Interpreting the Dutch Great Awakening (1749–1755)

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FRED VAN LIEBURG

In 1754, the Scottish minister John Gillies (1712–1796) published a collection of historical accounts concerning “remarkable periods of the success of the Gospel.”¹ Its composer was a spider in a web of correspondents in Europe and North America who believed they were living in an extraordinary time of revival in Christianity. Collective conversions and signs of repentance and faith were reported from all parts of the world and placed in a large eschatological perspective. After the Protestant Reformation—the climax of church history since the New Testament—a great decline had set in comparable to the Middle Ages. The “Great Awakening” seemed to recapture the spirit of the first Pentecost and offered prospects for a further extension of God’s Kingdom. By means of missionary work among the heathen peoples, the Gospel would reach the ends of earth. Finally, after the collective conversion of the Jews and a millennium of peace, the time would come for the Lord of the Church to appear on the clouds of heaven to gather the harvest of all times.

Using a range of printed sources, John Gillies had exerted himself in compiling a historical overview of evangelical successes in two volumes. Seventeen centuries were covered by the first volume, divided into a book about the first fifteen centuries (offering much information about Waldenses and Albigenses and about Wyclif and Hus), another book about the Age of Reformation in several countries, and a third book about the seventeenth century, containing much material about England and Scotland but also about a “revival of Christian piety about Hall in Germany” (Francke’s Pietism). The second volume of Gillies’s work was completely devoted to the first half of the eighteenth century. It told about “some instances of the success of the gospel in British colonies in America” between 1705 and 1734, the Salzburgers in Germany, the labors and success of John and

¹Historical collections relating to remarkable periods of the success of the Gospel, and eminent instruments employed in promoting it, ed. John Gillies, 2 vols. (Glasgow: Robert and Andrew Foulis, 1754).

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Charles Wesley and George Whitefield, and the extensive revivals in North America since 1740, in Scotland in 1742, in Ireland in 1747, and finally in Holland in 1750. For this most recent revival that Gillies was able to include, he quoted “two letters from a minister in Holland to a minister in Scotland.”

I am introducing the Dutch awakening in the middle of the eighteenth century by referring to Gillies’s work because he was the first to place it on the scene of international church history. Brief summaries of the event, based on Dutch scholarship, can be found in the great German surveys on Pietism, starting with Heinrich Heppe in 1879 and ending with the four-volume standard work of the Historische Kommission der Pietismusforschung of the past decade. Curiously, in 1906 the well-known Pietism historian Wilhelm Goeters devoted his own first publication to the Dutch revival in a German Reformed magazine. His interest in this event was inspired by the influential revival in Wales in 1905. The best treatment in an international context has been given by the English historian W. Reginald Ward in his overview of awakening in Eastern and Western Europe and North America. By the way, this work is to some extent also written as a pre-history of the great history of evangelicalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

What Gillies called a revival in Holland was in fact a movement that arose in the eastern Netherlands, more precisely in Nijkerk, a town in the Veluwe region in the province of Gelderland. Although the movement expanded on a wide geographical scale, it has become known in Dutch church historiography as het Nieuwerkse werk (either as beroering = trouble or opwekking = awakening). In this article, I first want to tell the traditional story of the events, followed by a sketch of the ways in which the movement has been dealt with in national church historiography. Next, I want to place the movement in a larger context by demonstrating that on the one hand it was rooted in a Dutch tradition, and on the other hand it was connected to developments in the Anglo-Saxon world. These considerations result in a brief proposal to approach the revival as an intersection of traditions within the context of the confessional state. I will end this article with some remarks on terminology.

2 Gillies, Historical collections, vol. 2, chapter IX, 455–461. The letters are dated 2 October 1750 and 15 January 1751, respectively.
I. THE TRADITIONAL STORY

The standard story of the Nijkerk movement is concentrated around the person of Gerardus Kuypers (1722–1798). His life passed according to the model career of a theologian in the Dutch Republic. Born a minister’s son, he was trained at the University of Leiden under Professor Johan van den Honert (1693–1758), the leading figure of Reformed orthodoxy in the rationalist wing of Coccejanism. Kuypers specialized in oriental languages and, unlike most students, obtained a doctorate of theology. He served as an assistant pastor in Amsterdam for one year. During that period it happened several times that some hearers of his sermons began to show violent religious emotions. In 1745 he was ordained as a minister in Jutphaas, a village from where he went to Nijkerk in 1749, becoming the colleague of Johannes Jacobus Roldanus (1714–1791). In this town of fishery and industry, religious life among the prosperous and growing population had a formalistic character. A small group of godly people had withdrawn into conventicles to practice inner Christendom in the shadow of official church life.

