

How the Reformational Movement got started in the UK

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Dutch Christian life at the end of the nineteenth century saw a flowering, associated with the prominent figure of Abraham Kuyper, in almost every area of national life. The “reformed faith” gave practical, public demonstration of its beneficence. In the 1920’s, the idea emerged that this philosophy of life should be propagated by setting up an international association of “calvinists”.

The London-based “Sovereign Grace Union”, with members in a wide variety of church affiliations, was, as a development of that idea, brought into contact in 1928 with the Dutch Prime Minister, H. Colijn. Henry Atherton, its secretary, minister of Grove Chapel, Camberwell, was an ex-coal-miner with boundless enthusiasm for calvinist action. He published an edition of Kuyper’s Princeton Lectures in 1931 but his understanding of calvinism was more churchy, theological and doctrinal-scholastic than practical and cultural. To get to understand the Kuyperian “second reformation”, he took a party of British Christians to Holland in 1929 (among them both my parents).

Others, in USA and South Africa, who wanted that international association, doubted whether Atherton and the SGU generally had the breadth to handle a leading role. A fatalistic type of calvinism with a one-sided emphasis on the “lost-ness” and “powerlessness” of believers was what they sensed in the SGU.

When he took the leaders to meet Colijn in Holland, the Dutch Prime Minister recorded his impressions of Atherton in a letter.

The SGU aims that members should propagate the Reformed principles in their own churches in England...and principally the doctrine of election.....Yet an awareness has arisen that there is a wider calling to the Calvinistic world-view than their earlier activities showed.....this is what moved them to seek contact abroad.....As for the men themselves, Rev. Atherton knew some of Kuyper’s work and has an open eye for the broader implications of Calvinism. His opinions now and then would astound reformed Dutchmen – specially when he chases off to the Battle of the Boyne or the Loyal Orange Institution; you’d think he put these on the same level as Reformed doctrine. Still he’s an attractive personality with extensive knowledge, a warm faith and good Calvinist foundationwe must see what these men or their organisation in England can set up in the direction of international co-operation.

THE INTERNATIONAL CALVINISTIC CONGRESSES

Atherton’s energy sprinted ahead and four International Congresses with wide representation, the first in London, were mounted between the wars. But the rise of fascism and communism externally and conflict internally over strictness of adherence to the inerrancy or infallibility of Scripture brought an end to the activity. Kuyperians who supported *Christian* educational, social and political associations distrusted Barth’s supporters. The conservatives (Atherton and his friends) dreamed of an *ecclesiastical* and *denominational* calvinism, not Kuyper’s *universal* and *confessional* type. The English were always sceptical about Kuyper’s political achievements demanding coalition with Roman Catholics.

IARFA

International collaboration began again, almost “from scratch” in 1951. The International Association for Reformed Faith and Action (IARFA) was established under the leading of Jan Dengerink (Holland), Jacob Hoogstra (USA) and Pierre Marcel (Fr.) in 1955. The universal relevance of Christian faith for life in the world inspired this effort. A Kuyperian inheritance and the influence of Herman Dooyeweerd are identifiable from the start.

16 international conferences took place in 30 years to 1983. Nine of them, from Nottingham in 1968, were organised by Ruth and me in the UK, Europe and USA. IARFA published *The International Reformed Bulletin* from 1958 to 1981, edited by Philip E. Hughes, Bernard Zylstra, Paul Schrottenboer and finally by me with the help of Lance and Hazel Bidewell.

Ruth and I, six weeks after our marriage, first attended an IARFA conference in 1964 as conservative evangelicals reared on D. M. Lloyd Jones. It was a turning point in our lives. The forbidding image of a Platonic Heaven, in which most evangelicals then seemed to believe, vanished for ever. (“Where in the Bible, young man, do you find that you will spend eternity there with Christ?”) The redoubtable Stacey Hebden Taylor (Vicar of Greengates, Bradford), Bernie Zylstra, Dengerink, van Riessen, Schrottenboer, Stanford Reid, Herman Ridderbos, Klaas Runia, Pierre Marcel became our friends and encouraged us.

A Charity, IARFA(UK), was registered to support the international association and propagate a Kuyperian worldview in this country but never really got off the ground. We never had ecclesiastical members - only individuals. Our interest was primarily in the full-orbed life-in-the-world of the people of God (church-life included.) The focus fell not so much on theology as on action recruited or invaded by the Kingdom of God in family and marriage, art and science, state and school, political party and industrial or commercial enterprise, labour union and private association.

“Reformed” proved a poor title for our purposes. The English use it of alcoholics, wife-beaters and other criminals. Christians may use it to indicate separatism and world-avoidance. It brings to mind on the one hand re-published Bible commentaries from some imagined golden age (Puritan, Evangelical Revival, Victorian) – or it means presbyterian with Euro-links. It suggests an ecclesiastical zone, a scholastic theology (emphatically rational, concentrated upon a “realm of grace” and exhaustive in its ambition to master the Word of God.)

WEST YORKSHIRE SCHOOL OF CHRISTIAN STUDIES

For various reasons IARFA came unstuck both internationally and in UK. Its administration was concentrated on very few, widely dispersed, people who could rarely meet. It suffered from chronic financial difficulties. **Wysocs** (<http://www.wysocs.org.uk/>) has functioned as IARFA(UK) was intended to do and the international network continues as a great joy and encouragement. Two international symposia have been held here, the first, led by George Vandervelde and Mike Goheen, as a means of exploiting the convergence of Lesslie Newbigin’s Missiological movement with the Kuyperian or reformational movement, the second, led by John Van Dyk, to study what Christian school education means for the classroom. In September 2006, we ran a day conference on Management in Christian Perspective with attenders from many parts of the UK. The hope was

expressed that a study group should continue the work of that conference. In December, **wysocs** will host a crucially important meeting on Global Economy and Climate Change, with Sir John Houghton and Prof Bob Goudzwaard, two influential leaders of the Christian world, as speakers. In 2006, its 21st year, **wysocs** incorporated IARFA(UK) and adopted the latter's charitable registration. In 2007, one of our Tutors, Mark Roques will start a programme of training the class leaders of the "Crusader" movement nationwide. Already this year, Mark and Arthur Jones have represented **wysocs** and the reformational movement in proposing new ways of rekindling Bible Study among young people. The Working Group handling this issue consists of Scripture Union, Scripture Gift Mission (now Lifewords), Crusaders, London Institute for Contemporary Christianity and **wysocs**.

What now? Why shouldn't **wysocs** continue to function *nationally* as a reformational organisation with its HQ in Leeds? (It need not be London!) What is most important is the geographical closeness of the officers and the majority of its committee members. Meeting frequently gets things done. It's my opinion that the reformational movement in the UK could and should increasingly use the existing (and mature) **wysocs** organisation as an effective administrative structure. The success of this Colloquium demonstrates the feasibility of such a strategy.