Summary
Groen van Prinsterer’s historical approach to politics

In the introduction, the thesis question of this book was described. This thesis question can be summarized as follows. When Groen van Prinsterer wanted to clarify his political way of thinking, he described it not only as ‘antirevolutionary,’ but also as ‘christian-historical.’ But what exactly was ‘historical’ supposed to convey? Indeed, Groen wanted to be known as a ‘Christian’ confessor of the faith but in what way did the term ‘historical’ further clarify his political stance and moreover how did he define it? Unfortunately, this question has received little attention even though it is essential to understanding the observations and political dealings of Groen van Prinsterer.

In the introduction it was also explained why the term ‘approach’ was used. This ‘approach’ consists of two different components, both important to Groen’s political thinking and work. On the one hand there is the historical school of law that initially attracted him as a student. We called this ‘the historical principle.’ On the other hand, as a result of his conversion to orthodox Protestantism around 1830, he developed a new religiously-oriented view of history. We called this his ‘religious philosophy of history.’ In order to place these two distinct components under one term, we opted for the broad concept of ‘approach.’ The introduction concluded with a short explanation of the objectives and the structure of this book.

Chapters I-III address the first component of Groen’s historical approach: The historical school of law. In chapter I, we were introduced to Groen’s early interest in a historical disposition with reference to his personality and aptitude. In chapter II we investigated the meaning of the historical school of law and its influence on Groen. We discussed in particular the relationship between the founder of the school, Von Savigny, and Groen. We examined the various aspects of the historical principle. These included the respect for what had developed throughout history, the unique character of historical institutions and the antirevolutionary, non-contrarevolutionary approach to current events. We concluded that all these influences influenced Groen. We then asked whether Groen could be called a historist. In Chapter III, we examined the relationship between Groen and the German political scientist and politician Stahl from within the framework of our discussions about the historical school: While Groen generally showed himself to be a strong apologist of the often reactionary-minded Stahl, it became apparent in political life that there were considerable differences between the two. This can in part be explained by Groen’s Calvinism and Stahl’s Lutheranism and their differing views of God’s providence.
Chapter IV addresses the second component of Groen’s historical approach: His religious philosophy of history. Groen’s philosophy of history can be summarized as follows: The world without God is a state of chaos and thus would remove the reality of ‘history’ in the true sense. On the contrary, Christ came and His church was established in this world. Through these actions history was restored which made it possible for the state and society to be blessed. Groen studied history in that light and from it streamed the second part of his well-known motto: ‘It is written! Is has come to pass!’ This is to declare that God has revealed himself in the Bible and history. The latter cannot be seen as an ethical demand but as simple reality based on experience: If a nation displays Godly faith it will be blessed. If a nation displays wanton unbelief then chaos and decline come into existence. ‘Blessing’ is a concept with material and immaterial aspects. ‘Even the heathens’, Groen frequently stated, understood this to some degree. Groen saw a direct analogy between an individual and a nation: The individual Christian will ponder his or her own life’s history and learn from faith and failure. Likewise a nation will have to reflect upon faith and unbelief, blessing and decline in its history. Groen examined the history of the Netherlands in this regard and published his findings in his Handboek der Vaderlandsche Geschiedenis (Handbook of the History of the Fatherland).

Groen’s idea here was not original as consideration over the special position of the Netherlands in its relationship to God had already arisen in earlier centuries. In his Handboek, however, Groen offered a more systematic overview of the rise and fall of the Netherlands. He did not pay much attention to isolated events in Dutch history but rather on the long-term effects of Dutch belief and unbelief on the nation’s general material and immaterial situation. Groen also took time to examine the French Revolution in order to demonstrate how unbelief could result in chaos and disaster. The results of this research went on to form his best-known work Ongeloof en Revolutie (Unbelief and Revolution).