Roldanus distinguished himself by serious preaching with a strong emphasis on sin and grace; his work, however, was initially not very successful. Kuypers introduced a pastoral offensive by organizing public sermon disputes, private discussions of faith, and personal visits to church members before celebrating the Lord’s Supper. Soon the effects made themselves felt. During a sermon of Roldanus, an old woman started to weep about her sins. On November 16 and 17, 1749, strong emotions broke out during a Sunday sermon and a public catechization of Kuypers on Psalm 72:16: “There shall be a handful of corn in the earth upon the top of the mountains; the fruit thereof shall shake like Lebanon.” People were seized with horror about their sins, began to call for Jesus loudly, let themselves fall on the floor or be carried outside, and so on. Crowded services and mass meetings in public houses were held during many weeks and months. The ministers worked day and night to guide people in experiencing their spiritual misery and the way to redemption. Skilled and recently converted believers started to help in further building up the congregation.

Soon after the hectic events, Kuypers reported on them in excited letters to his parents. These manuscripts passed from hand to hand and were printed without permission of the author in April 1750. Then Kuypers himself published a “True account and apology” in September 1750. These writings

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6For more on Johan van den Honert, see Joris van Eijnatten, Mutua Christianorum Tolerantia: Irenicism and Toleration in the Netherlands; The Stinstra Affair, 1740–1745 (Firenze: Olschki, 1998).
7Gerardus Kuypers, Getrouw verhaal, en apologie of verdeediging der zaken voorgevallen in de gemeente te Nieuwkerk op de Veluwe (Amsterdam: Gerardus Borstius, 1750).
were the start of a huge controversy that produced more than 125 pamphlets in three years. They also made Nijkerk something of a tourist attraction: ministers, lay preachers, and other interested people traveled to the town to witness the impressive services and the meetings where the Bible was studied, Psalms were sung, people prayed, and conversions occurred. Oral and written reports of the events resulted in similar scenes in many places elsewhere in the country. We know of more than 60 places that were involved in the religious movement for some time. These revival centers were not only located in certain regions of the Netherlands, but also in the German border countries of East Frisia, Bentheim, and the Lower Rhineland, which were closely connected with the Dutch Republic in culture and confession.

Of course, general opinion about the Nijkerk movement was very diverse, ranging from enthusiasm to skepticism. Many discussions concerned the question of whether this work was directed by the Holy Spirit or by the devil; in other words, whether the corporal manifestations originated in the biblical experience of faith or not. Opponents were offended by the disturbances of church services and explained the strong emotions through natural or medical causes. Sympathizers emphasized the great numbers of remarkable conversions among common people. The predominant critic of the movement appeared to be Kuypers’s own teacher, Van den Honert. He replied to the “True story and apology” with extensive “Comments” in which he denounced the revival as transgressing the confessional order on theological, ecclesiastical, and political grounds. Kuypers found his most important advocate in the minister of the Scottish church in Rotterdam, Hugh Kennedy (1698–1764), who placed the events in a worldwide perspective in the same spirit as his fellow countryman John Gillies.

Gradually, public attention shifted from the excesses of the religious turmoil to the negative effects of continuing tensions. The networks of ecclesiastical and political authorities were meanwhile being mobilized—also at the

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10Johan van den Honert, Kenmerkingen op het werken, door Do. Gerardus Kuypers uitgegeven (…) (Amsterdam: Adriaan Wor, 1750).
11Hugh Kennedy, Nederige verdediging van het werk des Heiligen Geestes, in de overtuiging en bekeering van vele zielen, eenige jaren geleden in Schotland, en nu onlangs te Nieuwkerk, en op andere plaatsen in Gelderland (…) (Rotterdam: Hendrik van Pelt and Adrianus Douci, 1751).
instigation of the stadholder, William IV of Orange (1711–1751)—to take measures to suppress the movement. In October 1750, the consistory of Nijkerk proclaimed a regulation on the order of church services and lay meetings, in which convulsions were especially condemned as inappropriate corporeal utterances of religious excitement. Other consistories, classes and synods, as well as provincial estates and local councils, followed this example. When the autumn of 1752 had come, peace and order seemed to have returned to the church and society of the Netherlands and Western Germany. At the end of that year, a retrospective and rather negative overview appeared in the “Netherlandish yearbooks.”

