



'Het humanitaire moment'. Nederlandse intellectuelen, de Eerste Wereldoorlog en de crisis van de Europese beschaving (1914-1930)
M. Brolsma

Summary - 'The humanitarian moment'. Dutch intellectuals and the crisis of European civilization (1914-1930)

Not only did the First World War give rise to far-reaching economic and political changes, but it also proved to be a cultural watershed. The 'great seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century' had strongly invigorated the dissatisfaction with European civilization that had been growing among intellectuals since the end of the nineteenth century. After 1918 an unpleasant feeling of living in an era of crisis, transition and fundamental insecurity was gaining ground everywhere in Europe. In the Netherlands too, a deep concern about contemporary culture was widespread, despite the fact that in the historiography of the interwar period the country is often characterized as a sleepy and conservative remote corner of Europe, due to 'pillarization', and neutrality in the 1914-1918 war. This study explores the Dutch response to the European cultural reorientation after the First World War by analysing the cultural criticism of the 'humanitarian movement' from a transnational perspective. This heterogeneous movement, which came into existence at the turn of the twentieth century, did not fit neatly into the Protestant, Catholic, socialist or liberal 'pillars', which separated Dutch society. The adherents all shared a strong anti-rationalism, and longed for a better and more humane society. According to these 'humanitarian idealists', this renewal would not be brought about by collective reform, but through an enhancement of the individual, and a 'spiritual revolution'.

The first chapter investigates the international and domestic causes of the revival of humanitarian idealism in the Netherlands after the outbreak of the First World War. It is pointed out that this 'humanitarian moment' should be understood as a revolt against the war and against the prevailing 'rationalism' of the liberal bourgeoisie. The collective eruption of violence in 1914 had brought to light the urgency of the humanitarian ideals and - in the perception of many contemporaries - seemed to affirm the bankruptcy of the rationalist, 'mechanistic' world view which had dominated in the second half of the nineteenth century. A significant domestic factor that contributed to the rise of humanitarian idealism was the growing dissatisfaction with the ongoing 'pillarization' of society, and the strengthening of Christian orthodoxy that accompanied this process of religious mobilization in the Netherlands. The humanitarian movement brought solace both for people searching for a religious alternative to Christianity, as well as for liberal Protestants who remained loyal to the church, but felt the need to revise 'conventional' Christianity. What typifies the cultural criticism of the humanitarian idealists in this period is the aim for a cultural regeneration through a *spiritual* revolution based on a humanistic, undogmatic religion, with a focus on immanence. To illustrate the significance of religion as *the* designated antidote to the crisis of culture and the disintegration of society, the thought of the cultural critic Just Havelaar, of the ex-minister Gerhardus Hendericus van Senden and of Kees Meijer, leader of the free religious movement De Nieuwe Gedachte (The New Thought) is examined. Although to most adherents, 'religion' provided the initial framework for the desired remedy for the ailing European civilization, the intellectual underpinnings were subsequently drawn mainly from socialism, philosophy and literature.

The second chapter focuses on religious socialism, the movement that became vital to the image of humanitarian idealism in the 1920s. It is argued that socialism exerted a strong attraction for the humanitarian idealists. This allurements was based first of all on the premise that socialism would be able to create favourable preconditions for the emergence of an undogmatic and unifying 'religion', which was undermined by capitalism. Secondly, it was grounded in the widespread perception that capitalism had been the fundamental, underlying cause of the First World War. But despite the appeal of socialism, the humanitarian idealists also agreed upon the diagnosis that historical materialism as the philosophical foundation of this political ideology would no longer suffice. In their perception, historical