Chapter V was a more theoretical chapter discussing the relationship between the two components of Groen’s historical approach. It appeared that there were similarities between the two components that nevertheless had to be distinguished. One was also able to establish that the religious philosophy of history was put into perspective by the historical principle. The combination of the religious philosophy of history and the historical principle meant that Groen could not without question be positioned within a left-right classification. This combination also shed light on changes in his political attitude during his life.

Groen spoke openly about the influence of a number of prominent foreign scholars. In addition to the Lutheran Stahl mentioned above and the Swiss Von Haller, he mentioned in particular the Anglo-Irish Anglican Burke and the French Calvinist Guizot. These authors were discussed in chapters VI, VII and VIII. Von Haller had inspired Groen early on with regard to the historical source of the State. He distanced himself, however, from other themes of Von Haller’s that were clearly reactionary in nature. This was further proof of how important this historical aspect of the State was for Groen. The three ‘celebrities’ Groen referred to were Burke, Guizot and Stahl who all had one thing in com-
They all presented themselves as historians and played an important part in the politics of their nations. Their politics along with Groen’s also displayed a historical slant.

Burke preferred what had been formed by history on a vague respect for tradition (‘The wisdom of tradition is the wisdom of God’). One learned, however, nothing from his work about Christ as the center of history or the meaning of the Christian character of nations or periods. Guizot also had a sharp eye for the meaning of what had been molded by history. As an optimistic historical philosopher, he saw a straight line towards progress and freedom. According to Guizot, the French Revolution was a step on that path. Although he was critical of certain aspects of that revolution, Guizot did not condemn the events after 1789 as a process entirely controlled by unbelief as did Groen.

Groen regarded himself as a Dutch representative of a European movement of Christian-historical scholars and statesmen. This was however rather optimistic. It was true that all these scholars and politicians shared a respect for what had evolved through history and were critical of the French Revolution. These opinions, however, did not find exact matches in a Christocentric philosophy of history. That is why Groen, also within the European context, should be regarded as a more solitary individual than he professed himself to be. He was a thinker who appropriated the works of others when needed but otherwise preferred to go his own way. That Groen regarded himself so firmly connected to Stahl, Burke and Guizot proves once more how important he believed the historical approach was. However much the three politicians differed from Groen, their historical interest was what bound them.

Groen’s historical approach can be more clearly understood through reference to the concrete political issues with which he was confronted. This was investigated in chapters IX, X, XI and XII. In selecting these issues we took into consideration how much attention Groen paid to them and whether the historical approach could be relevant.

One of the issues which Groen confronted at a relatively young age was the Belgian question under which in this study falls: a) The formation of the new kingdom by virtue of the decision of the European powers, b) The policy to be followed with regard to the Belgians and c) The release of Belgium from the kingdom. In the approach to this Belgian question, we see Groen’s historical principle and his religious philosophy of history ‘in action’ as it were for the first time. This is detailed in Chapter IX as follows:

Groen called the decision of the great powers to construct a new and enlarged kingdom both unhistorical and artificial. Given the reality of this creation, however, Groen believed one had to respect the historic rights of the southern counties, the southern Catholics and the Belgian aristocracy within that kingdom. These views resulted from the historical principle. At the same time, however, he argued for a certain Dutch supremacy and for a Protestant counterweight against the French spirit of the revolution, on the basis of his religious philosophy of history. During the Belgian uprising, Groen showed himself to be a fervent supporter of the historical, legitimate authorities. Once the uprising was successful,
Groen soon realized that the Netherlands had to pull its troops back to the center of the kingdom in the North. As a result of his religious philosophy of history, he saw in the reduced kingdom a State that was being challenged to develop itself in the spirit of Protestantism, the the Republic of the United Netherlands being a prime historical example. From Groen’s historical approach his political position could clearly be deduced. Sometimes there was a certain tension between the consequences of his historical principle (for example respect for the rights of the church and the aristocracy in the south) and his religious philosophy of history (Holland as a bastion against the revolutionary spirit in France). A consistent line can however clearly be discerned in Groen’s case, as opposed to the inconsistent and wavering politics of king Willem I.

