

Een theocratisch visioen

THEOLOGISCHE UNIVERSITEIT VAN DE GEREFORMEERDE KERKEN  
IN NEDERLAND TE KAMPEN

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## **EEN THEOCRATISCH VISIOEN**

**DE VERHOUDING VAN RELIGIE EN POLITIEK VOLGENS  
A.A. VAN RULER**

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

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# Summary

The theocratic model for the relationship between church and state had powerful advocates in the Dutch society. During the first 25 years after the liberation from the German occupation the Dutch-Reformed theologian A.A. van Ruler, professor in Utrecht since 1947, was its most fervent defender. With his theology about the state Van Ruler seems to have been the final representative of an age-long tradition in the northern Netherlands on the subject of the relation between the state and the Reformed church. In this book we mapped out his theocratic vision, placed it in its historical context and ascertained its present-day meaning for Christians who want to connect faith and politics.

Christians today are living in a democratically organized social order, in which different convictions have equal rights. In what way will they be able to reconcile their role in it with the absolute claim of the truth of the Christian faith? Must they continue devoting themselves to a theocratic social order or keep themselves apart from political life? Is there perhaps a third way? Can Van Ruler's political theology be helpful in finding an answer to these questions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Christians trying to find a well-considered position in the political domain should have given the question of their own origin considerable thought and therefore have gone through Van Ruler's view. This will prevent secularization creeping into Christian-political thought.

How Van Ruler gave a dogmatic foundation to his theocratic vision and how he viewed the actual realisation of it is examined successively. Subsequently we give attention to some predecessors who inspired him to a large extent. We describe the reception of his views by contemporary theologians and the response they received in church and politics. Next we follow the ongoing discussion about his theocratic body of thought after his decease. This study therefore is of an ethos-historical nature.

Finally we discuss its lasting significance, its weak and strong aspects, and where necessary we will try to formulate our own answers to the questions he raised, which are of essential importance to Christians seeking to answer their calling as citizens. Can a Christian, convinced of the absolute truth of the Word of God, participate with a clear conscience in a modern democratic social order?

In the *second chapter* we examine two central concepts in Van Ruler in connection with his theocratic view: Christianization and corpus christianum. In Van Ruler's view the Christianization of a nation is the road along which theocracy can be realized, although it can never be realized completely. The result is a state that can be characterized as corpus christianum. Both are essential in the coming of the Kingdom of God.



Van Ruler only distinguishes between a pagan state and one with the Bible. A neutral state is impossible. The distinctive feature of the state with the Bible is that its spiritual foundation is the Bible and its justice is based on God's commandments. On the way to realizing God's Kingdom the state is crucial; for the church is only a means to preach God's commandments to the state. In a state with the Bible the nation has been Christianized, at least outwardly, and its citizens serve the Lord as a body. Van Ruler grounds this view on election and covenant, which are not concerned with individuals or generations, but with nations. He rejects a dichotomy between a Christian and a non-Christian part of the nation.

The church according to Van Ruler is a focal point in the Christianization of the nation and state. He attributes a central position, but not an exclusive one, to the Dutch Reformed Church. The theocratic view implies that the church has to represent the revealed truth in the political sphere. This makes the ecumenical movement a very urgent matter. Van Ruler's theocratic vision thus comprehends a close mutual engagement of church and state which engagement is therefore institutionalized.

Subsequently we examine how Van Ruler founds his view on Holy Scripture. It is evident here that biblical foundations only play a limited role in Van Ruler's theocratic vision. An appeal to particular places in the Scriptures is subservient to this overall view. We can state, however, that his theocratic vision is directly related to his view of the Old Testament. In his opinion there is a contrast between the Old Testament, that is theocracy directed and the New Testament that is soteriology directed.

Van Ruler's theocratic line of thought is closely related to his dogmatic-theological view as a whole. In this view God's dealing with this world takes place from his eternal counsel until the eschaton with the aim of the supremacy of the Kingdom of God. The fall into sin intervened as a disruptive element. That is why the world needs reconciliation through Christ and sanctification by the Holy Spirit. But all this forms an interlude until the complete breakthrough of God's Kingdom on the last day. In this process of sanctification, in which the kingdom of God receives its various temporary manifestations in this world, the state plays a more important role than the church. Based on his dogmatic view in its entirety and in the framework of God's work in the history of salvation, he attributes an important place to Christian governments. In close cooperation with the church these governments will have to promote Christ's Kingdom by devoting themselves to the Christianization of their people. The Old Testament Israel is the normative model.