Kuypers continued his pastoral career in the province of Groningen after 1758 and was appointed professor of theology at Groningen University in 1765. In his inaugural oration he warned against enthusiasm as well as against rationalistic skepticism that denounced the true exercise of the Christian faith as a form of fanaticism.

II. THE TRADITIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

The first systematic description of the Nijkerk movement was offered by the Groningen professor of theology Annaeus Ypeij (1760–1837). He wrote a large multivolume work on international Christianity during the eighteenth century, followed by a four-volume history of the Dutch Reformed Church. He typically represented enlightened Protestantism with its emphasis on reason and civilization, and its refusal of enthusiasm and fanaticism. In line with the polemics of the church establishment in about 1750, he depicted the Nijkerk troubles as the unwelcome effects of outdated scholastic theology and preaching, of excessive popular piety created by mystical and puritan readings, and of the influence of lay preachers who in particular infected unlettered folk, women, and children. He considered the events of Nijkerk a response to the rhetorical gifts of Kuypers; their echoes elsewhere in the country were merely weak imitations of the original.

In the course of the nineteenth century, the assessment of the Nijkerk movement shifted from its rejection as a disturbance—though Kuypers’s young age was seen as a mitigating circumstance—to its reinterpretation as a spiritual awakening. The foremost spokesman of this positive approach

13 Gerardus Kuypers, *Oratio inauguralis de impedimentis certum in theologicis constituendi, optimaque ... ratione* (Groningen: Hajo Spandaw, 1765).
was the Utrecht professor of church history Sietze Douwes van Veen (1856–1924).\textsuperscript{15} He regarded the Nijkerk movement against the background of a church full of half-heartedness and self-complacency caused by petrified doctrines and careless morals. In that situation, God used the Reverend Kuypers to breathe new life into the deathly church. His work was blessed, and people attained assurance of faith and a loving zeal for God’s Kingdom. This view must be seen in the context of the ideological struggle that went on in the Dutch Reformed Church at the time, with liberal theology being opposed by a movement for the revitalization of orthodoxy. Just as the national church in the middle of the eighteenth century had temporarily awoken from its state of lethargy, it might start to flourish again in the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{16}

In the first half of the twentieth century, church historians discussed the Nijkerk movement several times. Yet new research of sources was scarcely undertaken, and theological preoccupation in dealing with the historical matters was hard to escape. Again and again, the “origins” of the events were identified as the main problem to be explained. The Leiden church historian Albert Eekhof (1884–1933) proposed in a 1927 article that Kuypers was not only the instigator of the commotion but also the “product” of a revival, namely that in North America and Scotland. Eekhof drew a line from the transatlantic revivals in 1735/36 to the Cambuslang revival in 1742, which became known in the Netherlands through printed reports and could have inspired Kuypers to create just such an awakening.\textsuperscript{17} A decade later, the Amsterdam church historian Doede Nauta (1898–1994) followed this track in some articles on Kuypers and what he called the Dutch “offshoot” of the early Methodist revival movement in Scotland.\textsuperscript{18} He also made much work of indicating the differences in theology and pastorate between Kuypers and the pietist pastor Wilhelmus Schortinghuis (1700–1750), whose work on “the inner Christendom” had caused much commotion in the Dutch Reformed church during the 1740s.

Since 1980, some surprising challenges to the old historiography of the Nijkerk movement have come from the social sciences. Cultural anthropologist Jojada Verrips compared the symptoms of the troubled believers as described in eighteenth-century reports to modern cargo cults in the Pacific Ocean and

\textsuperscript{15}S. D. van Veen, \textit{Uit de vorige eeuw: vier voorlezingen ter kenschetsing van het kerkelijk en godsdienstig leven in de 18de eeuw} (Utrecht: Breijer, 1887).


\textsuperscript{17}A. Eekhof, “Waar liggen de oorsprongen van de Nijkerksche beroeringen?” \textit{Nederlandsch archief voor kerkgeschiedenis} 20 (1927): 296–299.

suggested that the convulsions were caused by food poisoning. A certain mildew often found in rye, the principal food of poor agrarian folk, could evoke hallucination and cramp. Social psychologist Mel van Elteren supplemented this theory. Arguing from the fact that people themselves were unaware of the medical-biological causes, he explained that the cognitive vacuum was filled in a religious way as a matter of course. Pastors offered the divine explanations, and those who were not infected physically also accepted them.

Some years ago, Aries van Meeteren tried a similar approach in a study of the revival in a village in the Alblasserwaard (one of the South Holland polders). Long-suppressed socioeconomic frustrations would have manifested themselves somatically in the recognized form of religious experiences, for which Scotland provided the example for the Netherlands, and Nijkerk for other places.

