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# Democrat or traditionalist? The epistemology behind Groen van Prinsterer's notion of political authority

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## Abstract

*The antirevolutionary statesman, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876) constructively and actively engaged as public political figure during the early years of the Dutch constitutional democracy. Despite real opposition to the constitutional revision of 1848 that brought about this political system, Groen, by means of this constructive engagement, managed to play a significant historical role in the consolidation and shaping of the Dutch political system. Most of the existing literature has attributed this to a change in his political theory occurring around 1848, with the institutionalization of the constitutional democracy in the Netherlands. The general claim is that Groen accepted the new democratic system in a way that he would not have, had he maintained his pre-1848 stance regarding what constitutes legitimate political authority, a position characterized by a rejection of republicanism in favor of the res privata notion of political authority. Through an investigation of the primary sources in light of the intellectual traditions that shaped Groen's political thought, this claim is critically evaluated. The article proposes a novel perspective on Groen's notion of political authority, emphasizing its consistency even in the midst of the strategic and flexible political engagement that characterized Groen's career.*

## Key words:

**Burke; Constitutional Democracy; Epistemology; Groen van Prinsterer; Republicanism; Stahl; Von Haller.**

## 1. Introduction

The nineteenth-century statesman and historian, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876) achieved fame by means of his strong opposition to ideas of the Enlightenment from a conservative Calvinist standpoint. He argued that the ideas behind the French Revolution had a negative impact on Dutch society at the time (Harinck, 1994:126-7). Appreciation for Groen van Prinsterer as exemplary Christian statesman continues to be present within the contemporary Dutch political landscape, especially among members and officials of the Calvinist political party, the *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* (Krijger, 2015:85-120).

Groen's opposition to the French Enlightenment's idea of the social contract was central to his understanding and conceptualizations of political authority and liberty. This has been widely recognized in the literature (Brants, 1951:143; Zwaan, 1973:243; Van Dyke, 2012:75). As Dutch-Canadian scholar Harry van Dyke (1976:vi) explains: "Certainly the cornerstone of Groen's political philosophy is his insistence ... that power and authority in state, society and family derive from divine institution and cannot in the final analysis be grounded in human approval or social convention." Dutch historians like Johan Zwaan (1973:249) and more recently Huib Klink (2012:176-7) have also noted that the idea of government as a divinely ordained institution responsible to God and his laws, as opposed to being formed by the people by means of a social contract, was central to Groen's political theory.

In Groen's view, the de-confessionalization or secularization of society by means of unbelief lead to political totalitarianism, since the transcendent moral principles found in the Christian religion are necessary to uphold a healthy balance between liberty and authority (Zwaan, 1973:219; Van Vliet, 2008:296). He countered the licentiousness of revolutionary liberty with the Augustinian concept of *servire Deo vera libertas est* ("serving God is true liberty") (Zwaan, 1976:87). This was reflected in his opposition to the liberal constitutional revisions of the 1840s, which initiated the Dutch constitutional democracy (Te Velde & Willink, 2006:26). He argued for an explicit constitutional recognition of the role of the Dutch Reformed Church as well as a constitutional amendment that would require the monarch to be

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a Protestant. He also advocated maintaining the public right of the church in terms of managing the Dutch welfare system in addition to the inclusion of a constitutional clause institutionalizing Sunday as national Sabbath (Groen van Prinsterer, 1840:71-3, 99-100). Groen opposed the idea of the separation of church and state, arguing for a national church with public right. For him, the ideal of the separation of church and state amounted to institutionalizing unbelief (Kirpestein, 1993:137-8; Van Vliet 2008:201). Even after the liberal constitutional revision of 1848 had become a reality, he wrote that the “complete separation of church and state ... is opposed to divine revelation, history and the knowledge of the ages” (Groen van Prinsterer, 1991 (1855):208).<sup>1</sup> He also argued that the Reformed Church had the right and duty to manage and oversee not merely private, but also public education – a position he based in his interpretation of article 36 of the Belgic Confession (Ibid., 654). Based on this same article Groen, in contradistinction to later Neo-Calvinists like his successor Abraham Kuyper, argued that not only the church, but also the state ought to use “legal means to punish blasphemy” (Groen van Prinsterer, 1852:73).<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, he emphasized the independence of the national Church in terms of its right to work “in unity with the Christian state ... but [also to] separate itself from the non-Christian one”. He would continue to argue that church and state as entities remain independent “in their own spheres and, as much as possible, in common agreement, working for the laws of God and to his glory” (Groen van Prinsterer, 1872:279).<sup>3</sup> For Groen, the church therefore had to maintain the right to distance itself from the revolutionary state, even if, in principle, he maintained the ideal of a church that performs certain public functions, such as education and welfare in addition to not only being a witness, but also a moral guide to government. He believed that the Dutch Reformed Church was, like the Dutch state, the Dutch provinces and its municipalities, products of the organic historical development of Dutch society, each with its own authority, role and function in that society. Groen thereby advocated a form of subsidiarity that proved decisive in shaping Kuyper’s idea of sphere sovereignty (Friezen, 2019:19).<sup>4</sup>

