CHAPTER NINE

DUTCH CALVINISTS AND DARWINISM, 1900–1960

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INTRODUCTION

Darwin’s theory of evolution rapidly gained acceptance in the Netherlands, first among biologists, who were almost unanimous in their acclaim for Darwin’s ideas about the origin of species. His theory had a profound influence on the practice of biological research and became a basic element in most of the university curricula in the 1880s. Outside the scientific community, Darwinism received a remarkably positive response from the majority of those belonging to the large liberal wing of the ruling protestant church. By incorporating Darwin’s theory in a Christian progressivism,¹ they integrated it rather easily with their religion.

The other religious denominations showed themselves considerably less friendly toward Darwin’s evolutionary views.² The Dutch Calvinists challenged Darwinism with dogmatic and exegetic arguments. There was unanimous disagreement with every aspect of the theory, which was considered a direct attack on essential elements of the orthodox protestant religion and was therefore rejected completely. The Calvinist position remained unchanged until the end of the nineteenth century.³

Around the turn of the century a few theologians showed themselves more receptive to evolutionary ideas. In the scarce publications on Darwin’s reception in the Netherlands, one of these, Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), figures as the man who, according to the philosopher Ilse Bulhof (1932), enabled the Calvinists “to accept evolutionism as long as it was stated as a working hypothesis.”⁴ But a cursory glance at the

¹ See Hegeman 1970, esp. 308.
² For the history of Calvinist denominations in The Netherlands, see de Knijff 2008 and Harinck 2008.
³ Ibid., passim and Bulhof 1972, esp. 301–304.
⁴ Bulhof 1972, 306.
source material makes it clear that the vicissitudes of the theory of evolution were much more complicated than suggested by Bulhof.

The new attitude demonstrated by Kuyper met with little response from his fellow theologians and the anti-Darwinian orthodoxy soon reasserted itself. Later attempts by some Calvinist biologists to promulgate a moderate version of Darwin’s theory in the Calvinist community were not successful. Ignored by the neo-Calvinist theologians and severely criticized by most of their scientific colleagues, they discontinued their attempts to contribute to what they considered essential for the modernization of scientific thinking among their co-religionists. The first publicly presented attempt to solve the conflict between neo-Calvinist theology and the theory of evolution dates from 1956. Only then, almost sixty years after Kuyper, did Darwinism finally begin to win ground among the Dutch Calvinists.

In this contribution I shall analyze the main events in the Calvinist struggle with Darwinism during the first part of the twentieth century. The determining factor in the reception of evolutionary thinking was the interaction between theologians and scientists, biologists in particular. For chronological reasons I shall deal first with the theological and then with the biological actors. To conclude I shall examine the breakthrough of 1956 and some of its consequences.

Theologians

Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), the leading neo-Calvinist theologians, provided the Dutch Calvinist community at the beginning of the twentieth century with new perspectives on Darwin’s theory. Unlike their predecessors, both of these men were aware of the need to distinguish between Darwin’s theory as a scientific explanation of the origin of species and the metaphysics that had been deduced from it by men like the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919). Kuyper and Bavinck considered such philosophies to be a threat to humanity in general and to Christian societies in particular.5 Kuyper in particular fiercely opposed all explicitly materialistic versions of evolutionary thinking. These doctrines, or dogmas, as he preferred to call them, and the Christian religion were “mutually excluding

5 See Kuyper 1899, 11 (his famous rectoral address at the Calvinist Free University) and Bavinck 1901.