In Van Ruler's opinion the importance of the history for his theocratic ideal is to be found in the views of his predecessors. He has a balanced understanding of the tension between holding an ideal and implementing it, therefore he does not over-idealize. However, an important element in his theocratic vision is, that he values the history and culture of Europe as determined by Christianity. To the European nations he assigns a mission for the Christianization of nations in other parts of the world.

At the end of this chapter we indicate five pillars on which the ideal is founded: Christianization as a common task of church and state; the view of Christianity

as a mix of revelation and paganism; the view of the Old Testament with David's theocratic kingship as a model for all time; the idea that in the New Testament dispensation peoples would be led to Christ nation by nation; and the view of western culture as a Christian culture. These pillars are founded on his understanding of the Law and the Kingdom of God.

In the *third chapter* we examine how Van Ruler develops a practical application of his theocratic vision. Theocracy to him is a concrete ideal that cannot be realised completely.

However, it is more than a vague dream. He has a concrete image of how the church ought to function in such an order, and the same applies to the government. In spite of the visionary character of his theocratic conviction he has very concrete ideas about its implementation in the Dutch state and society. At the same time he gives little thought to its practicability in the Dutch society of his time. Van Ruler was a normative thinker; he left practical politics to others.

In a theocratic society such as he has in mind, the state and the church must Christianize and rule the nation together, in great unity, as in a marriage. Nation and church will coincide in essence. At first Van Ruler advocates a restriction of political rights for citizens who do not adhere to the true religion, but after 1945 he did not come back to it. He realizes that such a theocratic government of the state would make an aggressive impression on dissident citizens. He rejects violence towards them, but for reasons of principle he wants tolerance to a large extent. He has nothing concrete to say about the bounds of this tolerance.

His judgment on the tolerance and the public rights of dissenters is gradually becoming more positive. However, he does not offer a convincing solution to the tension between his theocratic vision and the tolerance he advocates at the same time. This becomes clear from what he writes about the public position of the Roman Catholic Church and of the Humanist Society. He may recognize the rise of other religions, but the question of tolerance towards them is not a concrete matter of discussion yet.

Van Ruler realizes the value of popular influence on the government. His view of the theocratic organization of the state, however, is problematic for him in view of the democratic system of political parties and the freedom of thought for all convictions. Yet his appreciation of their positive contribution is gradually increasing. The actual conditions are contributive to this development. Consequently his attitude develops from a compromise with an imperfect reality to magnanimous acceptance. Nevertheless, he fails to present a clear harmony between theocracy and democracy. The difficult choice between truth and independence is a lasting problem for him.

Because of his identification of church people and nation he has objections of principle against the appearance of Christian organizations, but given the circumstances he finds practical reasons to opt in favour of a Christian political party and a Christian primary school.

In the background the ideal of the one nation that serves God in unity is permanently present.

The *fourth chapter* gives attention to three predecessors who have been of great importance for the development of Van Ruler's theocratic vision, viz Ph.J. Hoedemaker, A. Kuyper, and K. Barth. There will be discussion of the importance of all three to Van Ruler. When comparing Hoedemaker and Van Ruler we see that Van Ruler's theocratic view is much stronger embedded in an overall theological concept than Hoedemaker's. Van Ruler, though, unmistakably followed Hoedemaker in taking the Old Testament relations in Israel as the starting point for his thinking about church and state.

Of great importance to Van Ruler at the beginning of his career was his close attention to Kuyper. It is also because of the confrontation with Kuyper's doctrine of common grace that he developed his own view of the relation between church, state, nation and culture. He has a great admiration for him as a person, but their opinions about church and state, Christian culture and national culture, are almost diametrically opposed to each other. Yet underneath lies a spiritual congeniality in their struggle for a government that openly wants to serve God in their policies. Van Ruler seems to have become more conscious of this towards the end of his life.

At first Barth's theology appealed to Van Ruler, but it is exactly on the point of the relation between church and state that he distanced himself from him at an early stage and drew the obvious conclusions. As opposed to the way in which Barth separated salvation from reality and the world from the Kingdom of God he gave salvation a place in the reality of the creation. He saw the Kingdom of God already become apparent in the cooperation between church and state for the Christianization of the nation.

