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## Opinions on Jewish baptism in Calvinist Holland, 1945–1965

### ÖSSZEFOGLALÁS

A 20. század eleji Hollandia református egyházainak teológiai gondolkodásában az üdvösség szigorúan a Jézus Krisztusban való hittel párosult. A keresztség ebben a kontextusban az egyén megváltásának elengedhetetlen eszközeként került értelmezésre. A korszak kiemelkedő holland teológusa, Gerrit Marinus den Hartogh alapvető keresztyén kötelességként gondolt a zsidók megtérítésére és egyben megkeresztelésére. A holokausztot, a II. világháború utáni felszabadítást és Izrael államának megalakulását követő években azonban ez a fajta szemlélet gyökeres változáson ment keresztül. Miután a judaizmus az a forrás, ahonnan a keresztyénség is eredeztethető, a zsidó gyermekek megkeresztelésének és betérítésének gyakorlata már egyre kevésbé volt egyértelmű a holland protestánsok számára. A '60-as, '70-es években a keresztyének és zsidók közötti kapcsolat újszerű fejlődésen ment keresztül, így mára a holland protestáns teológiai gondolkodás elismeri és tiszteletben tartja a zsidók egyedülálló kapcsolatát Istennel és a Messiással. A zsidók megkeresztelésének gyakorlata a múltban csupán helyrehozhatatlan konfliktusokat generált, miután a megkeresztelt zsidókat elszakította saját közösségüktől. A gyökeresen új értelmezés széles körű elfogadásának ténye a szerző számára azt bizonyítja, hogy a holland református teológia nagymértékű változásra volt képes a 20. század folyamán.

### A baptism in Kampen, after liberation

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1945 Gerrit Marinus den Hartogh (1899–1959) administered baptism to Isidore Polak in the Burgwal-Church in Kampen. Dentist Isidore Polak was one of the very few surviving Jews in this city. During the later years of the German occupation he had been in hiding with the Reformed Bosma family, in their farm located on the Island of Kampen.<sup>1</sup>

Den Hartogh was a predecessor of Hans-Martin Kirn as a professor of Church History, (and of Leo Koffeman as a professor of Ecclesiastical Law) in what was then the Theological School of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Den Hartogh's sermon, delivered during the service in the Burgwal-Church, gives us an insight into Dutch Reformed attitudes towards Jewish baptism, right after the Second World War. The title is as follows: *Life eternal in the knowledge of God and His Christ.*<sup>2</sup> This central theme is derived from the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, verse 3:

'And this is eternal life, that they know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.'

1 See for Isidore Polak and his family: DAAN VAN DRIEL AND JAAP VAN GELDEREN (eds.): *Elly*, in: *Kinderen verhalen van de oorlog* (Children's stories about war). Kampen 1940–1945, Kampen, 1990, 126–128.

2 G. M. DEN HARTOGH: *Het eeuwige leven in het kennen van God en zijn Christus. Preek over Johannes 17:3, gehouden zondag 13 mei in de Burgwalkerk te Kampen* (Life eternal in the knowledge of God and his Christ. Sermon on John 17:2, delivered on Sunday the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1945 in the Burgwal-Church, Kampen), Kampen, 1945.

### Gerrit Marinus den Hartogh, Jewish baptism and Neo-Calvinism<sup>3</sup>

First of all, Den Hartogh addresses the situation of Holland right after the war. After the death of so many innocent people, the liberation by the allied forces is hailed as a redeeming act of God. The purpose of this act is perceived as regeneration, a goal that is interpreted in a specifically Christian way. For a believer, restoration of a free nation is not the highest aim. It is only as an individual that we can attain true salvation. In Den Hartogh's concept of baptism, the true moment of this regeneration is not identical to the moment of the sprinkling of water. The important thing is the knowledge of Christ, which of course we can only receive as a gift from God. Nevertheless, the signs of this knowledge can be seen by others and checked against the contents of the Bible and the Confession.

Some days before baptism on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, the consistory of the Reformed Church of Kampen has ascertained itself that Polak indeed possesses a sound understanding of the Calvinist theology. During the following service the main elements in the ceremony are: the sermon by Den Hartogh, the confession of faith by Polak, and immediately after that his baptism. The service is concluded by a prayer of thanksgiving.

For a glimpse of the atmosphere in the Reformed Churches in Holland right after liberation the sermon delivered by Den Hartogh is very revealing. First of all, he tells his audience that God had been fully justified in the judgment that He had meted out during the preceding years of occupation and terror. For Polak (who, as we have seen, was one of the very few Jewish survivors in Kampen) this must have been a very real experience, or, as Den Hartogh calls it: 'a terrible truth'. According to him, affliction in this life is a result of sin, of our inability to fulfil the Law of the Lord. Salvation can only be found in Jesus Christ, or to be more specific: in the existential knowledge of Jesus Christ.