Current Dutch scholarship is still unsuccessful in finding a middle way between the strongly emphatic but hardly empirical, and the very abstract but poorly integrative approaches to revival history. During the past decade, for example, Reformed ministers published two books, one a biography of Kuypers and the other a “historical description” of the awakening in Nijkerk. They read the well-known sources again out of the current perceived need for a more emotion-based faith and an evangelical renewal of the church. However, a very refreshing collection of articles was published in 2001. Theologians as well as historians tried to deal with the controversial movement in the light of new facts and new insights. My own contribution to that project is summarized in this article. I want to demonstrate that Dutch research can play an important role in international revival studies. In particular I aim to show that the Dutch Reformed revival in the first half of the eighteenth century was an essential link in the chain of Protestant awakenings in Europe and North America.


III. The Chronological Tradition

The Nijkerk awakening in about 1750 was exciting, yet it was not unprecedented, either in international or in Dutch church history. Depending on the definition of revival, earlier examples can be given of remarkable church growth, deeply felt religious experiences, and even particular emotions and corporeal expressions. Regarding church growth, I refer to a special phenomenon during the Dutch Reformation period. Between 1572 and 1648, Calvinism became the official religion of the United Provinces due to the support of magistrates, though no one was obliged to become a member of the Reformed church. Consistories required public profession of faith and submission to ecclesiastical discipline for people to be admitted to the holy community and the Lord’s Supper. For that reason, many people postponed their choice of religion and came to form a wide circle around the core group of members, representing the so-called “lovers of Reformed religion.” Sometimes, for instance after the arrival of a new pastor or in response to very inspiring preaching and teaching, great numbers of these adherents came to profess their faith officially. Such events could be experienced as collective conversions and small pentecostal wonders at the local level.25

Since the middle of the seventeenth century, young men and women professed their faith as a ritual transition to ecclesiastical maturity after a proof of knowledge without special requirements of lifestyle. In this situation, extraordinary piety was not just measured by faithful church attendance and participation in the Lord’s Supper. Serious believers were distinguished by their intensive reading of edifying books and their eagerness to join conventicles, share remarkable experiences with others, and in general conduct a godly life. Ministers who called for such sanctification of life in word and print are considered representatives of the piety movement of Further Reformation or Reformed Pietism in a broad sense.26 Such preaching and pastoral work could make congregations flourish impressively. A poorly documented but striking report of such a case was given by John Quick (?–1681), an English puritan-minded minister in the city of Middelburg on the island of Walcheren where a number of highly influential pietists, such as Willem Teellinck (1579–1629) in the 1620s and Jean de Labadie (1610–1674) in the late 1660s, worked to proclaim the gospel. In a letter to a colleague, Quick sounded the praises of the Dutch Reformed people:

The ministry of the Word was exceeding successfull, many hearers would weep at sermons, proud sinners would quake and tremble at the word preached, multitudes were converted & reformed, religious worship was strictly & reverently celebrated in congregations & familys.27

A revival similar to the Nijkerk movement occurred in the city of Sluis, situated in the part of Flanders that was annexed by the Dutch Republic. Here Jacobus Koelman (1631–1695) had worked as a pastor since 1662, striving for a strict reformation of morals but mostly opposed by the local magistrate. As the threat of a French invasion was growing in 1671, the congregation underwent a visible alteration. Koelman himself in 1672 (the so-called year of disaster) wrote in a letter to his predecessor that his sermons had borne remarkable fruit since the previous winter. Every Sunday numerous attendants were brought to repentance about the state of their souls. Ungodly, indifferent, and ignorant people experienced a wonderful conversion. Entire families and quarters were involved. Old and young visited crowded services and catechizations. Children prayed in extraordinary ways and wrote out the sermons they had heard. House fathers replaced their forms by free prayers. Of course, Koelman says, there were also hypocrites, given that outward adaptation to the flourishing movement promised honor and respect.28

While Labadie was deposed by the Walloon Reformed synod in the Netherlands in 1669, Koelman was banned from his congregation by the city council of Sluis in 1674. However, whereas Labadie switched from the public church to his private circle of true Christians, Koelman remained averse to separatism and had traveled since then as a free pastor throughout the Netherlands and the German border regions to preach in conventicles. As it became clear that the government and the majority of the clergy would not respond to the call for radical conversion of the people and for purification of the church, Reformed pietism developed into a subculture that centered around its own pious experiences and connections, supported by congenial ministers and authoritative laymen or lay preachers. The public church and society at large were considered the domain of hypocritical Christians, a pool of spiritually dead people who needed to be brought to life individually or collectively. Several sources provide examples of such local revivals; some of them were the achievements of young pastors who were able to blow new life into their sleeping congregations, while others can be

seen as responses to the personal conversion of ministers who testified to a spiritual regeneration.29