materialism had emanated from the same prevailing materialist and rationalist world view as capitalism. In their analysis the First World War had proven the bankruptcy of this 'cold' and 'calculating' rationalism, because it had suppressed and negated the subconscious drives and elementary instincts of humankind until they had violently sought a release in 1914. In addition to analysing the attractiveness of religious socialism to the humanitarian idealists, this chapter also pays attention to the various religious socialist organizations in the Netherlands between the 1890s and the 1930s. It is shown that religious socialism was a broader phenomenon than has hitherto been assumed. Apart from the *Arbeidersgemeenschap* (Workers Community) of Willem Banning and the ministers of the *Blijde Wereld* (Happy Humanity), Meijer and his *De Nieuwe Gedachte*, Havelaar, Van Senden and part of the youth association of the *Praktisch-Idealisten Associatie* (the Association of Practical Idealists) can all be considered religious socialists, or at least be placed on the periphery of the movement.

In the third chapter Hegel's idealism, and the *Lebensphilosophie* (Philosophy of Life), are analysed as intellectual sources for the cultural criticism of the humanitarian idealists. Both philosophical movements exerted an appeal because of their alleged potential for revising the defunct unity of society and undoing the predominance of rationalism. Furthermore, they could be easily combined with both a liberal Protestant and a humanistic, universal religious consciousness. Finally, both philosophies provided a new perspective on the course of history that could serve as an alternative for the Christian teleological vision of history, as well as for the liberal secular belief in progress from which the humanitarian idealists distanced themselves. The *Internationale School voor Wijsbegeerte* (International School of Philosophy) in Amersfoort is presented as a case-study to explore the ways in which the humanitarian idealists interpreted Hegel's idealism in the years 1914-1930. This stronghold of leftist Hegelians, almost all of whom were former students of Professor Gerard Bolland at the University of Leiden, had been founded in 1915. The initiators dreamt of restoring the cultural unity within Europe and, in this way, of contributing to peace and reconciliation as well. Furthermore, attention is also paid to revolutionary Hegelians like Bart de Ligt, Clara Wichman and the 'red' minister Henri van den Bergh van Eysinga, who longed for a transformation of both individual and of society. All of them initially embraced the Russian Revolution with enthusiasm, but rejected the violence and soon came to conclude, on the basis of Hegel's dialectic principle, that a spiritual purification or 'revolution of the revolution' would be indispensable. More popular than neo-Hegelianism in the early 1920s was the *Lebensphilosophie*, albeit in a strongly vulgarized version. As well as the philosophy of Hegel, the *Lebensphilosophie* was interpreted by the humanitarian idealists in very diverse ways, and was harnessed for various ideals and political purposes, such as an 'ardent' or 'dignified neutrality' of the Netherlands during the First World War (Just Havelaar and the pedagogue Rommert Casimir), an 'internationalist nationalism' (the adherents of the *Praktisch-Idealisten Associatie*), a 'United States of Europe' (Egbert Smedes), a socialist revolution (Geertruida Kapteyn-Muysken), 'democracy' (Havelaar), and a 'construction' of society based on liberal democratic ideals (Casimir).

The fourth chapter investigates the rise of cultural critical Orientalism in the 1920s. Because in the perception of many intellectuals the First World War had grievously exposed the moral deficiency of Europe, the idea that a 'spiritual' and 'unspoiled' East could heal 'degenerate' Western civilization aroused a new fascination. This enchantment of the East contributed strongly to the relative success of the Theosophical movement in the Netherlands and to the success of the *Orde van de Ster in het Oosten* (the Order of the Star in the East) in particular. This group around the 'World Teacher' Jiddu Krishnamurti congregated annually in the province of Overijssel near the town of Ommen. In their turn the Theosophists contributed to the familiarity with Eastern religious, literary and philosophical traditions, for example by inviting the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore for a lecture tour through the Netherlands. Apart from Tagore, the German *Lebensphilosoph* Hermann Keyserling was also embraced as a prophet of the 'therapeutic' 'oriental mind'. Strikingly, and a new development in this period, was the fact that this cultural critical Orientalism manifested itself first and foremost in an increased interest