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1 “volkomen scheiding van kerk en staat ... [is] met de openbaring, geschiedenis en wetenschap van all tijden in strijd”.

2 “door wettige middelen, door bestraffen van hetgeen godslasterlijk is”.

3 “die vereeniging met den christelijken Staat ... maar zich van den niet-christelijken los maakt.” “Beiden in eigen kring en, zoveel mogelijk, in gemeen overleg, naar de geboden Gods en ter zijner eer werkzaam.”

4 Subsidiarity is a mechanism that aims to ensure the liberty of citizens from the interventions of the central government, by emphasizing that socio-political matters ought to be handled by the smallest, lowest and least centralized authority (McManners, 2012:35).

Despite his very real opposition to the constitutional revision of 1848, Groen managed to constructively engage as statesman in the newly established constitutional democratic system during its early decades, even acting as a solidifier of the system at a time when the Dutch democracy was still young and vulnerable, in addition to laying the foundations for the Dutch political party system at a time when most of his opponents were still determined to preserve a “homogeneous” cabinet without parties (Schlebusch, 2018:204). His historical role in the solidification of the Dutch constitutional democracy is evidenced by his rejection of king Willem III's suggestions for reshaping the political system yet again in 1856, whereby Groen definitely brought an end to all reactionary or restorationist politics in the Netherlands (Mulder, 1973:87).

Historians have almost unanimously explained Groen's political re-positioning after 1848 in terms of a significant change in Groen's thinking regarding the nature of political authority occurring around that time. The change is attributed to Groen's encounter and appreciation the ideas of the conservative Lutheran German jurist, Julius Friedrich Stahl (1802-1861). Thus in turn led to a forsaking of the Swiss political theorist Karl Ludwig von Haller's (1768-1854) private-legal (or *res privata*) concept of civil authority in favor of Stahl's republican (or *res publica*) theory (Diepenhorst, 1932:319-22; Brants, 1951:140; Dooyeweerd, 1959:50; Zwaan, 1973:291-3; Kruidenier, 1975:13; Kirpestein, 1993:87; Kuiper, 2001:178; Drentje, 2004:429; Sap, 2004:29; Bijl, 2011:356; Krijger, 2015:91-2).

Von Haller's feudal theory known as *res privata* entailed that the historical private ownership of large amounts of property gradually became the foundation for “owning” and exercising government authority in a given area. Without levying taxes, the landlord as prince had to maintain an independent existence from his land. Due to his socio-political relationship to his subjects, he held governmental responsibilities and authority (Von Haller, 1816:xii, xxiii-iv). Stahl in turn favored a republican idea where government authority is a public matter of interest to the entire community as a whole. Government was to represent the interest of the population as a divinely ordained institution, and was not merely the historically developed duty of a landlord towards his subjects (Stahl, 1854:586).

The prevalent claim in the existing literature, namely that Groen's embrace of republicanism around 1848 enabled and structured his constructive political engagement in the context of the Dutch Constitutional Democracy established during that same year, remained unchallenged throughout the twentieth century.