From 1710 there were revivals in South Holland as well as in Groningen, Drenthe, and East Frisia; relations between many of the affected places were often of a personal nature. A schoolmaster in the Alblasserwaard wrote something against pietist pastors who charmed people with their “foul fanaticism.” They preached about conversion and rebirth as deep experiences of despair and as particular revelations, bringing about much anxiety among the religious people. Many lamented their sinful lives, which would bring them eternal punishment. In some villages people even crept into haystacks to hide from their misery.30 One of the instigators of this revival was Henricus Eyssonius (1683–1742), a self-named “metamorphosed minister” who went to a congregation in East Frisia in 1713. There he joined a pietist revival in which the pastor’s conversion of Wilhelmus Schortinghuis in about 1723 can also be situated. Influenced by the fijnen (precisians) in the Alblasserwaard, the student Sicco Tjaden (1693–1726) became a pietist before entering a pastoral career in the province of Groningen. In his diary he described how emotional piety flourished in the northern countryside. Among others, he met Meinart Thomas Hamrich (ca. 1640–1717), an uneducated minister and former friend of Koelman. He had been preaching for 40 years already when in 1716 his congregation began to show the fruit of his work. Numerous meetings were organized there by pious souls with eyes as “fountains of tears” from spiritual struggle as well as joy of faith.31

There were also signs of revival in the Rijnland region in the middle of the former province of Holland during the first half of the eighteenth century. The Scottish minister Robert Wodrow (1679–1734) noted in his diary in about 1730 a testimony of a certain Mr. Randy, who apparently had connections in the Netherlands. He reported what he called the best news for a long time, namely “that in several places up and down Holland, the Lord is following the Gospel and the endeavours of Ministers with visible success and remarkable conversion; not so much in their great towns, as up and down the country villages.” As an illustration he mentioned “that in one country village, within these few years, there has been, by the Lord’s blessing on a pious Minister, almost a general conversion of near two hundred families to serious religion and piety; and that this success is pretty common up and

30Balthazar van Gravenbigt, Een kristen beproeved en verzeekerd, of Nauwkeurige verhandelinge van de wedergeboorte (Amersfoort: Pieter Brakman, [ca. 1712]).
31Johannes Hofstede, Eenige aantekeningen en alleen-spraken betreffende meest het verborgen leven voor den Heere, van Sicco Tjaden (Groningen: Jurjen Spandaw, 1727).
down in several places. The Lord himself revives his own work in the midst of the years!" \textsuperscript{32} Undoubtedly, he referred to the pastor of Woubrugge, Carolus Blom (1674–1734), who experienced an influential conversion in 1716 that was still remembered in late-nineteenth-century pietist oral culture. \textsuperscript{33}

IV. THE INTERCONTINENTAL TRADITION

The tradition of Dutch Reformed revivals stretched beyond the borders of the Dutch Republic well into North America. The colony of New Netherland, founded in 1621 in the region of present-day New York state and New Jersey, remained strongly connected with the mother country after the English annexation in 1662, especially in ecclesiastical matters. \textsuperscript{34} Church members in New Castle (formerly Nieuwer-Amstel) wanted to call the expastor of Sluis, Jacobus Koelman, as their minister in 1682. The Reformed settlers along the South River, facing opposition from Lutherans, Quakers, and other “erring spirits,” could make good use of a fighting theologian like Koelman. Moreover, Koelman had mastered English, was very well acquainted with Puritanism as a translator, and would establish harmonious relations with the Presbyterian sister churches. Although Koelman and a number of admirers in Amsterdam were willing to make the journey, the transfer failed. \textsuperscript{35} About that time an adherent from Sluis, Guiliam Bertholf (1656–1726), migrated to New Netherland as an artisan. Having demonstrated his religious gifts as church reader and visitor of the sick, he was admitted to the ministry in 1693. As a genuine yet controversial pietist preacher, he worked among the Dutch Reformed Americans until his death in 1724. \textsuperscript{36}

The great wave of religious renewal in the Middle Colonies was provoked by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen (1692–ca. 1742), Reformed minister on Long Island since 1719. Then Americans did not yet know who he was. It had been the aforementioned Sicco Tjaden who had brought this godly candidate to the attention of the classis of Amsterdam. Frelinghuysen grew up in the German border region and was devoted to pietism in the spirit


\textsuperscript{33} For contemporary reports, see van Lieburg, \textit{Living for God}, 77–78; for a nineteenth-century English tradition, see A. G. Honig, \textit{Alexander Comrie} (Leiden: Groen, 1991), 19–25.