Chapter X outlined Groen’s views about the relationship between church and state which evolved during his life. After the separation of the Belgian counties in 1830, he was inspired by his religious philosophy of history to seek closer bonds between church and state. A neutral state or even worse a state without any connection to the church was unthinkable for Groen initially. If Reformed belief were to be excluded from the public domain other religions and ideologies would surely fill the gap. Gradually Groen sought for the narrow ties, or ‘associations,’ between church and state by pointing out its historical nature. He also pointed out the tolerant nature of Protestantism, which he distinguished from the indifferent ‘tolerance’ of Liberalism. He declared that the state had to recognize the fundamentally Christian character of the Dutch nation, precisely by emphasizing the truly tolerant nature of Protestantism. Thus with regard to the subject of ‘church and state,’ it again appeared that his historical principles and religious philosophy of history were determining factors.

Chapter XI discussed Groen’s desire for the one state-run and Christian school, fruit of the aforementioned cooperation between state and church. This cooperation in education had after all been the case during the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic, which prompted Groen’s consistent praise. He soon acknowledged, however, the fact that many Roman-Catholics were dissatisfied with this state of affairs while at the time Protestant orthodoxy was losing influence. This meant that the orthodox Protestant nature of state-run schools was being compromised, whereby orthodox Protestant parents were facing a moral dilemma. For Groen, education was not merely the transference of knowledge but also an upbringing. He furthermore believed that Christian education was not only important in regards to a Christian upbringing but also to the promotion of a Christian understanding of the history of the fatherland. The latter in turn stems from his religious philosophy of history.

Gradually Groen’s position favored a split, where possible, within the framework of state-run schools. In particular, the big cities could consider Protestant and Roman Catholic state-run schools. After all, as he increasingly acknowledged, Catholics also had historic rights. He also became increasingly incensed that free private schools, which were not founded or maintained by the state, were being thwarted by the government. In this case it was called a question of the free-
dom of conscience, which Groen, given his religious philosophy of history fervently supported.

The revision of the Constitution in 1848 offered possibilities for a certain concession to Groen’s ideals with regard to primary schools. He was, however, terribly disappointed by the Primary Education bill as required by the Constitution of 1857. For the most part, this bill was the creation of Groen’s friend and sympathizer Van der Brugghen. From a comparative study of Groen and Van der Brugghen, we concluded that Groen’s religious philosophy of history and Van der Brugghen’s view about current events both played important roles. The differences between them did already appear, however, in their earliest correspondence: They thought differently about the church, the state and the meaning of the Christian faith. The Primary Education Act of 1857 eventually led to the resignation of a deeply disappointed Groen as a member of the Second Chamber. In the Act he saw the historical cooperation between church and state being dismantled. This resulted in a remarkable viewpoint for Groen: He accepted the Act as a historical inevitability but consequently also wanted to guarantee the ‘neutral’ status of the state-run school. If the government wanted this ‘experiment,’ then it had to intentionally prevent the emergence of an explicitly anti-Christian education. At the same time, however, Groen believed that state-run and free Christian schools should be able to compete with one another in an ‘honest’ way. During a following term in the Second Chamber (1862-1865), Groen tried to improve the preconditions for the free schools. What was particularly important was his attempt to abolish Article 194 from the Constitution, which was interpreted by many as an obligation for local councils to found state-run schools throughout the country.

On the one hand, Groen did not want an obligation such as this but on the other hand neither did he want the free schools included in the Constitution ‘as a rule’ either, a position which many others held. His consistent historical principle prevented him from forcing through issues by means of Articles in the Constitution. This was particularly the case if in doing so the States-General would be deprived of its own freedom to formulate. Groen supported the role that the Dutch Reformed Church had in founding private schools. After 1857, Groen followed a course that would be in keeping with the historical ties between church and state and would also offer room for conscientious objectors. Both these aspects were typical for this age of the Republic. During the period of 1857-1870, he tried in vain to accomplish these tasks.