For the true believer this knowledge constitutes a Christian state of being in the present. This focus on the present, in Den Hartogh's perception of the baptism of Polak, is characteristic for Dutch Neo-Calvinistic theology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In earlier stages of the Reformation, it had been quite common for Dutch Calvinists to interpret the rare instances of Jewish baptism as a portent of the impending return of Jesus and the ushering in of a Messianic age. The most famous Jewish convert in the early nineteenth century, Isaac da Costa (1798–1860), had interpreted his own baptism in an eschatological context.<sup>4</sup> One can hardly miss the deterministic element in this way of reasoning that was also present in the theology of Jan van Andel (1839–1910), who had been trained as a student in Kampen.<sup>5</sup> God himself, according to St. Paul, had hardened the hearts of the Jews against the tenets of the Gospel. Only God Himself could reverse this situ-

<sup>3</sup> See for Den Hartogh and his theology: THEO VAN STAALDUINE: *G. M. den Hartogh en de Vrijmaking van 1944* (G. M. den Hartogh and the Free Reformed Churches), Heerenveen, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> See for this famous poet, polemist and exegete: JAAP MEIJER: *Isaac da Costa's weg naar het christendom* (Isaac da Costa's road towards Christianity. Contribution to the historiography of Jewish problematic in the Netherlands), Amsterdam, 1941.

<sup>5</sup> JAN VAN ANDEL: *Handleiding der Gewijde geschiedenis* (Vademecum of Sacred History)<sup>3</sup>, Leiden, 1903.

ation of being unable to believe, and thus 'all Israel would be saved' (Chapter 11 of the Letter to the Romans, verse 26). The thinking of Calvinists who were influenced by Dutch Reformed Pietism showed a strong tendency to link this future event to eschatology in general. Jewish baptism was linked to salvation history.

Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) however, one of the main architects of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, would have none of this. For him the Jew, like any other person, bore a personal responsibility before God. For those who had access to Scripture, such as both the Christians and the Jews, unbelief was an act of wilful disobedience. Kuyper attributed this attitude to Christian intellectual *hybris* but also to Jewish national pride, an unwillingness to be redeemed by grace alone. Thus, it was important that baptism was disconnected from any associations with an hypothetical restoration of the Jewish nation in the future. Den Hartogh follows in this track. During the service for Polak he stresses over and over again that baptism implies the presence of the saving knowledge of God and His Christ in the here and now, and that it is not identical to the guarantee of any future saving scenario for the Jewish people. Hope for the future is limited to the individual believer, who can face death without fear of punishment in the afterlife.

Prior to the baptism, Polak confesses his faith publicly. Den Hartogh compares the moment to the exclamation of Nathanael in the New Testament, saying about Jesus: 'Thou art the son of God, thou art the king of Israel'. The ceremony of baptism itself invokes the trinity.

## Jews and Christians in Holland after the Second World War

Out of a pre-war population of about 140 000 persons, no less than 102 000 Dutch Jews had perished during the German occupation. Among the survivors was a relatively small number of recent converts to Christianity. Even so, they accounted for the highest number of Jewish baptisms ever to occur in remembered Dutch history. In the Reformed Churches alone in 1945, this concerned 126 adult persons out of 3500 Jews who had survived the war while hiding in the home of a Reformed family. Isidore Polak was one of them. The total number of Jewish converts, in all the Dutch Churches put together, amounted to a few hundred.

The wave of baptisms was unique. During the decades to come, the aim of conversion and baptism of the Jews became more and more questionable in the Dutch Churches. The first stimulus for an alternative way of thinking came from the Council for Church and Israel, established in 1942 by the Reformed Church in the Netherlands.<sup>6</sup> The Council stated that the traditional Jewish Mission should be superseded by a debate between equals, based on arguments and mutual respect. Two reasons were given for this new course:

- First of all, recent insights in biblical exegesis had made it clear that Christianity had been born in a Jewish context. As the Council said, the child (Christianity) could

6 J. F. L. BASTIAANSE: *De Jodenzending en de eerste decennia van de Hervormde Raad voor Kerk en Israël* (The Jewish Mission and the First decades of the Reformed Council for Church and Israel. A generation in the service of Jewish-Christian rapprochement), Zoetermeer, 1995.

- not talk to the parent (Judaism) as if that parent was completely unaware of God;
- Secondly, the casualty numbers of the war were staggering. Apart from the military and victims of hunger and bombings, about 5000 non-Jewish Dutchman had died as political prisoners in the concentration camps – against 102.000 Jews. After such an event, the Christians lacked the moral superiority for the classical missionary approach.