\textsuperscript{35} A. Eekhof, “Jacobus Koelman, zijn verblijf in Amsterdam en zijn beroep naar Noord-Amerika,” \textit{Nederlandisch archief voor kerkgeschiedenis} 10 (1913); 289–327 and 11 (1914); 13–40.

of Koelman. Working in America, he had much influence on religious life. Through his sermons, pastorate, publications, and personal contacts, he laid the basis for a series of revivals in the New World, culminating, as is well-known, in the revivalist success of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) in Northampton in 1734–1735 and of George Whitefield (1714–1770) in New England between 1740 and 1745. The latter achieved a prominent position among the greats of church history, while honoring Frelinghuysen as “the beginner of the great work.” Edwards appreciated the Dutch colleagues in his country for their “awakening, searching, strict, and experimental preaching.”

The transatlantic events also became known in Europe, if not by the personal correspondence between ministers and friends, then certainly through printed reports that further disseminated the good news in oral and written form. Jonathan Edwards’s account of 1737 about the revival in Northampton appeared in the German language one year later and in a Dutch translation in 1740. The same is true for the Cambuslang revival in 1742. This private and public communication was part of an international commitment to collective prayer for the extension and welfare of the Lord’s Kingdom. Since 1744, several circles existed in Scotland and North America whose members met regularly to pray for the universal revival of religion. This so-called Concert for United Prayer, about which printed memories were distributed, may well have become known among Dutch ministers in America and possibly also in the Netherlands. After the outburst of the Nijkerk movement in 1749, this exciting news also spread to the Anglo-Saxon world through a network of correspondents.

Precisely during the Nijkerk awakening, a son of the late Theodore Frelinghuysen, John Frelinghuysen (1727–1754), was staying in the Dutch Republic to receive his theological education and ordination as a minister in New Netherland. He returned home to New Jersey in the summer of 1750...
and shared the news about Nijkerk with a friend, a certain Davenport. Davenport wrote about it in a letter to Jonathan Edwards who corresponded with his colleague John Erskine in Edinburgh. Edwards wrote on June 28, 1751: “The letters I have received from my other correspondents, make mention of a great revival of religion in Guelderland, and Mr. M'Laurin has sent me printed accounts of it, published, as I understand by Mr. Gillies, his son-in-law, being extracts of letters from Holland.”42 Probably these reports appeared in an American revival magazine, preceding the publication of Gillies’s historical collection in 1754.43 By the way, Edwards also told that John Light, a Dutch minister in New Jersey, was translating reports from Holland into English.44 In addition, an English-language account of the Dutch events appeared in London in 1752 under the authorship of Hugh Kennedy, the already mentioned Scottish minister in Rotterdam.45

As more news about the Dutch movement reached the revival sympathizers, spiritual opinion became more differentiated. Strong criticism was developed by Jonathan Edwards, who in a number of theological treatises tried to establish the criteria for the work of the Holy Spirit. Already in his first letter to Erskine, his positive reference to the events in the Netherlands was embodied in a general warning against false conversions. When he wrote two other letters, dated July 7 and November 23, 1752, Edwards appeared better informed about the Nijkerk developments. He had learned that the Dutch awakening was hindered by irregularities and finally feared there was more evil than good in it—more than public advocates such as Kuypers and Kennedy were aware of. As explained before, Kuypers himself had also become more nuanced. This is also clear from a letter written July 10, 1754, to John Gillies, apparently after a request for further information to be used in the latter’s pending publication of the “historical collection.” This letter, however, arrived too late and was published many years later in a 1761 appendix to the volumes. In it Kuypers held on to his view of the movement as an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.46

42 *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, I:cxxx. A certain John Light, Dutch minister in New Jersey, would have been a translator of reports from Holland into the English language.