Because of his independent, constant thinking in Hoedemaker's line, his stand against Kuyper, and his independent position towards Barth, Van Ruler occupies a unique place in the Dutch political theology of the twentieth century.

In the *fifth chapter* we describe Van Ruler's position versus his contemporaries in the debate on theocracy. During the first years after World War II Van Ruler had a number of supporters within the Dutch Reformed Church. But these, too, were critical of specific points of Van Ruler's argument for theocracy. Dutch Reformed theologians like Th.L. Haitjema, G.C. van Niftrik, H. Berkhof and A.J. Rasker also see the relation between church and state in a theocratic light and they choose (at least initially) for a Christian political party. But they were influenced by the dialectic theology more so than Van Ruler was. It is especially Haitjema and Van Niftrik that express critical opinions about Van Ruler in a public correspondence, but he made it clear that they failed to appreciate his deepest intentions. On the other hand, these critics have not really contributed to the discussion, on account of the fact that they wanted to solve the inner tensions in theocracy through Barth's dialectics. And whereas Van Ruler held on to his ideal all his life, sympathizers like Berkhof and Rasker gradually distanced themselves. His theological foundation of theocracy hardly came up for serious discussion during his lifetime. He avoided any discussion himself, too.

Just like Van Ruler the supporters of the Doorbraak ('Breakthrough', groups of Christians switching over to a non-Christian party) could appeal to certain lines in

Hoedemaker's thinking. But because of their choice for (personalistic) socialism those who opted for the *Doorbraak* ('Breakthrough') underestimated the tensions between this ideology and the Christian life principles and overestimated the possibility of a practical implementation in politics. They became virtually invisible in the Labour Party. Van Ruler realized this in time, which also resulted from his criticism on Barth.

In the sixties Van Ruler emphatically turned against the supporters of the so-called 'new' or 'radical theology' (developing into the theology of revolution/liberation theology). He recognized a basic relationship as to the pursuit of the Kingdom of God in the political way, but he rejected their way of thinking as hypertheocracy. He was involved in the preparation of the *Getuigenis* (*Statement*) which was not published until after his death.

Several theologians from Reformed circles outside the Dutch Reformed Church, like I.A. Diepenhorst, G.C. Berkouwer, W.H. Velema, K. Schilder and C. Trimp criticized Van Ruler's theocratic views. It seems to us that Schilder and Trimp in their criticism do not do Van Ruler justice in all respects. For instance in the course of time he distanced himself from Barth far more clearly than they are aware of. Van Ruler differs from Barth where the former distinguishes between creation and fall, creation and salvation. They are blind to any points of agreement that can be indicated in every dogmatic dispute between Van Ruler and Schilder c.s. Theologians in the Reformed Church (Liberated), too, opposed the dialectical theology, the '*Doorbraak*' ('Breakthrough') and the theology of revolution. They also agreed with much of Van Ruler's criticism of the Anti-Revolutionary Party. But the religious and theological distance was too large for them to be able to appreciate one another as allies in this struggle. During his lifetime Van Ruler's theocratic range of ideas was only mentioned in passing in criticism from the Reformed (Liberated) side.

A few German Lutheran theologians, too, criticized his theocratic ideals. But Van Ruler did not come to any explicit answer to this criticism. Yet during his lifetime four doctoral theses were devoted to his theocratic ideal – all of them in a foreign context - which were predominantly positive; two South-African authors without any criticism at all.

All in all, during his professorate (1947-1970) the theological developments in the Netherlands, together with the dialectical theology, the *Doorbraak* ('Breakthrough') and the theology of the revolution took an entirely different course from what was essential to Van Ruler, namely theocracy. However, he refused to 'move with the times' and would rather have himself branded 'conservative' than give up his ideal. Consequently he continued fighting these developments, although with increasing disappointment about the lack of supporters. As S. Gerssen wrote after his death: 'He felt the most aggrieved by the fact that his theocratic vision had held the interest of only a few.'

In the *sixth chapter* we describe Van Ruler's influence in the Dutch Reformed Church and in various political parties. His influence on the point of view of the Dutch Reformed Church in regard to the mission of the church in society appears

to have been considerable during the first years after World War II. This is obvious from the realization of *Fundamenten en perspectieven van belijden* (*Fundamentals and Perspectives of Confessing*) and of the Church Order-1951. But starting from the mid-fifties his influence gradually ebbed away. His criticism of the Pastoral Letter *Christen zijn in de Nederlandse samenleving* (*Being a Christian in the Dutch Society*) is severe. It is true there is an incidental revival in the publication about *De politieke verantwoordelijkheid van de kerk* (*The political Responsibility of the Church*) in 1964. After 1970 the Dutch Reformed Church disassociates itself more and more from a theocratic view of the relation between church and state.