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In extrapolating this interpretation, some scholars in the early twenty-first century have even claimed that Groen, through the adoption and application of Stahl's theories, had gradually embraced democratization and liberalization as itself in line with the natural development of the Dutch national character (Sap, 2004:29; Krijger, 2015:91-2).<sup>5</sup> Such interpretations imply that Groen radically adapted or liberalized his understanding of what it meant to be an anti-revolutionary Christian in light of the historically significant political and constitutional changes that initiated the Dutch Democracy in 1848 (Te Velde & Willink, 2006:26). These recent interpretations also reflect what scholars like McCoy and Baker (1991:86) refer to as the uniquely contemporary equating of republicanism and democracy, something that was not necessarily the case in the nineteenth century.

Given the fact that Groen's renown as political theorist has long been based in his rejection of the sovereignty of the people as a revolutionary heresy, these early twenty-first century interpretations of Groen as having developed into a principled democrat in terms of his political re-positioning after 1848, merit a thorough study. By means of an investigation into the witness primary sources, this article aims to scrutinize this claim of a change in Groen's notion of political authority as well as the implications thereof for his political positioning by reassessing the manner in which the intellectual traditions that shaped Groen's political theory and action also influenced its development or expression from 1848 onwards.

The central purpose of this article is therefore to answer the following research question: what legitimacy do the claims regarding a significant change in Groen's notion of political authority have, and, if any, does it sufficiently explain Groen's strategic political re-positioning in light of the constitutional changes in the Netherlands after 1848? Through an investigation of the primary sources, this aim is to be achieved by means of a critical reappraisal of the intellectual traditions that shaped Groen van Prinsterer's idea of political authority in its historical context.

## **2. *Res privata* and *res publica* in Groen's works**

Decisive changes characterized the political landscape in the Netherlands during the 1840s. Discussions on a constitutional revision in a liberal

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5 Sap, for example, engaging in the political disputes in the Netherlands at the time (2004), argued that the tendency towards increased democratization as it manifested in the legalization of homosexual marriage was in line with Groen van Prinsterer's anti-revolutionary political position after 1848.

spirit, provided the incentive for Groen to systematically articulate his anti-revolutionary or Christian-historical worldview. This culminated in his fifteen lectures on *Unbelief and Revolution*, delivered from his home between November 1845 and April 1846 and eventually published in 1847 (Van Dyke, 1976:181-2). These lectures became what the twentieth-century historian Hendrik Smitskamp (1949:11) described as the “unmissable key to understanding [Groen’s] thought and action”.<sup>6</sup>

In the second lecture of *Unbelief and Revolution*, Groen (1847:39) called upon the support of predecessors for the purpose of showing his “science against the revolution” to be the traditional Christian political position. He lists figures such as Guizot, Van Alphen, Pitt, Burke, De Bonald, De Maistre and De Lammenais.<sup>7</sup> Before also adding Von Haller, he (ibid.:51-2) noted the following with regard to the Roman Catholic De Lammenais’ anti-Protestant sentiments:

I would not need to provide an exculpation, no assurance that I do not lean back towards the Roman Church. We do not belong to those who appreciate the truth only in associates and forget that not only friends, but sometimes enemies can teach us. We ought to be eclectic, in the good sense of the word. With a thorough standard, we ought to acknowledge the purity of the jewel, wherever it may be found.<sup>8</sup>

Then, although crediting Von Haller, Groen (ibid.:52) also added: “I’m no unconditional panegyrist, not of anybody, and especially not of Von Haller.”<sup>9</sup> In his own mind, Groen’s reliance upon others was always eclectic in nature. In an autobiographical reflection written in 1873, Groen (1873:250) re-iterated that his appreciation for Von Haller had always been qualified. Nonetheless, biographical theorists like Hans Renders and Binne de Haan (2014:2) have rightly pointed out that autobiographical material, although an important source for historians and biographers, should not be considered decisive but should rather be critically analyzed. In this spirit, authors who have argued for a significant change in Groen’s political theory have also pointed to the fact that several references to Stahl’s political ideas were included in the second edition of *Unbelief and Revolution*, published in 1868.

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6 “onmisbare sleutel tot het verstaan van zijn denken en doen.”

7 “wetenschap tegen de revolutie”

8 “Ik zou geen verontschuldiging hoeven te geven, geen verzekering dat ik niet overhel tot de Roomsche kerk. U behoort niet tot hen die waarheid enkel in medestanders waarderen en die vergeten dat niet enkel van vrienden, maar soms evenzeer en meer nog van vijanden geleerd kan worden.”