Around 1870, Groen became convinced that the ‘experiment’ of 1857 had failed. His idea of an optional division of the state-run school resurfaced in his correspondence with friends such as Elout van Soeterwoude and Van Otterloo. This conviction only became public after a brochure had been published by the Liberal education specialist Farncombe Sanders. This brochure was warmly recommended by him a month before Groen died. Also behind this turn that Groen made in the 1870s, lay ideas closely linked to his historical principle and religious philosophy of history.
Chapter XII discussed Groen and the constitutional monarchy of the Netherlands. Not having a clear preference for a republic or a monarchy, Groen believed that a ‘limited’ monarchy under the dynasty of Orange would be right and proper for the Netherlands. However much he praised the Republic of the United Netherlands as a blessed commonwealth, this did not apply to its constitutional form. He soon saw divine intervention within the conduct of the stadtholders, the Princes of Orange, whom he compared to the Old Testament judges of Israel. He supported the fact that in 1813 sovereignty had been bestowed on the House of Orange, as the crowning glory of its ‘destiny.’ Given history, he saw this destiny in particular as the ‘protection of minorities.’ At the same time he also continued to argue for a ‘limited’ or ‘reduced’ monarchy, joining the typically Dutch tradition in doing so. During his last phase of life in particular, he spoke in positive terms about ‘republican components’, but at the same time warned against hollowing out (‘refutation’) the monarchy. It was against this rather ambivalent background that we examined Groen’s views about the role of the king, the ministers, the States-General and their mutual relations. Groen, who continued to think historically, was confronted with his former friend and future adversary, Thorbecke. Thorbecke was, just like Groen, a supporter of the historical school but was fascinated with ideas concerning a new state and society. Thorbecke also wanted an association that was historical, but referred particularly to what was nascent and relevant to the times, as he saw them. He also interpreted the history of the Republic in a different way than Groen.

Groen’s opinion about the development of the Dutch monarchy highlighted worry and pessimism even before the constitutional revision of 1848. His worries appeared to be confirmed after 1848, particularly in 1856, when his openly expressed opinion concerning the king was completely thrown to the wind. This for Groen marked the beginning of the ‘demolition’ of royalty. While at various moments throughout his life he argued for a homogenous ministry, which in certain cases would be able to replace the king, he ultimately seemed to have little hope of his ideal ‘limited monarchy’ being realized. This ideal can be described as follows: A monarchy of Orange with real powers for the king himself, whereby the king continually deliberates with and leads the ministers, but in doing so is open to the influences and wishes of the populace. At the basis of this position lay Groen’s ideas about the historical destiny of the Orange dynasty as determined by God. It also simultaneously incorporated the ‘republican’ (democratic) components as they had been manifested during the Republic. In addition, one also finds Groen’s opinion about harmonising the dimensions of authority and freedom. According to Groen, this harmonization will only be found in the historically-rooted consensus of monarch and people. This was after all the state of affairs during the high days of the Republic when the authority of God was generally accepted.

At the close of chapter XII, paragraph 7, we concluded that Groen, in applying his religious philosophy of history to practical politics, came to positions that were mutually contradictory. In other words, he tried to keep to two historical lines that could not always be united.

In the political position that Groen chose in dealing with the current issues of
his time, we see that his historical principle and his religious philosophy of history are always present, even though they are sometimes alternating, mutually complementary or even at odds with each other. They form the warp and the weft of all the political positions described above.

In chapter XIII a number of observations can be found about Groen’s historical principle. As far as this principle was concerned, we thoroughly examined the question why Groen, who after about 1830 primarily wanted to be a confessor of faith, remained a supporter of the historical school his entire life. We believed that four things influenced this decision:

1. His aversion from a very young age to anti-historical illusions which were strengthened by his Christian understanding of human failings.
2. If he failed to find definitive answers in the Bible, his need for guidelines made him reach out for lasting structures which could be found in history. In the existing historically-formed reality he saw, just like Plato, the reflection of the essence of God’s ordinances.
3. His sense of nationhood, present at an early age, was a breeding ground for his great appreciation of the Republic, which had been influenced by the Reformation.
4. The connection he made between the break in the historical continuity and the ideas of popular sovereignty and contrat social, which he rejected, were also conducive to thinking from a historical principle.

