychologisches Problem* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1933). I. L. Child, *Italian or American? Second Generation in Conflict* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1943). J. Dollard, *Criteria for the Life History* (New York: Peter Smith, 1949). G. H. Elder, Jr., "Family History and the Life Course," *Journal of Family History*, 2 (1977): 279-304. Elder, "Historical Change in Life patterns and Personality" in P. P. Baltes and O. G. Brim Jr. (eds.) *Life-span Development and Behavior* Vol. 2 (New York: Academic Press, 1979). W. M. Runyan, *Life Histories and Psychobiography Explorations in Theory and Method* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1984). In analyzing the data I followed the "grounded theory" approach, first formulated by B. G. Glaser and A. L. Strauss *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967) and later refined by J. Lofland and L. Lofland *Analyzing Social Settings: A guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1984).

5 These terms are more fully described below. See also M. R. Langley, *The Practice of Political Spirituality* (Jordan Station, ON: Paideia Press, 1984, 112, 128 136.

6 M. Schuchart, *The Netherlands* (New York: Walker and Co. 1972).

7 R. Breton, "Institutional Completeness of Ethnic Com

munities and Personal Relations of Immigrants," *American J. of Sociology*, LXX, 2 (1965): 193-205.

8 The *Liberalen*, like all classical liberals, rejected the influence of religion on public life. They championed public schools and non-religious political parties. For this reason they were called "Neutralists" in The Netherlands.

9 Numerically the Reformed never did comprise a large part of the Dutch population. For example, only 9% of the population ever belonged to the *Gereformeerde* Church, as compared to 38% to the Roman Catholic Church. Politically their Anti-Revolutionary Party was never able to capture more than 16.4% of the Dutch vote. However, their influence on Dutch public life always far exceeded their number, as is evidenced by the fact that between 1900-1940 their party formed the government six times. This is probably due to their organizational ability and their emphasis on the importance of institutions. See *Christelijke Encyclopedie* Vol. I, V, F. W. Grosheide and G. P. Van Itterzon, eds. (Kampen: Kok, 1956). See also J. C. H. Blom, *Crisis, Bezetting en Herstel* (The Hague: Universitaire Pers, 1989): chapter I.

10 S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (New York: Fontana Press, 1988), 26.

11 See especially L. de Jong, *Het Koningkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* Vols. 1-13 (The Hague: Staatsuitgeverij, (1969-1988).

12 The term was coined by H. M. Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States* (New York: Boni and Leveright, 1970). In recent years, the term "multiculturalism" has become more popular.

13 Simmel's concept of being a stranger (*The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, Kurt Wolff, ed., Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950) has been further explored in connection with the immigrant experience by E. Polyzoi (*An Examination of the Experience of Immigration: Movement from a Familiar to a Strange Frame of Reference*. Ph.D. Thesis, U. of Toronto, 1982) and by M. Disman, ("Listening to Immigrants, From Memories and Narratives to Questions of Sociological Inquiry," *IJOH*, 1985).

14 On the other hand, one can speculate whether the Reformed in The Netherlands would have moved in the direction of religious ecumenism if, instead of emigrating, these people had remained in their country of origin.

15 The pressure to assimilate by the majority culture on cultural minorities is particularly intense for immigrant communities.

16 For example, even though, politically, they frequently made common cause, the *Hervormden* and the *Gereformeerden* maintained separate denominations and separate Christian school systems. Moreover, while they did intermarry, this was not the rule; when a *Gereformeerde* boy wanted to marry a *Hervormde* girl, he had some explaining to do, and so did the girl.

17 Comment made at a conference on *The Dutch in North America*, held in Middelburg, The Netherlands in 1989.

18 W. W. Isajiw, "Olga in Wonderland: Ethnicity in a Technological Society," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 9, (1977), 77-85.

19 P. S. Li, *Ethnic Inequality in a Class Society* (Toronto: Wall and Thompson, 1988), p. 133.