To be sure, the aim of the required debate between equals, as far as the Christians were concerned, was unchanged: the acceptance by the Jews of Jesus as the Christ. In the coming years this was to remain so, even though the aim was put forward in far more modest terms than during the pre-war years.

The new programme was laid down by an elite of professional theologians, such as Arnold van Ruler and Kornelis Heiko Miskotte.<sup>7</sup> The first change of attitude to be noted in the wider Christian community followed the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. This State was widely hailed as a resurgence of the Jewish nation. It received warm support from the Churches in the Netherlands, even though this implied a future for the Jews outside the context of Christianity.

### Changing attitudes towards Jewish baptism after 1948

All of the major Dutch Protestant Churches (with the sole exception of the free Reformed Churches in the Netherlands) cooperated in the Inter-Church Contact Israel (ICI), established in 1946.<sup>8</sup> Relations between Jews and Christians, based on a common support for the State of Israel, improved beyond recognition. ICI supported a policy of mutual understanding and respect. A major problem however, arose from the fact that baptized Jews such as Polak were considered interlopers by the Jewish community both in Holland and in Israel. As Justus Tal (1881–1954), the only surviving chief rabbi in the Netherlands, had made clear as early as 1945: by accepting baptism, Christian Jews were considered to have cut themselves off from the Jewish community, by their own free will. The organized Jewish community refused all contacts between itself and these converts to Christianity, unless they returned to Judaism.<sup>9</sup>

For the ICI in the years after liberation, it became more and more clear how grave the consequences of Tal's verdict could be for the Christian Jews: as much a victim of the Shoa as any other Jew, they were separated from their own people thereafter and in many cases felt themselves ill understood in the Churches. Only an absolute and exclusive truth, such as Den Hartogh had postulated in 1945, could justify such sacrifice of identity. This very exclusivity slackened by the gradual

7 Cf. *Fundamenten en Perspectieven van Belijden* (Fundamentals and Perspectives of Confession. Presented by the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church as a specimen of renewed Protestant testimony), The Hague, 1949.

8 GERT VAN KLINKEN: *Christelijke stemmen over het Jodendom* (Christian voices on Judaism. Sixty years Inter-Church Contact Israel (ICI), 1946–2006), Delft, 2009.

9 JUSTUS TAL: *Voor ons ons Jodendom en niet het Christendom* (For us our Judaism and not Christianity), Amsterdam, 1945.

Christian acceptance of Jewish faith as a legitimate way towards God, in the fifties and especially the sixties. *Israel and the Church*, a publication by the Council for Church and Israel of the Dutch Reformed Church, was typical of the new trend (1959).<sup>10</sup> After the murder of six million Jews the Church had lost its claim of moral superiority. The State of Israel and the continuing existence of the Jewish people were sure signs that God had not renounced His old Covenant. In 1963 the Christian kibbutz Nes Ammim in Galilee in Northern Israel, in which the Reformed doctor Johan Pilon from Heemstede was a leading figure, renounced all efforts to convert the Jews.<sup>11</sup> Many of the Jewish converts to Christianity in Holland concluded that the time had come to rejoin the Jewish community. One of them was Mart Cohen. He consulted the representative of the Dutch Reformed Church in Jerusalem, Jacobus (Coos) Schoneveld. In his answer, Schoneveld replied that baptism for a Jew was unadvisable, as the resulting breach between him and the Jewish community would imply an unacceptable loss of identity. Moreover, there was no need for a Jew to be baptized, as the Torah was his ordained path towards God:

‘Whatever eloquent dogmatic theories one might argue about baptism, no baptismal water is able to wash away the bitter fact that baptism implies the exclusion of a Jew from the covenantal community of Israel. It is an irony that baptism, once intended to grant pagans access to the Covenant, now alienates the Jews from it.’<sup>12</sup>

Mart Cohen said farewell to his Church and rejoined the Jewish community. He was one of many converted Jews who did so. Their choice was respected by the ICI and the Churches that were represented in that platform. Isidore Polak however, remained a member of the Reformed Churches till the end of his life. He died in Kampen in 1974.<sup>13</sup>

10 *Israel and the Church. A study by order of the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church, written by the Council for the relation of Church and Israel*, The Hague, 1959.

11 SIMON SCHOON: *Nes Ammim. A Christian experiment in Israel*, Wageningen, 1976.

12 MART COHEN: *Afscheid van de houten broek en terugkeer naar de Joodse Gemeente* (Farewell to the pulpit and return to the Jewish community), Wateringen, 1981.

13 I thank Jaap van Gelderen (Kampen) for this information.