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Katholieke identiteit en historisch bewustzijn. W.J.F. Nuyens (1823-1894) en zijn 'nationale' geschiedschrijving

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Summary and conclusion

In the tradition of Dutch national history, W.J.F. Nuyens (1823-1894) is known as the father of Catholic historiography in the Netherlands. The part he played in the Netherlands is comparable to that played by John Lingard (1771-1851) in England and Johannes Janssen (1829-1891) in Germany. His *Geschiedenis der Nederlandse beroerten* [History of the Netherlands' Troubles] gave a new interpretation to the history of the Dutch Revolt. By giving Catholics their own place in Dutch history, he enabled Catholics to identify with the Dutch nation.

In an era of increasing scale, the new national group relationship quickly gained importance. Following in the footsteps of nationalism, the national framework was rapidly becoming the most dominant framework. It was a new type of secular faith, to which all other beliefs had to relate. In this process of national unification, each of the separate ideologies also acquired its individual identity. The Dutch nation became characterized by religious diversity. For each of the religions, however, the nation had become the common umbrella framework.

History lent the nation its actual content. Thus the collective memory acquired a new political function. It was used as an instrument for identity politics. The nineteenth century is often referred to as the century of history. To an increasing degree, history was used as a justification. A variety of social and cultural phenomena were said to be 'natural' based on their organic and historical evolution. This was certainly the case in the new group relationship that was projected far back into history to give it depth and content: the nation.

The nineteenth century, however, was not only the century of history. It can also be called the century of religion. Nation and religion entered into a powerful alliance that brought a forceful new symbolic language which lent content to new national loyalties. Nuyens must be understood in that context. This book is in keeping with recent publications in which the relationship is discussed between nationalism, historical consciousness and the oftentimes neglected factor of religion in the processes of forming identity that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The struggle for the national identity was part of a broader struggle for modernity. Nuyens started as a liberal Catholic. He was raised in an atmosphere of optimism and faith in progress. The French era brought equality to the Catholics, and this equality was further expanded with the constitutional amendments of 1848. In

Nuyens' own words: "Thus we helped the liberals. We were Papist-Thorbeckians." Nuyens orientated his political thought towards popular French liberal Catholics, including Montalembert and Dupanloup.

This initial optimism would eventually be eclipsed by the Roman Question. Everywhere in Europe, liberals fought the alleged obscurantism and despotism of the Catholic church, which was increasingly considered to obstruct European progress. A new ideology developed from Catholic circles that vehemently distanced itself from the godless liberalism: the ultramontanism. It was a centralizing movement towards unity: Catholics united around the throne of Saint Peter's successor. At the same time, the ultramontanism also represented a movement towards innovation with a wide range of new devotions. As a result, Catholicism became a mass religion in the modern sense. But because ultramontanism simultaneously brought the downfall of liberal Catholicism, Nuyens had no choice but to feel ambivalent towards it. His loyalty to the pope could not be doubted, proven by his significant contributions to the pope's cause: as medical examiner for the Pontifical Zouaves, as political commentator with reference to the Roman Question, and as historian with his two-volume biography of Pius IX. At the same time, he clung to his liberal-Catholic roots. This brought him much criticism in his own circles.

From an international perspective, the Roman Question did not simplify the integration of Dutch Catholics into the umbrella national whole. Paradoxically, however, it was this same Roman Question that brought the Dutch Catholics to unify more strongly into a social group within the Dutch nation. The Question evolved into a common identification point, behind which they could close ranks.

Nuyens was an amateur historian. He did his historical work in his spare time, in the margin of his career as a country doctor. After his medical studies at Utrecht University, he started his practice in the village of Westwoud, in the area known as West Friesland. On the local level, Nuyens was extremely active, including in politics. He regularly got involved in the elections for Dutch Parliament. With *De Wachter* [The Watcher], a periodical he started up together with Herman Schaepman, he broadly discussed the Catholic culture. The Catholic identity was not only historically based, but also evident in current issues, which varied from Darwinism to views on recent French authors such as Victor Hugo. These current issues fit into the broader debate on the national identity, which was on-going on many fronts.

Nuyens' importance lies in his historical work in particular. In every way, he was a *Catholic* historian. Like Augustine, he viewed history as a struggle between the *civitas dei* and the *civitas terrena*, a struggle that was also fought in the Roman Question. It sometimes brought virtually insurmountable difficulties. Was God not always on the side of the Good? Then why did He allow the pope to be defeated in the Roman Question? And why during the Dutch Revolt did He so often side against the moderate Catholic forces?

Nuyens started his historical career with a broad social history of Europe, in which he strove to uncover the Christian foundation of West European civilization; this was a polemic study aimed against both Protestants and liberals. The Spanish apologetic Jaime Balmes had shown the extent to which medieval Catholicism had civilized Europe. Nuyens would echo Balmes in his *Het katholicismus, in betrekking tot de beschaving van Europa* [Catholicism, in relation to the civilization of Europe]. The Catholic heritage was mobilized to gain a future.