9 “Ik ben geen onvoorwaardelijk lofredenaar, van niemand, en van von Haller vooral niet.”

The most significant and relevant of these was Groen's positive reference in lecture XI to Stahl's sentiment that a constitutional system is in itself a means of moral progress (Groen van Prinsterer, 1868:195). Groen (ibid.:42) also added a footnote to his discussion on the exclusivist monarchist sentiments of some of his predecessors – from which he had already distanced himself in the first edition – noting that he had never been opposed to constitutional government. He also omitted a comment from the first edition in the second, where he had cited the Belgic Confession's mention of 'kings' in article 36 as proof that Calvinism in no way gave preference to a republic (ibid.:140). Nonetheless, despite this, Groen left unchanged his observation in lecture II that "the Calvinist doctrine never led to republicanism" (ibid.:141).<sup>10</sup>

In reflecting upon the constitutional revision a year after it was passed – in 1849 – he (1849:15) wrote that political theorists who argue for the republican and democratic forms of government as the only legitimate forms based on their adherence of the sovereignty of the people, were wrongly seeking their salvation in these political forms. In another work written long before his contact with Stahl, his *Dutch Ideas* published in 1830, Groen (1830:137) already explicitly drew a sharp distinction between republican and revolutionary principles, arguing that it would be an error to equate the two – a sentiment he would re-iterate already in 1847 in his sixth lecture on *Unbelief and Revolution* (1847:119). Both these statements were made prior to his introduction to Stahl's works at the end of the 1840s.

These explicitly pro-republican statements from Groen expressed prior to 1848 as well as his continued appreciation for the Hallerian theory of *res privata* expressed after 1848, render the argument of a radical break with his position on political authority prior to 1848 unconvincing. The idea that he had, on this basis, embraced democratization as a positive good is therefore also directly at odds with the witness of the primary sources. In fact, in 1856, when king Willem III enquired his thoughts about the new democratic system in the Netherlands, he wrote that he had "never been a proponent of direct elections on a national, provincial or municipal level ... not in general and in particular not given the character of our country" (Groen van Prinsterer, 1876 (1856):18-9).<sup>11</sup> Even in expressing his appreciation of Stahl in 1862, he noted that his agreement with the German was on the level of foundational principles, rather than in terms of their interpretation or appreciation of political systems (Groen van Prinsterer, 1862:19-20):

10 "De calvinistische leer heeft stellig nooit naar republicanisme geleid."

11 "... nooit voorstander van regtstreeksche verkiezingen in Land, Provincie of Gemeente ...; niet in het algemeen en vooral niet met het oog op onzen landaard."

I know that there is a difference between the Prussian and Dutch contexts; he [Stahl] might be too anglophile and parliamentary for my liking [...] But, in terms of the core principle, the foundations of our political and religious position, we also who are here called "antirevolutionary" are in agreement with Stahl. Under all local and national varieties the same general truth applies.<sup>12</sup>

Groen's political engagement in the Dutch Constitutional Democracy after 1848 therefore cannot be explained in terms of a change in his idea of political authority in terms of turning towards republicanism under influence of Stahl and even less so in terms of a suggested embrace of democratization on his part.

### 3. Groen's epistemic understanding of the 'Revolution'

As will be explained in this section, Groen's understanding of the 'Revolution' played a central role in shaping his notion of legitimate political authority. Groen (1849:12, 528; 1847:180, 195-6, 207) always de-emphasized political forms and systems in favor of an emphasis on the epistemic principles by which political systems were informed. Understanding how Groen strategically decentered political forms and structures in his political engagement, while instead always focusing on principles, is the key to unlocking the nature of his political engagement after 1848.

For Groen, the 'Revolution' did not in the first place signify historical political phenomena such as the French or Batavian Revolutions, but rather the epistemic shift or epistemic revolution which he believed sanctioned these political revolutions. The ideas of the Enlightenment sanctioned by this epistemic shift opposed the teachings of history and the Bible, thereby overthrowing the basic pillars of justice and order needed for the flourishing of society (Klink, 2012:120, 288-9; Van Dyke, 2012:74-5, 94-5). Legitimate political authority was derived from God, and not from the people.