The political party of which Van Ruler was a co-founder, the Protestant Union, had too small a following in the Dutch political life to play an important role. Of the other political parties only the SGP shows any sign of a growing affinity to Van Ruler's views, but without the pronounced place that Van Ruler assigns to the church. It is true that within the CHU and the GPV Van Ruler's views did have some influence, but this is not at all, or hardly noticeable any more.

The *seventh chapter* contains an evaluation of Van Ruler's theocratic ideas and a formulation of our own answers to the questions he raised concerning the relation between religion and politics. As our criticism is part of a permanent debate we first briefly examine what others put forward after his death. The literature consulted contains various points of criticism, which are often to the point.

What is lacking in these publications is a total framework in which Van Ruler's theocratic thought is assessed systematically. We do that in the rest of this chapter. We link up with the five pillars under his theocratic vision that we distinguished at the end of chapter 2. This brings us to five points of criticism: 1. The special character of the Old-Testament dispensation is too much left out of account. 2. The idea that in the New-Testament dispensation the nations are Christianized as collectives does not find support in the Scriptures. 3. The task that he assigns to the government concerning Christianization cannot fail to lead to religious pressure. 4. Christianity is not done justice to when it is characterized as a mix of revelation and paganism. 5. The European culture is all too easily valued as a Christian culture. Our conclusion, therefore, must be that the theocratic ideal as van Ruler saw it, is not the right interpretation of the relation between church and state, religion and politics in the post-Pentecost dispensation.

In order to remove the impression that nothing good can be said about his vision of the relation between religion and politics, we also indicate what we appreciate in Van Ruler's vision. That is absolutely his positive appreciation of creation as the work of the Creator; his respect for the government as God's servant; and his love of the nation that he so much wanted to see serve God in its totality. We also appreciate his repudiation of radical theology as this arose in the sixties. He posed critical questions about the operation of the democratic system, the neutrality of the government and the division of the nation into parties; questions that theological ethics cannot carelessly ignore.

Finally we answer the question how the relation between the Christian faith and politics, church and state ought to be looked upon in the light of the Bible.

Although we reject theocracy as a political ideal, Van Ruler's criticism of the democratic order, the neutral state and the party system deserves serious consideration. Is a Christian state - in a non-theocratic form - an aim to be pursued on biblical grounds? If not, or if that object cannot be achieved, how should the government deal with the spiritual variety among the people?

Christians nowadays live in a democratic public order, in which various convictions have equal rights. Must they continue devoting themselves to a theocratic order or rather keep themselves apart from political life? Or is there a third road? If a Christian is convinced that the Word of God is the truth (Psalm 119,160) can he participate and bear responsibility in a political order in which the question of truth is left undecided and all persuasions have equal rights? What are the implications for the formation and the foundations of parties? In short, can Van Ruler's political theology be helpful in finding an answer to the questions that Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century politics are faced with?

Our conclusion is that Van Ruler's starting point in his criticism of the democratic system was a one-sided view of democracy. Recognition of the constitutional state is part of the essence of democracy (the *rule of law*: even the highest authority is subordinate to the law; power does not mean you are free to do as you like) as well as the recognition and protection of the rights and freedom of minorities. This is not only a view held within the Reformed ethics, but no less by non-reformed theologians and by jurists. This view of democracy can give a Christian the liberty to participate in a democratic order. There is no need to hide his being a Christian - different from Barth's view - let alone to deny it, but he will have to accept that his conviction concerning the absolute truth of God's revelation will not be shared by others in the public debate.

Within a democratic, constitutional state the government is supposed to treat all citizens the same, regardless of creed. In this sense the government has to be impartial. It is true they cannot avoid making choices and deciding about good and evil. Here they can only ignore the wisdom of the Bible to their own cost.

Christians who organize themselves in a party based on a Christian foundation would do well to be conscious of the problems this presents. But this is no reason to abandon the formation of a party for reasons of principle.