In our opinion, the historical principle can be regarded as a healthy reaction to the general constructivist way of thinking which gained prominence during the French Revolution. Groen wanted to return to historical reality, which in itself was a good desire. The historical principle, however, had its own trappings. In this context we successively discussed static conservatism with its aspects of legitimism and legalism, actualism and its opposite, quietism. The historical principle can also lead to too much emphasis on what is ‘characteristic,’ which can devolve into extreme nationalism and/or blindness towards the Kingdom of God. Often connections were made between a historical situation and faith in God’s providence. This gave the sense that God’s providence had led to a certain situation and that that situation should therefore be continued. Religious followers of Groen made this connection in particular during the period of the interbellum. This became clear in their political choices, in particular those regarding the Dutch East Indies/Indonesia, but also in other ways as well. This applied to a figure such as the Antirevolutionary leader Colijn, but was also not absent in his successor Schouten. During that same interbellum, however, serious objections were raised by like-minded philosophers such as Dooyeweerd and Mekkes against what was called an ‘irrational historicism.’

In chapter XIV we offered further considerations about Groen’s religious philosophy of history. Already at first sight, various objections can be raised around the central theme of Groen’s philosophy of history. We have tried to summarize these objections in ten points:

1. It is doubtful that the comparison Groen makes between the individual who regards his personal fate and a nation that contemplates its history is valid.
2 The complexity and therefore the difficulty of managing the concept of ‘blessing’ in practice.

3 The trap of basing oneself on ‘the facts’ without having regard for hermeneutics.

4 The autonomous subjectivism in the interpretation of God’s leadership in history.

5 The fragmentarism that arises when one only wants to point out God’s leadership in certain people or certain events.

6 The schematism in the periodization of history, which arises if one sharply juxtaposes in an antithetical way the time preceding the French Revolution and the time that followed it.

7 The danger of anticipating divine judgment.

8 The insufficient appreciation of the hidden nature of God’s leadership in history.

9 The one-sided nature of Groen’s ‘decadence theory’ (Humanity is said to regress in a continual way).

10 The questionable nature of the structures of creation, which according to Groen, become visible in history.

After an analysis of these objections, we examined what attitude four consecutive professors of the Vrije Universiteit had towards the central thesis of Groen’s philosophy of history. These were A. Kuyper, A.A. van Schelven, H. Smitskamp and M.C. Smit, who all felt involved with Groen. It was established that the first three gradually distanced themselves from Groen. We paid particular attention to the philosopher of history M. Smit. In his inaugural address delivered in 1955, he outlined in penetrating terms the dilemma that could arise when God is seen in abstracto. In other words, this is the tension that arises between the idea of an authority who arranges everything and the limits in the concrete historiography to secular and purely human factors that the historian employs. It seems that Smit’s inaugural address and his other publications can be classed as a turning point.

In the case of writers who represented another direction than these professors from the Vrije Universiteit, we also discovered a new interest for God’s acts in history. It appears that in the last half century a surprising amount has been published about Groen’s central theme by authors of various disciplines and confessional schools. The most important publications in this context, at least as far as they were published in the Netherlands, were listed in paragraph XIV.3 and were provided with a few marginal notes. In doing so we made a distinction between subjects that showed great mutual consensus and subjects that brought differences of opinion to light. In paragraph XIV.4 we offered a number of short concluding remarks. To this end, some of the viewpoints were as follows: A philosophy of history is not only desirable but also inevitable for all those who want to be involved in politics. The central theme of Groen’s philosophy of history remains important. This theme, however, will have to be applied with the utmost caution, exactly because it concerns a matter of faith. This caution is also necessary when, for example in the case of a society in decline, not only constitutional