



'Do you believe in God?' to 'What makes
your life meaningful?'

Unbelief in the Netherlands

In the sixteenth century perhaps 18,000 unbelievers were tortured and executed in the Low Countries. However, 'unbeliever' in these times did not really mean that one was an atheist. In pre-modern times the Dutch equivalents of 'atheist', 'unbeliever' and 'infidel' were often used to denounce people who believed in the Christian or Jewish God, yes, but not in the right way (according to the speaker, of course). The execution of heretics in the sixteenth century was ordered by the Roman Catholic Spanish Emperor and those concerned were Protestants, hardly atheists. Up to 1850 atheism, in the sense of publicly not believing in the Christian God at all, was very much an exceptional phenomenon in the Netherlands.

Before 1850 only a few individual Dutch men and women had concluded that the Jewish and Christian God did not exist. Mostly they continued to use the word 'God' to refer to something they thought really important, but this God had little to do with the God of almost all of their contemporaries. The seventeenth-century heretics Uriel Acosta, Adriaan Koerbagh and Baruch de Spinoza were some of the first and most important 'unbelievers'. Spinoza's *Ethica*, especially, influenced many later freethinkers. However important these individuals were in the history of ideas, they were controversial exceptions in their own society. They needed courage to be different and often had tragic lives (Acosta committed suicide after being ostracised and humiliated, Koerbagh died in prison because of his beliefs). Until the middle of the nineteenth century atheism and rejection of Christianity was something for individuals and very small groups. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did atheism and leaving the Church become important social phenomena.

Johannes van Vloten (1818-1883), an early militant Dutch atheist. Part of photo opposite title page of: M. Mees-Verwey, *De betekenis van Johannes van Vloten. Een bibliografie met inleiding* (Santpoort, 1928).

Eduard Douwes Dekker (1820-1887) aka Multatuli, writer and hero of late nineteenth-century Dutch freethinkers and atheists, in 1875. Photo by Wegner and Mottu.

De Dageraad: an atheist David versus a Christian Goliath

De Dageraad, which means 'dawn' or 'sunrise', developed into the first atheist organisation in the Netherlands. It was founded in Amsterdam on 12 October 1856, and most of its founders were scientifically-minded deists. They felt that God will reveal Himself when nature is investigated scientific-

ically and assumed, like Voltaire, that there had to be a God to explain the cosmos. In matters of politics they were conservative liberals. Once founded, De Dageraad developed quickly. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) proved to be a catalyst for the debate on science and religion, and after 1865 the Netherlands rapidly industrialised, leading to the rise of a socialist labour movement. By 1880 most of the members of De Dageraad were atheists, materialists who admired Jakob Moleschott, Ludwig Büchner and Ernst Haeckel, and socialists with Marxist or anarchist leanings. Often they thought science proved that God did not exist, and often they saw a connection between atheism and socialism. The teacher and social democrat Adriaan Gerhard was one of them. His view can be paraphrased like this: Freethinkers try to destroy the belief of the mass of the common people in a good God and in an afterlife in heaven. The freethinkers' efforts to raise the consciousness of the majority of humanity about their real situation are cruel. Gerhard thought, if at the same time we do not work hard toward a society in which a good life here and now is possible for everybody, not just for the happy capitalist few.

In its long history many courageous and important individuals have been active in and associated with De Dageraad. Apart from Gerhard we will mention only the militant atheist and Spinozist Johannes van Vloten, the important writer Multatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker), the Darwinian H.H. Hartogh Heys van Zouteveen, the natural scientist and socially committed liberal Pieter C.F. Frowein, the anarchist and political activist Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, the physician and feminist Aletta Jacobs, the anarchist and anti-militarist Bart de Ligt, the philosopher Leo Polak and the journalist and anarchist Anton Constandse.

De Dageraad has a record as a strongly atheist, antireligious and anti-church organisation engaged in a battle with the Christian majority in the Netherlands. Among the issues it focused on are the importance of science and free inquiry, the non-existence of God, the dangers of religion and mind-policing churches, the separation of Church and state, the value of morals without God and the equal value of a non-religious and a religious oath in court or office. De Dageraad produced a large number of cheap pamphlets, some of which sold many thousands of copies. In the 1920s and 1930s De Dageraad, led by the cabinet-maker Jan Hoving, was able to organise large meetings in theatres where hundreds and hundreds of sympathetically-inclined people turned up. Membership rose to 2,500, 1,200 in Amsterdam alone. In July 1931 Hoving organised a much-publicised propaganda tour into the heart of the Catholic south. De Dageraad's activities were not only directed against religion, but also against capitalism, fascism and Hitler's Nazism. To the dismay of the rather authoritarian Christian government coalition (which wanted to remain friends with Hitler's Germany), in the 1930s the freethinkers of De Dageraad were among the most determined fighters against anti-Semitism wherever it reared its ugly head, in the Netherlands, in Germany, or in the Soviet Union.