One more individual in the Dutch-American revival network should be mentioned: Gerardus van Schuylenburg (1681–1770). As a young Reformed minister, imitating Koelman intentionally, he played a role in the Alblasserwaard awakening about 1715. Then and later he stimulated—referring to the prosaic word of Psalm 72:16—the actions of lay preachers, including a farmer in the village of Kockengen who provoked a revival in a vacant congregation in 1747, just two years before Kuypers did the same in Nijkerk. During those years Van Schuylenburg housed the aforementioned John Frelinghuysen in his parsonage in Tienhoven and brought the American student into contact with a godly girl in Amsterdam, Dina van den Bergh (1725–1807). She accompanied him to New Jersey as a minister’s wife and is still being honored as a “mother in Israel” in the Reformed Church of America. Finally, Van Schuylenburg provided the 1755 Dutch edition of the biography of David Brainerd (1718–1747), a Scottish missionary among the Red Indians, first published by Jonathan Edwards. The preface described New England’s church history from an initial flowering through a troubled period to a recent recovery due to faithful, orthodox, and pious preachers. Van Schuylenburg encouraged his readers in particular to pray for the remaining members of the Reformed church in the former colony of New Netherland:

Since 1720 a powerful door has been opened there under the ministry of Theodorus Jacobus Frilinghuysen Senior, who (besides several presbyterian preachers) has been used for building up the fallen walls of Zion, whose two surviving sons are still working there with fruit, together with other preachers, also those of the Scottish church.

V. MEETING OF TRADITIONS?

In this paper I have focused on some of the concrete interconnections between revivals that widely diverge in time and space in order to demonstrate that the Nijkerk movement was neither an incident nor an isolated event. However, this does not mean that I would defend an approach consisting of the mere tracing and reconstruction of such relations. Rather, I would distance myself from the traditional inclination—in addition to the tendency to view events from

50Apparently he did not know that one of Frelinghuysen’s sons, John, had already died a year before he wrote these words.
a purely theological perspective—of church historians to look for “origins,” “forerunners,” and “offshoots,” etcetera. I study revivals principally in the same way ethnologists deal with oral and written stories. Tales can be told and retold in many different versions that are adapted to changing social and cultural contexts. Their patterns of diffusion can be imagined either as lines between locations or circle waves crossing each other. However, tales may also arise anywhere and any time due to basic human psychical conditions. Why should such “polygenesis” not apply to collective articulations of religious experience?51

The study of revivalism in a context of communication is well tried by some Scandinavian scholars in church history and (popular) culture.52 Whereas communication is a processual phenomenon involving sender, message, and receiver (in singular or in plural), to be “revived” simply means being deeply influenced by a religious message presented by others. Most revivals contain a range of messages—either in verbal form, especially in a Protestant context, or in rituals and symbols—representing different social and cultural levels and being in a continual state of change, moving from one location to another, from individual to individual, and from group to group. It is important, in my opinion, to note that theological concepts can also be transformed into exemplary stories and religious experiences, as I have demonstrated with the Reformed notion of a “justification in the court of conscience.” During the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, a Puritan comparison of God’s justification with a juridical trial has been adopted as a highly privileged testimony of grace in Dutch pietist sermons, private discussions, and personal conversion stories.53

Being inspired in my general approach by studies on revivalism and communication, my diachronic perspective of the Dutch revivals during the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century (which can easily be


extended into the nineteenth century) is derived from historian Marilyn Westerkamp’s analysis of the Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies. She placed the Dutch revivals in a long tradition of Scottish-Irish Calvinistic piety and started her history with the Six-Mile-Water Revival in Ulster in 1625. In her continuous argument about the relations between church and state, preachers and believers, and orthodoxy and pietism, she showed that eighteenth-century religious dramatics do not fall from heaven. She considered revivals as temporary collective manifestations of personal piety, of which the views, images, and rituals were already latently available in religious culture. In the same way, I would place the Dutch awakening that suddenly occurred in some Reformed communities about 1750 primarily in the context of a long, consolidated tradition of dogmatic concepts, individual conversions, and stories of remarkable acts of providence.

In addition to the appropriation of particular faith experiences, there was a demonstration of physical religious emotions. In fact, these too were part of a universal tradition of individual ascetic practices or collective forms of enthusiasm, present in Protestantism from the very beginning. Stories about Anabaptist preachers in Switzerland, Lutheran prophets in Germany, Quakers in England, and Camisards in the Cevennes, to mention some examples, circulated in believers’ communities. The same is true of the Jansenists who experienced convulsions when visiting the grave of an abbot in Paris in 1731. Of course it is hard to discover whether such a repertoire was available among pious Reformed people in the Netherlands. However, it makes no sense to look for physiological, medical, or psychiatric explanations for these uncommon phenomena. They do not suffice to explain why certain particular forms of behavior were able to occur under such diverging circumstances in different places and at different times. More insight is needed into the symbolic function of some corporeal utterances in the religious worldview. In group settings, such meaningful body language—crying, shaking, and falling—could be easily imitated without the intention to deceive and without being experienced as false.