The dichotomy of revolution or rebellion against God on the one hand and faith in God on the other, was one that Groen believed to be ever-present throughout history. Groen therefore also understood this epistemic Revolution to be opposed to history, i.e. the divinely-ordained cosmic-historic *telos* of evangelistic progress and the glorification of the Lordship of Christ. Here

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12 "Ik weet dat er tusschen de Pruisische en Nederlandsche toestanden verschil is; misschien zou ik hem te anglomaan en parlementair [vindt] [...] Maar, in hoofdbeginsel, in grondtrekken van staatkundige en godsdienstige beschouwing, zijn ook zij die men hier antirevolutionair noemt, met Stahl homogeen. Onder alle locale en nationale verscheidenheden geldt het algemeene waarheid."



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the influence of a leading Dutch Réveil figure, Isaac Da Costa, is evident. Da Costa was instrumental in shaping Groen's view of all of history and politics as the manifestation of the battle between faith and unbelief (Groen van Prinsterer, 1964 (1844):566). 'Revolution' for Groen (1847:28) was ultimately a denial of the sovereignty of God in favor of the sovereignty of mankind, with the 'revolutionary' ideas of the Enlightenment being the fruits of a rationalist religion wrongly elevating man-made abstractions as truths supreme over the revelation of God. This epistemic perspective shaped his political theory and engagement. Groen argued that the Revolution, not only as a historical-political phenomenon, but as a historical-philosophical development, amounted to an anti-Christian infringement upon the natural rights, established socio-political relationships, and justice system rooted in a divinely-ordained social order. Therefore the anti-revolutionary or Christian-historical position entailed opposing this epistemic Revolution as a path doomed to social disaster and political tyranny (ibid.:26, 118).

Placing the emphasis of his battle against the 'Revolution' on an epistemic level enabled Groen's constructive political engagement within the context of the Dutch constitutional democracy initiated in 1848. Hereby he was able to decenter the constitution and political system. If the generally accepted principles behind the political system did not change, all systemic or constitutional changes would prove to be merely artificial and even counterproductive in the long run. In setting out his position on the new constitutional democratic system, Groen (1876:19-20) noted that whether people "participated directly or indirectly in the organization of public affairs" was not the core issue, but rather the need for a re-appreciation and re-application of the perpetually valid socio-political principles derived from divine revelation. A core aspect of his polemics against the revolutionary project was his rejection of its experimentation in terms of applying the same objectionable theories under different forms of government. This continued re-casting of political policies and structures was something he regarded as futile as long as the revolutionary foundations themselves remained intact (Groen van Prinsterer, 1847:352-3). To Groen, as long as the foundation of political authority lied with the people and not with God, any political system or structure remained revolutionary or anti-Christian. In fact, he (ibid.:77) regarded the revolutionary emphasis on political systems as a misplaced and deceptive strategy for political legitimization:

Only when we are familiar with the meaning and legitimate extent of authority in the forms [of government], we learn to see how far the desire of the learned to reduce everything to systems deviates from history. We see how wrongly the revolutionaries proclaimed their goal to be the constitutional restoration of the ancient political principles.<sup>13</sup>

This rejection of the idea of seeking political deliverance in systems is in line with Groen's criticism of the democratizing tendencies of the Dutch constitution which he expressed in 1848, where he warned against the tyranny of the majority inherent to democratic systems based on popular sovereignty and argued that being on a democratic electoral role makes one "free" in the same way that buying a lottery ticket makes one "rich" (Groen van Prinsterer, 1848:17). In contradistinction, it was his emphasis on the epistemic truth of divine revelation in Scripture and history that his principles were rooted in, that provided him the ability for confident political engagement, regardless of the political system. This connection between epistemic truth and practical reality in his political philosophy is the key to understanding his political engagement. In this regard he (1847:385-7, 389) wrote in his conclusion to *Unbelief and Revolution*:

The Christian-historic principle also (...) directly leads to political triumph. The truth of a principle is also evidenced in application (...) [T]aught and guided by experience and the eternally constant Word of Revelation, I proclaim the inalterability of truth, the forsaking of which leads to distortive ideas. In this regard the inability and depravity [of these ideas] become clearer every day (...) Submission to truth is the only true practicality (...) Even now there lies in the free confession of man's conviction the ability of which the outcome is known to Him alone who works all growth (...) Let us, in the midst of very small sacrifices to which we are called with dutifulness and self-denial, keep in mind that the dominion of truth progresses through witness (...) Faith conquers the world. To conquer the world it is necessary to ... destroy all arrogance that rebels against the wisdom of God and to make every thought captive to obedience to Christ.<sup>14</sup>

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13 "Alleen wanneer wij met de betekenis en de wettige omvang van het gezag in de vormen nauwkeurig bekend zijn, leren wij inzien, hoe ver de drang van de geleerden om alles in systemen onder te brengen reeds vroeg van de waarheid van de geschiedenis afweek. We zien dan hoe verkeerd het was dat de revolutionairen hun doel uitbazuinden als grondwettig herstel van het aloude staatswezen."

14 "[H]et christelijk-historische beginsel leidt ook (...) rechtstreeks naar politieke winst. De waarheid van een beginsel blijkt ook in een brede toepassing (...) door de ervaring en het eeuwig blijvende woord van de openbaring geleerd en geleid, beweert ik de onveranderlijkheid van waarheden. De verzaking daarvan leidt tot dwaalbegrippen. Hiervan valt het onvermogen en de verderfelijheid dagelijks meer in het oog (...) Onderwerping aan de waarheid is de enige ware praktijk (...) Er ligt ook nu in de vrijmoedige belijdenis van uw overtuiging een vermogen waarvan de werking alleen bekend is aan Hem die de groei geeft (...) Laat ons bij de zeer geringe opofferingen waartoe wij vooralsnog geroepen

“Experience”, i.e. the characteristically traditionalist or conservative appreciation of the value of the lessons of history, as well as the “Word of Revelation”, i.e. the special revelation of God’s will through the divine inspiration of the Bible, formed the twofold epistemic foundation of his Christian-historic or anti-revolutionary political theory. In the truth of these epistemic foundations lied the guarantee of the “practicality” or inevitable progress and success of his political position over against the revolutionary position represented by his political opponents.

This twofold epistemic foundation, namely the revelation of Scripture along with an appreciation of tradition was fundamentally rooted in Groen’s Burkean conservatism.<sup>15</sup> Edmund Burke, widely considered the father of conservatism, had an immense impact on shaping Groen’s notion of political authority (Klink, 2012:277-9). In *Unbelief and Revolution*, Groen appealed to Burke’s emphasis on the essence and principle behind political developments as the key to understanding their nature or determining their historical legitimacy (Groen van Prinsterer, 1868:251).<sup>16</sup> Groen (1868:409) appealed to Burke as a prime example of a true anti-revolutionary rightly resisting the principles behind political systems, rather than focusing on these systems themselves, as no true progress could be made through changes in political forms without changes in core principles. He (1847:137) also expressly referenced Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* when he shunned the Enlightenment’s neglect of tradition.

The traditionalist or historic principle was, for Groen, epistemic rather than ethical in nature. Because of his conviction that “no page or almost no line of history isn’t polluted by sin”, he distanced himself from the notion that all of providence or history were to be cherished as legitimate or in line with the God’s moral will (Groen van Prinsterer, 1847:59-60).<sup>17</sup> History’s authority was always tied to what Groen saw as its proximate relationship to God’s creative-redemptive order and purpose for the cosmos: that is, connected to

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worden tot plichtsbetrachting en zelfverloochening in het oog houden dat de heerschappij van de waarheid veld wint door getuigen (...) Het geloof overwint de wereld. Om de wereld te overwinnen is het nodig vooraf in ons eigen geweten de overwegingen te onttronen en elke hoogte die zich verheft tegen de kennis van God neer te halen en alle gedachten als gevangenen te leiden tot de gehoorzaamheid aan Christus.”

15 Van Vliet (2008:358) isn’t wrong to point to the influence of the Romantic Historical School in shaping Groen’s “historic principle”, but this school nonetheless only re-affirmed that for which Groen was originally indebted to Burke (Bijl 2011:197; Schlebusch 2018:127).