De Dageraad's attitude has mostly been that of a minority in a hostile environment. In the latter part of the nineteenth century the number of people in the Netherlands who were not members of a church was very low indeed: 0.1% in 1869 and 2.3% in 1899. In the twentieth century it rose rapidly to 7.8% in 1920 and 17.1% in 1947. De Dageraad no doubt contributed great-



ly to the social and intellectual undermining of Christian belief in the Netherlands, especially before World War II. In 1957 De Dageraad changed its name to De Vrije Gedachte, meaning 'free thought'. Now it is a small organisation with less than a thousand members. After 1945 its role as the main organisation of 'unbelievers' was taken over by the Humanistisch Verbond.

Humanistisch Verbond: emancipation and identity

The Humanistisch Verbond (HV; Humanist League) was founded on 17 February 1946. The founders of the HV were of the opinion that De Dageraad put too much emphasis on the negative and unproductive fight against religion, whilst the main aim of the Verbond was to raise the consciousness of the non-religious part of the population to the level of a spiritually thought-out and morally justified world-view. De Dageraad had reached a dead end, and a new organisation was needed to unite and inspire the one and a half million Dutch who adhered to no religious faith. Membership of the new humanist organisation grew rapidly till it reached about 12,000 in 1956, and up to now it has remained between 12,000 and 16,000. Important individuals connected with the Humanistisch Verbond were the teacher and PvdA (Labour Party) politician J.P. van Praag, the social democrat and professor of Dutch Garnt Stuiveling, the radical socialist philosopher H.J. Pos, the first humanist spiritual counsellor Cees Schonk and the sociologist and prominent homosexual Rob Tielman.

The history of the HV can be divided into two phases. In the period 1946-1965 it pursued a successful emancipation struggle on behalf of non-Christian humanists, and of atheists and agnostics in general. In 1965 this mission can be said to have been completed. Important to this success were the always very strategically formed board of the HV and its lobbying activities, but the decisive factor, of course, was the rapidly increasing number of people in the Netherlands who were not members of a church: 21% in 1960, 33% in 1966, 43% in 1979, 50% in 1980, 57% in 1991 and 63% in 1999. The Netherlands had ceased to be a Christian nation. Atheists were no longer regarded as second-rate citizens and as people without morals or conscience.

The period from 1966 to the present day can be characterised as the period in which the Humanistisch Verbond attempted to find a new mission, a new humanist programme. This was difficult because after 1965 Dutch society at large was very much a humanist society. J. P. van Praag, president from 1946 till 1969, tried – largely unsuccessfully – to present the struggle against nihilism, against not having any world-view at all, as the main task now, and one which would appeal to the general public. Personally he had always thought this to be the main issue, 'the big fight'. What was most important, he thought, is that people should have a conscious world-view, which can be humanist, Christian, Muslim or something else. The real danger is the mass of nihilists, 'unbelievers' in the true sense, who not only do not believe in the Christian God but who do not believe in any serious set of principles, values and purposes at all. In his view Hitler had come to power because too many people had no well-thought-out guiding principles and



Testimony to a bygone era: H.C. Rümke. *Character and Disposition in Connection with Unbelief* (*Karakter en aanleg in verband met het ongelooft*), second, slightly revised edition. Amsterdam, 1943. Rümke was a professor of psychiatry at the State University of Utrecht. The first edition of this popular booklet was published in 1939 as number 8 in the series 'The Psychology of Unbelief'. In opposition to Freud, Rümke defended the thesis that not believing in a personal God is a mental disorder. T.T. ten Have published an unbeliever's reply.

J.P. van Praag (1911-1981),
co-founder and president of
the Humanistisch Verbond.
Photo taken around 1975.



had not made up their minds about what is really important in human life. While Van Praag's ideas may have been very sensible, the fact is that the Verbond did not grow to become the large organisation of 100,000 members he had envisaged. Rob Tielman's presidency of the Verbond (1976-1986) was probably the most successful one after 1965. He gave the HV a clear identity as the organisation which promoted a world-view centred on the principle of individual self-determination, and which crusaded in favour of legalising abortion and euthanasia and against discrimination against homosexuals. These moral and political priorities of the HV were very well adapted to the views of its members and leadership, which included leading politicians like the conservative liberal Frits Bolkestein and the social democrat Klaas de Vries. The humanists and the non-Christian political parties in the Netherlands were divided on important issues like the arms race or social inequality, but on desirable changes in laws and attitudes regarding abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality they were very much united. After Tielman's presidency this limited but clear and relevant identity of the HV lapsed into vagueness. The continuing search for a new mission became even more difficult (but perhaps also easier because it was now almost inevitable) when in 1994, for the first time since 1918, the Netherlands got a government coalition in which no Christian party participated. Many Dutch people were confirmed in their idea that there was no longer any need for a HV after the successful struggle for emancipation.