The struggle for modernity was a struggle for an interpretation of the past. This was fittingly reflected in the motto that Schaepman and Nuyens chose for their periodical *De Wachter*: 'Stel wachters bij de bronnen' ['place watchers at the sources']. Using history, Nuyens showed that Catholics were entitled to a historical place in the Dutch nation. He opposed the great-Protestant apologetics, who placed the Dutch nation in an umbrella framework of national Protestantism. In particular, the Groningen theologian Hofstede de Groot attempted to elevate Protestantism into a national binding agent. To that end, the Protestant religion had to be stripped of any Calvinistic extremes. The history of the Dutch Revolt also served as ammunition. The American historian John Lothrop Motley paved the way. In his *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* he uncovered the roots of the Netherlands as a *Protestant* nation. The Leiden national school of historiography, with its great leader Robert Fruin, strove to expand on the American's work in order to establish a national placating historiography that put an end once and for all to the partisan spirit that had largely characterized the Republic's history. It was a conciliatory historiography that was intended to serve as a general, national identification point.

Nuyens' main work was his *Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche Beroerten in de zestiende eeuw* [History of the Netherlands' Troubles in the sixteenth century], the first part of which was published in 1865. Later he wrote a popularizing work: the *Algemeene geschiedenis des Nederlandschen volks, van de vroegste tijden tot op onze dagen* [General History of the Dutch nation, from the earliest time until our days] which was primarily intended for use in his own circles, the objective of which, as he formulated it in his foreword, was "to increase consciousness in a large part of our nation of the fact that the history of our nation is also their history". Striking is the fact that he was the only Dutch historian of his time to compile a multiple-volume reference work of this type. His strong beliefs also led him to write a *Vaderlandsche geschiedenis voor de jeugd* [National History for the youth], a small book that could be used for educational purposes. Nuyens' identity politics were played on many fronts.

Nuyens' work with reference to the Dutch Revolt was also well-received beyond his own circles, in particular by Robert Fruin, the *doyen* of Dutch historical science. The liberal Fruin believed Nuyens' work was extremely important because it fit in perfectly with the development of a new national conciliatory historiography, in which every ideology would receive a place within a national umbrella histori-

ography. At the same time, Nuyens' historical work led to much discussion. This was evident the most clearly in discussions regarding the celebration of national anniversaries, in which glorious episodes from the history of the Dutch Revolt were commemorated, such as the Battle of Heiligerlee, the Relief of Leyden and the Union of Utrecht. In these celebrations, the history of the Dutch Revolt was emphatically related to another powerful symbol of national unity: the House of Orange. Nuyens dedicatedly joined in the debates about the national anniversaries that were being commemorated with many rattling sabres.

Initially, criticism by Catholics focused on the Protestants' appropriation of the Dutch nation, in which the nation was founded on an exclusively *Protestant* history.

As a result of this criticism, the celebrations of the protestantized 'national' anniversaries were not attended. For Catholics, the history of the Dutch Revolt would never be a national binding agent. Nuyens initially joined in this Catholic policy of hush up and ignore. Later, in particular when the Relief of Leyden was celebrated in 1874, Nuyens opted for a different strategy. Like Groen van Prinsterer and Robert Fruin, he isolated certain elements from the history of the Dutch Revolt in order to give a national interpretation to that history which, in his case, was in keeping with his Catholic beliefs. This actually meant that he chose the side of the moderate middle groups, the large majority of the population that wanted to find a middle course between the vehement Calvinists on the one side and the Spanish oppressors on the other. Even for Nuyens, the Dutch nation had become the highest moral good. This could only be done by lending great-Catholic content to the national history. Nuyens was Catholic but not pro-Spanish. To him, the moderate middle groups represented the 'national' element of the Dutch Revolt. They were the cement in Nuyens' historical interpretation of the Revolt.

The position Nuyens took in the debate about the historical anniversaries reflected how obstinate the Catholic historian could be, as well as unafraid to go against the flow. Nuyens was certainly not the timid historian who was blindly led by the episcopate as described by later critical historians from Catholic circles, including Brom and Rogier. Nuyens' obstinacy was evident in the loyalty to his Catholic-liberal roots, even when the new ultramontane ideology gained influence. With his historiography of the Dutch nation, Nuyens was part of a general trend. But within this broader context, Nuyens emphatically chose his own accents.

In the history of historiography, Nuyens' work was long viewed from Fruin's perspective: the national-conciliatory umbrella framework to which Nuyens' made an important contribution. Within his own Catholic circles, Nuyens' was primarily referred to in an emancipatorial sense: with his historiography, he had literally given the Catholics a history. The national-conciliatory view of the history of the Netherlands therewith also became a 'pillarized' view. This pillarized national conciliatory perspective remained dominant until the 1960s. Nuyens was elevated to the level of 'leader' of the Catholic part of the population. The part he played was mobilized for current *political* uses.

Now that pillarization has faded, the time has come to re-evaluate Nuyens' (historical) work. Nuyens' nineteenth-century part should be separated from the twentieth-century political-apologetic characterization of his work. Nuyens must be understood within the international, European context of his era. Determinant in this context was the developing national unity state: the new political relationships that also had to be established in the hearts of the citizens. History and religion were powerful identification tools in that respect. Nuyens was one of those nineteenth-century historians who claimed their country by giving its history – in his case – a broad Catholic content.

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