16 See Burke 1790:29-30.

17 “geen bladzijde en bijna geen regel van de geschiedenis welke niet door zonde werd bezoedeld.”

its *cosmological genesis* in terms of its divine design, and its *cosmological telos* in the glorification of Jesus Christ's universal lordship (Ibid.:57, 76-7, 243). In expounding his core epistemic principles in an 1834 essay, he (1834:3, 6) also argued that the wisdom of the ages along with history itself were legitimate epistemological *viae* tied to God as foundational first principle.

For Groen history was not only pedagogic in terms of the lessons that it teaches, but epistemic in the sense that, in the long run, history reflected the divinely imprinted essence of reality. As he (1849:483) explained in reflecting on the constitutional revision of 1848:

I desire not that the Revolution be removed from history – of which it compromises one of the most instructive parts – as if it never happened ... But although the Revolution certainly belongs to history, we must not forget that a doctrine, derived from false speculation, is opposed to the essence of things and therefore opposed to history, to the historic development of humanity, against all societal rights and relationships, as a fatal seed of confusion and dissolution.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, historical durability in itself serves as a seal of truth, since initiatives or developments at odds with the divinely ordained order were doomed to failure because its doctrines were “derived from false speculation”. Therefore, for Groen the inevitable failure and impracticality of the ‘Revolution’ was essentially rooted in its deviation from the truth based on false epistemology.

## 4. Conclusion

Groen's continued opposition to the principle of the sovereignty of the people underlying the establishment of the Dutch constitutional democracy characterized his political theory both prior and after the constitutional changes in the Netherlands in 1848. The claim that his thought developed from a Hallerian *res privata* understanding of the nature of political authority to a republican position around the time of this historic constitutional revision, is not supported by the primary sources. Such a claim is therefore also

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18 “Ik begeer niet dat de Revolutie uit de Geschiedenis, waarvan zij een der leerrijkste gedeelten uitmaakt, als of ze niet gebeurd ware ... Maar, ofschoon de Revolutie voorzeker tot de Geschiedenis behoort, dit mag ons niet doen vergeten dat een leer, aan valsche bespiegeling ontleend, tegen het wezen der dingen en dus tegen de Geschiedenis, tegen de historische ontwikkeling der Menschheid, tegen elken gegeven toestand der maatschappelijke regten en betrekkingen, als een noodlottige kiem van verwarring en ontbinding, gekant is.”

insufficient to explain Groen's strategic political engagement in the Dutch constitutional democracy after 1848. Groen did not look to political systems in themselves as a basis for political progress and continued to oppose any and all political systems devoid of epistemic foundations in God's revelation throughout his career. This lay at the heart of his understanding of political authority or legitimacy. Groen did not accept the constitutional democratic political system as superior to preceding political structures, nor did he cease opposing the principles behind the system as it was established in the Netherlands. He remained true to the traditionalist conservative foundations of his anti-revolutionary political theory throughout. In other words, Groen was a Burkean traditionalist rather than a republican, constitutionalist, democrat or Hallerian. Nonetheless, he still was able to constructively engage in a constitutional democratic system that he neither desired nor helped invent. In fact, it was this distinctly Burkean attitude of Groen which enabled him to decenter political forms in favor of the epistemic principles he believed to be rooted in the Bible and in history or tradition, that enabled this constructive engagement in the historical context of the newly established Dutch constitutional democracy. This was sanctioned by his distinct epistemic emphasis on the supremacy of the truths of divine revelation as practically manifested in (historical) reality.

To Groen, it was the epistemic truths underlying the Christian-historic principles which ultimately guaranteed the legitimacy of political systems based on these principles and their eventual success. This stood in contrast to what he considered to be the inevitable failure and illegitimacy of all revolutionary projects aimed at the usurpation of God's authority. The battle for anti-revolutionary politics therefore fundamentally raged on an epistemic rather than on a systemic level. This Groenian perspective demanded perpetual loyalty to Christian-historic or Christian traditionalist principles, while simultaneously sanctioning flexibility in terms of strategic political engagement and positioning in what Groen considered to be an ever-changing socio-political context with its inevitable variety of political structures and political systems.

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