Looking back at the results of our research we must admit that Van Ruler's dream about a theocratically ruled society is attractive - if only we stay aware of the fact that the realization of this dream is not to be expected until the second coming of Jesus Christ when he will return to judge all people and nations and establish his kingdom on the new earth for good. At that time tolerance will no longer be an issue, because all godless people will have disappeared from the face of the earth (Psalm 104,35). A critical examination of Van Ruler's political theology has also brought us to the conclusion that we must not try to get ahead of that future by turning this dream into a programme to be pursued in this temporary earthly dispensation. Van Ruler has not always been able to resist this temptation.

Therefore, rejecting both theocratic ideals and anabaptist aloofness we opt for a third road. With recognition of the earthly character of government authority Christians are allowed to make it their aim to influence government policy in a

positive way. They will do this using their democratic rights. God willing it will even be possible for a country for a shorter or longer period, to be governed also by authorities that obey the Word of God. However, even then, this does not make a theocratic state. It will remain a free, democratic state in which the government does not utilize its authority for compulsion or pressure in spiritual affairs, but respects everyone's freedom. In such a situation the church must also maintain its independence and its own responsibility, which the government has to respect.

But whatever the political circumstances may be – from dictatorial Roman emperors to libertine secularists – at any time it is the task of the church and the believers to pray for kings and other authorities, in order that they may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way (1 Tim. 2,2) and pay respect to them as God's servants (Rom. 13,1-7, 1 Pet. 2,17).

# Curriculum vitae

Jurjen Pieter (Jurn) de Vries werd geboren te Vrouwenpolder op 1 februari 1940, als oudste zoon van J.J. de Vries, v.d.m., en M.C. Hartenberg. Hij behaalde in 1957 het diploma gymnasium A aan het Willem Lodewijk Gymnasium in Groningen en studeerde daarna aan de Theologische Hogeschool van de Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt) te Kampen, waar hij in 1963 het kandidaatexamen aflegde. Daarbij leverde hij voor het vak Dogmatiek een scriptie over de hoofdstukken 3 en 4 van Van Rulers dissertatie *De vervulling van de wet*. In 1981 volgde het doctoraal examen (cum laude) met als hoofdvak Ethiek. Zijn doctoraalscriptie was getiteld *Verantwoord handelen met betrekking tot onze consumptie*.

Van 1963 tot 2001 was hij als redacteur werkzaam bij het *Gereformeerd Gezinsblad*, later *Nederlands Dagblad*, waarvan sinds 1974 als hoofdredacteur. Van 1967 tot 1974 was hij tevens part-time medewerker van de GPV-fractie in de Tweede Kamer.

Daarnaast vervulde hij verschillende ambten en functies op kerkelijk en staatkundig gebied en op het grensvlak van beide. Zo was hij enige perioden ouderling in zijn woonplaats en in 2002/3 scriba van de generale synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt).

Hij was van 1974 tot 1978 en van 1981 tot 1982 lid van de gemeenteraad van Amersfoort voor het GPV en van 1999-2003 en opnieuw in 2007 lid van de Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal voor de ChristenUnie. Van 1964 tot 1974 was hij voorzitter van het Landelijk Verband van GPJC's, van 1970 tot 1978 lid van de Centrale Verbondsraad van het GPV en van 1970 tot 1999 lid en voorzitter (sinds 1977) van het curatorium van de Groen van Prinstererstichting, het wetenschappelijk bureau van het GPV. Hij was lid van de staatscommissie-Biesheuvel (Relatie kiezers / beleidsvorming) van 1982 tot 1985, van de externe commissie van de Tweede Kamer die het rapport 'Het bestel bijgesteld' (kamerstuk 21427 nr. 36) opstelde (1992 tot 1993), en van de staatscommissie-Thomassen (versterking van de Grondwet) van 2009 tot 2010.

Ten tijde van het werk aan dit proefschrift maakte hij voorts deel uit van het moderamen van het interkerkelijk Contact in Overheidszaken (CIO) en was hij voorzitter van de stichting Dienstencentrum GVO en HVO), die het facultatieve godsdienst- en levensbeschouwelijk onderwijs op openbare basisscholen faciliteert ([www.gvoenhvo](http://www.gvoenhvo)).

Hij werd in 2002 benoemd tot ridder in de orde van Oranje-Nassau.

Hij is na een huwelijk van 43 jaar sinds 23 december 2006 weduwnaar van Alida Jongeling en heeft drie kinderen en zeven kleinkinderen.