in Russia. This was mainly caused by the Bolshevich Revolution of 1917, that seemed to confirm both the supposed 'un-European' character of the country, as well as the existing stereotype image of Russia as a 'mystery' and of the Russians as a unique, 'vigorous' people. According to many intellectuals in Western Europe, Russian literature seemed to hold the key to this assumed salutary and spiritual potential of the 'Russian soul'. This was particularly true of Fyodor Dostoevsky, who captured Western spirits because of his presumed 'typically Russian', erratic vitality, his 'unspoiled', 'pure' Christianity, his fierce assault on Western rationalism, and his mission humbly to affirm life, in both its positive and its tragic elements. Most attention in this chapter is therefore given to the 'Dostoevsky cult' that arose within the humanitarian movement around 1920. The leading protagonists of this movement were Jan Jacob Thomson, a left-wing minister and poet, Jan de Gruyter, a religious socialist and Dirk Coster, literator and editor of the monthly *De Stem* (The Voice).

The fifth chapter highlights the ways in which the humanitarian idealists in the years 1914-1930 reflected on the widespread, elitist idea that intellectuals were the appropriate group to provide cultural guidance to society. This formerly self-evident notion of intellectuals as a 'spiritual forefront', pointing the way to a new culture, was called into serious question by the growing discontent with civilization, the war frenzy of many German, French and British writers and academics in August 1914 and the engagement of many European intellectuals in the interwar period with extremist politics of the far left and far right. Because of this, intellectuals were increasingly seen as a cause of the problems instead of their solution. This encouraged the humanitarian idealists to rethink the role and position of intellectuals in society. The French writer and pacifist Romain Rolland became an important point of reference for this recalibration. In 1914 he had called upon European artists, writers and academics to rise 'above the battle', instead of being carried away by irrational political passions and nationalist delusions. Frederik van Eeden, dreaming of a society led by 'poet kings', made every effort to persuade the German, French and British intellectuals who were intoxicated by nationalism to come to their senses. The Christian-Anarchist and ex-minister Bart de Ligt, chairman of the Bond van Revolutionair-Socialistische Intellectueelen (League of Socialist Revolutionary Intellectuals), strove for a purification of both the Bolshevich Revolution, as well as of the intellectuals who in his opinion were deeply corrupted because of their support for the war and for capitalism. Dirk Coster was forced to abandon his long-held belief that European artists and writers would pave the way for a new culture. Half-way through the 1920s Coster's elitist vision gave way to a deep concern about the 'fascist harshness' of the young generation of European poets, which he believed, posed a severe threat to humanism.

The epilogue addresses the humanitarian movement in the 1930s and 1940s. Both the decline of the movement around 1930, as well as its response to the rise of fascism and Nazism are considered. The declining interest in humanitarian idealism is related to the disappointment at the failure to regenerate European culture, which had appeared to be within reach immediately after the war. Furthermore, the more rational and pessimistic cultural climate at the end of the 1920s, together with the acute and tangible economic and political problems of the 1930s also contributed to the downturn. Another important factor is the fact that around 1930 the need to search for an undogmatic, humanistic religious alternative had lost much of its previous urgency because the 'pillarization' of Dutch society had been by and large completed. Although the 'humanitarian momentum' of the 1920s had passed, the humanitarian movement remained active even after the Second World War. As an example, a certain level of continuity can be traced between the Humanistisch Verbond (Humanist Association) founded in 1946, and pre-war 'centres' of humanitarian idealism like *De Nieuwe Gedachte* and *De Stem*.