Comparing the Humanistisch Verbond with De Dageraad, one might say that the main difference is that the HV – and Jaap van Praag at its centre – always felt that it represented a large part and possibly the majority of Dutch society. The HV always wanted to be integrated into normal Dutch society, whereas De Dageraad was always kicking against other groups and what it saw as the dominant culture.

Frames of meaning today

The current social and cultural situation in the Netherlands is such that talking about belief and unbelief is reminiscent of a bygone past. It refers to a society in which Dutch men and women as a rule were Christian believers, and some exceptional people deviated from this norm. Dutch society at present is an inter- and multicultural society in which only 37% of citizens are members of a church or regard themselves as Muslims. Becker and De Wit forecast that in 2010 this percentage will have fallen to 33%. That 33% will be made up of 13% Roman Catholics, 13% Protestants and 6% Muslims (mainly of Turkish, Moroccan or Surinamese descent). But there is more. In 1999, 45 to 60% of church members only went to church a few times a year or not at all. Between 1979 and 1995 the number of men and women who were members of a Christian church but did not subscribe to the central tenets of the Christian belief, increased substantially. Since 1985 the group of non-believing church members is even larger than the group of traditional Christian believers in the churches.¹ We may be moving towards a situation in which the large churches have disappeared and what remains is a large number of smaller churches with a more conscious, convinced and 'orthodox' membership. And what do those Dutch people who are not mem-



'Believing in human beings starts with yourself' ('Geloven in mensen begint bij jezelf'), a sticker distributed by the Humanistisch Verbond, probably in the second half of the 1980s.

bers of a church believe? Less than 10% of them have traditional Christian beliefs. The others have (implicit) beliefs about what is important in life, about purposes and values, about maintaining some control over one's life, about retaining one's self-respect and personal identity. They are certainly interested in what makes their lives meaningful. They are no nihilists. They want to decide for themselves what they believe in. They belong to all kinds of organisations, but not to organisations which provide them with an all-encompassing world-view. One might say that they all have a 'frame of meaning' ('*zingevingskader*', as the Dutch call it), but only some have a 'world-view' ('*levensbeschouwing*'), to spell out the relative difference. A frame of meaning is a set of experiences, principles, values and views which makes the person concerned feel that her or his life is meaningful. This set may be largely implicit and have only a limited coherence, but it is there and it works. A world-view is a meaning frame which one is more conscious of, which is made more explicit, and of which one has tried to improve the internal consistency and external relevance. Frames of meaning and world-views may be highly personal, but to some degree they may also be shared by many others.² To say that most of the Dutch are 'unbelievers' does not make much sense. But their 'belief', 'faith', 'frame of meaning', 'life-stance' or 'world-view' is very hard to pin down, often also for themselves.

A few things can be said about the 'contents' of these frames of meaning. Research by Felling and others has shown that since 1979 the Dutch in general have come to regard traditional family ties and the traditional division of labour between men and women as less important. On the other hand they now judge to be more important: their own careers, freedom to enjoy life, freedom of speech and expression, and individual freedom in matters of life and death (think of abortion and euthanasia, both of which are now regulated by legislation that accords with the views of the HV). Late-modern Dutch 'believers' (atheists, agnostics and the majority of church members) welcome these changes in the climate of opinion. Traditional Christian believers have come to be the 'other-believing' minority and often object to these changes. David has become Goliath, and vice versa, and both have changed in the process.

PETER DERKX

NOTES

1. Traditional Christian belief here means that one believes in a God who concerns Himself with each human being personally, and also that one argues about and interprets the meaning of life, suffering, death and the problem of good and evil within the framework of this belief in God. See Felling, Peters and Scheepers (2000), p. 69.

2. Having defined these terms, we can now say that J.P. van Praag thought it very important for a society that most people should develop their largely implicit frames of meaning into conscious world-views, and share and discuss them with others.

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∴ Don't look, boy, it's a secular humanist!∴

The Low Countries

ARTS AND SOCIETY IN FLANDERS
AND THE NETHERLANDS

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