What, then, makes the Nijkerk movement still exceptional or unique? I think it must be studied with particular regard to the growing tensions within the confessional state, the sociopolitical structure of religious life in Europe since the sixteenth-century reformation. Characteristic for that system was

the state’s support for one single church to organize public worship, popular education, and theological training of the clergy. Little or no room was left for lay activities or individual faith expressions, let alone collective emotions. In the eighteenth century it became more and more obvious that the confessional state was not succeeding in turning its subjects into pious Christians. Several strategies were undertaken to reach this goal: orthodoxy was strengthened by the application of confessionalization and discipline, pietism promoted personal godliness, and Enlightenment theologians sought a simplification of doctrine. The time was not yet ripe for the radical alternative of building up communities of believers independently of political and ecclesiastical structures, as was attempted by the Moravians in several countries.57

The confessional state of the Dutch Republic also felt threatened in the 1730s and 1740s, as is clear from the strong reactions to the immigration of Herrnhuters, as well as from the polemics concerning pietist “bestsellers,” and last but not least from the commotion caused by the Nijkerk movement.58 Actually, what was special was not the event itself—a temporary but powerful manifestation of lay piety—but the broad social discussion of the event. Although the polemics followed the traditional codes of theological disputes, the intensity and the national scope of the controversy reflected the rise of a new public sphere, in which free deliberation about matters of general interest was possible.59 The contents of the struggle—the appreciation of individual belief and personal piety—also touched the core of the modern nation state, which eventually would replace the confessional state.60

VI. CONCLUSION

Americans speak of the Great Awakening between 1720 and 1760, that is, the “First Great Awakening” as distinct from the “Second Great Awakening” in the early nineteenth century. British tradition refers to Methodism, which is of

course closely related to the revivals in the entire Anglo-Saxon world. I have demonstrated that several developments in the Reformed Church in the Dutch Republic and in the countries across the German border in the first half of the eighteenth century can be situated very well in the picture of the “First Great Awakening.” Yet such a term has no significance in Dutch religious historiography. Regarding the Nijkerk movement, we can only refer to a shift in colloquial language from “trouble” (beroering) to “revival” (opwekking). This lack of a sound label for the events can be explained from later history. The success that evangelical Protestantism had in Great Britain and North America did not occur in the Netherlands or Germany. At best some small groups of Reformed pietists in the Netherlands could have conceived of the Nijkerk movement as a chapter in their spiritual “prehistory.”

In labeling piety movements, Dutch church historiography has borrowed from foreign traditions. As for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the German standard works of Heppe and Ritschl annexed the Netherlands for Pietism, that is for reformierter Pietismus—although the term Nadere Reformatie served as a national alternative for some centuries, which term should also cover the Reformed piety movement in the German border region. As for the nineteenth century, the untranslated term Réveil is in circulation for a very specific elitist Dutch Protestant movement. The Netherlands has not experienced a serious counterpart to the German Erweckungsbewegung, although this term is literally translatable as opwekkingsbeweging. I just want to indicate the relativity of several terms in the international research of church history. Usually these terms define early modern traditions from a national historical perspective and from a retrospective point of view. In fact, they are historiographical “terms of appropriation” that should be decoded by modern historical research in order to understand religious renewal movements in their original context and function.

When it comes to the definition of Pietism, it would be a welcome development if we could overcome the contradiction that is being coined in the German Pietismusforschung between a strict ecclesiastical and chronological connotation on the one hand, and a more anthropological and diachronical connotation on the other hand.61 We should not return to the 1754 approach of John Gillies, who transformed a series of stories into a “history of the success of the gospel.” He was not hindered by fixed terms like Puritanism, Pietism, or Methodism, let alone a focus on Central Europe after the Thirty Years’ War or the activities of Spener after 1670. Yet in a certain sense, Gillies’s approach comes close to the recent proposal

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by Hartmut Lehmann to consider Pietism as one link in a transatlantic chain of revivals that together aimed at rechristianization and revitalization in order to resist the breakthrough of secularization. 62 Although we need terms for international scholarly communication, we may equally need to get rid of national and confessional labels produced by later agendas. At the same time, terminological periodizations should be restricted to the great transitions in the interplay of politics, religion, and society, such as from the corpus christianum to the confessional states during the sixteenth century, and from the confessional states to the modern nation states in the early nineteenth century. Only then, public religion was located in the inner experience of people, and religious revivals were recognized as its public manifestations.