This thesis not only explores the revival, cultural criticism and decline of the humanitarian idealists in the years 1914-1930, but seeks to use this exploration to shed light on three larger historical themes as well. In the first place the dissertation examines the extent to which the Dutch humanitarian movement participated in the larger post-war cultural reorientation and European debates about the crisis of modernity. The methodology of 'cultural transfer' is used to map the ways in which the Dutch

humanitarian idealists appropriated ideas of foreign writers like Oswald Spengler, Romain Rolland, Thomas Mann and Julien Benda, and incorporated them into their own cultural criticism. They considered the crisis of civilization to be a pan-European problem of which the roots, as well as the consequences, were manifest throughout Europe, and therefore demanded a transnational solution. The Dutch humanitarians struggled with the same questions, doubts and problems as did the cultural critics in other European countries. They were nourished mainly by the same intellectual sources, and sought to join transnational regeneration movements. Cultural critical Orientalism, for example, was fashionable in all Western European countries, and around 1920 Dostoevsky cults existed in the Netherlands, Great Britain, Germany and Austria. Religious socialism flourished in the post-war period in the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland. A Hegel revival took place in the Netherlands, Italy and Germany. And finally, *Lebensphilosophie* aroused fascination particularly in Germany in the 1920s. The fact that the humanitarian idealists often drew on the thought of foreign philosophers for their diagnoses of 'depraved' European civilization and blueprints for cultural regeneration did not mean that they uncritically imported this cultural criticism. Cultural critical ideas and view were adapted to the specific Dutch context, and often took on a more pacifistic, meliorist and ethical religious interpretation.

Secondly, the role and meaning of religion within the humanitarian movement, as well as the interactions between this movement and the process of 'pillarization', are recurring themes in this thesis. 'Religion' in the Netherlands in the interwar period played a bigger role than just that of providing a foundation for the 'pillars'. In the eyes of the humanitarian idealists religion was the preferred remedy for the European crisis of civilization. Furthermore, religion served as a mobilizing force for political activism and organization in associations and journals. Although the humanitarian movement was only partly secular, and counted a considerable number of liberal Protestant ministers in its midst, the adherents were critical about the role and implications of religion within the pillars. They were convinced that religion should function as a binding agent instead of a divisive factor and they denounced the fragmentation of Dutch society that was deepened by 'pillarization'. Many religious socialist adherents of the humanitarian movement, for example, mobilized the ideal of a 'national unity' against both the Marxist notion of an all-encompassing class struggle, and against Abraham Kuyper's conception of an unbridgeable antithesis between confessional and non-confessional groups. The growing religious orthodoxy that accompanied the process of 'pillarization' was rejected by the humanitarian idealists, because in their opinion this would lead to an expulsion of humanism from religion. Instead of the Christian orthodox perception of a transcendental God far removed from mankind, they emphasized the 'immanence' of the divine and of the private religious experience. Rather than the pessimistic view of humankind held by orthodox Christians, they stressed an optimistic confidence in humanity, in its autonomy and personal consciousness.

The final theme that is explored is the complex relationship between humanitarian idealism and politics. The humanitarian movement has often been characterized as a group of 'a-political' and rather vague dreamers. Nevertheless, in the years after 1914 they showed an increased political involvement that manifested itself principally in the increasing entanglement of the humanitarian movement and the Social-Democratic Workers Party (SDAP). Many humanitarian idealists joined the SDAP, and some became active members, although they emphatically strove to ground socialism in an idealistic rather than a materialistic base. Also, in the ranks of the SDAP, there was a growing acceptance of humanitarian idealism. Prominent party members for example contributed to the humanitarian periodicals and meetings. With the adoption of a new official party line in 1937, in the form of a programme that had been greatly influenced by religious socialists like Willem Banning, the interrelatedness with the SDAP reached a peak. Furthermore, the politicization of the humanitarian movement was encouraged by the First World War, the Russian Revolution and the rise of fascism and

Nazism, all events and phenomena that seemed to demand a political stance. Nazism and fascism were fiercely rejected by most voices in the humanitarian movement, not least because they were obliged to recognize in these totalitarian ideologies the irrational elements that also characterized their own diagnoses of the crisis of European civilization. The rise of Nazism acted as a catalyst for the decline of the humanitarian movement around 1930, because it confronted the adherents with the downside of their own utopianism, as much as with the