

Edward W. Bok and the Midwestern Dutch: A Comparison of Connecting and Dividing Moralities

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In June 1920 the Rev. Samuel M. Zwemer presented the Baccalaureate Sermon at Hope College with the title: "The Duty of Conclusive Thinking on Great Subjects." He advocated tightening a belt about wandering and superficial thoughts. Zwemer talked about the purpose and method of education, especially christian education. He complained that the American youth was not interested in contemplation, but in amusement and entertainment. They rather read cartoons, discussed sports or perused "the mysteries of the *Ladies' Home Journal*."¹

The last line in this litany suggests that the youngsters of Dutch Reformed stock liked to read the nation's leading ladies' magazine, whose editor happened to be another Dutch immigrant, Edward W. Bok, who lived from 1863-1930. Three months after Zwemer's speech Bok would publish his autobiography, which remained on the bestseller lists for years and functioned as the main icon of Dutch-Americanness.² Bok provides an excellent example to compare the Dutch of the Midwest with an Americanized representative of the 'detached' Dutch immigrants of the Eastcoast. Despite the fact that Bok was a highly visible immigrant, he never became the hero or leader of the Dutch-American community. To explain this I will explore Bok's immigrant experience, his Dutch identity, his relation to the Netherlands, and his worldview.

Immigrant experience

A first reason why Bok never became a Dutch-American immigrant leader was the nature of his atypical immigrant experience. Eighty percent of the nineteenth-century Dutch immigrants left the Dutch countryside for a settlement among fellow countrymen in the Midwest, by way of chain migration. The Bok story was different. The family had a professional urban background and adhered to the Mennonite faith. The only feature in common with the majority of Dutch immigrants was that they moved as a family. The parents and two sons aged eight and six had to leave Den Helder involuntarily after a financial scandal in 1870, which had humiliated the father. No wonder they avoided contact with former countrymen. They settled in Brooklyn, where they had relatives, and did their utmost to become accepted by their new environment, by attending a Methodist Church and filing for citizenship as soon as possible in 1876.

After several clerical positions in publishing and using his hobby of collecting autographs to gain access to the American cultural and political elite Edward Bok became the editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1889 at age twenty-six. In Philadelphia, he made the *Journal* into the leader in its field and the envy of its competition. In 1896 Bok married his boss's only daughter. With the fortune of the company he rose to considerable wealth and influence during the thirty years of his editorship. His objective was to make life more comfortable for middle-class American women. His magazine's blend of information, entertainment, and uplift, proved a goose with golden eggs, attracting millions of readers and large sums of advertisers.

It did not go unnoticed among the Dutch-Americans that a fellow countryman had acquired an important position. Expectations ran high, judging from a message in the RCA periodical, the *Christian Intelligencer* in early 1892 from a personal acquaintance of Edward Bok: "No young man, to whom so much success has come, has carried himself so well as has this young Dutchman. He is a credit to American literature, but a greater credit to Holland and the Dutch."³

The leading church magazine of the CRC, *The Banner*, recommended reading the *Ladies' Home Journal*, because it did not belong to the dispirited category of the magazines, "so materialistic, realistic and so much ignoring higher and better things, that they should never be seen on our reading tables." The minister didn't even have to use the argument that the editor was a fellow Dutchman to support the *Journal*.⁴

Despite these compliments, the conditions of Bok's background would make it hard for him to play an active role in the Dutch-American community. We might wonder whether Bok identified with the Dutch and his compatriots in the midwest.

Dutch Identity

Bok eagerly embraced his new environment, but always maintained his love for his native country which he believed had contributed more to American culture than the Anglo-Saxons wanted to acknowledge. Bok had warm feelings for the Netherlands, to which he ascribed virtues of honesty, modesty, and rationality. He found opportunities to extol the Dutch virtues in his *Journal*, usually by tying them to royalty reports on Queen Wilhelmina.⁵

However, his testimony about his former country was always subjected to his perception of his own role. During his life he became America's model man, the proof of the reality of the American Dream, the classic success story for every poor immigrant, and the admirable philanthropical example for the affluent. In fact Bok was an American in bone and sinew. His priority was to coach American women during the transition of the United States from a producer economy to a consumer society, which thoroughly changed households and the position of women.⁶ His references to his Dutchness served to give him distinction and to strengthen his idealistic, mildly progressive, agenda for America.

This image was acknowledged by Hope College, the same institution where Zwemer spoke his critical words. Hope conferred an honorary Doctor of Laws degree on Bok in 1910 for "his literary ability, his wonderful success as a journalist, and his deep interest in education," but probably also to move Bok into contributing to the college.⁷ This degree was an immediate result of the award that Bok announced for the best paper on "The Hollander and His Descendants in the West of the United States," a contest won by George Ford Huizenga.⁸ Bok never intended to be the champion of the Dutch immigrants but expanded his promotion of the Netherlands by documenting the contributions of Dutch stock in the west. He had no idea of the sensitivities of the Dutch community, since he had overlooked the other Dutch-American college, Calvin, as Henry Beets noticed to his chagrin.

Moreover, it was not problematic for him to claim Dutch ancestry. Only during the First World War a visible clinging to Dutch ties proved harmful. Fully Americanized and operating outside a Dutch community, Bok did not feel the tension that Dutch-American minorities in the Midwest experienced when the Great War erupted. Houses of 'disloyal' inhabitants were painted yellow and ministers who refused to conform to the order to abandon the Dutch language were harassed.⁹ To Bok at the East coast these problems were unknown. Bok's loyalty to the US was never even questioned, since his behavior did not deviate from standard patriotism. He completely conformed to the expectations of loyal citizens. Indeed, he contributed to defining patriotic standards, so that he unintentionally made it more difficult for other immigrants to sustain their non-American preferences.

Interest in the Netherlands

Bok was more interested in the Netherlands than in the Dutch immigrants. After the war Bok took up the cause of Holland when Dutch economic interests were harmed by Holland's reputation as a profiteer during the war. Rumors circulated that the Netherlands imported more wheat, cokes, and fertilizer than it needed, selling the surplus to the Germans. The Dutch, in turn, were critical of the United States, which seized 135 (idle) Dutch vessels for war transport. The malfunctioning diplomatic corps made these misunderstandings even worse.¹⁰

While the American press continued to accuse the Dutch of pressing demands on poor Belgium, and refusing to extradite the German Emperor, American policy increasingly touched Dutch interests. Protectionist measures, immigration restriction, aggressive oil policy, and cable connections required immediate action.¹¹ This dismal situation prompted Dutch businessmen to assume the initiative from diplomats. The founding of a Chamber of Commerce for the Netherlands and its colonies in January 1920 helped to mobilize Dutch commercial interests, when government efforts failed to conduct a Holland-promotion campaign which had to put an end to the bad press. Bok gladly helped to cleanse the undeserved reputation of the Dutch and assisted in strengthening Dutch-American relations.¹²

This concern coincided with Bok's political priorities. He heartily supported the efforts of a political coalition that advocated American membership in the League of Nations.¹³ When a political victory proved precarious, League supporters tried to counterbalance the isolationist mood by establishing bilateral friendship organizations headed by celebrities. Woodrow Wilson was also Bok's idol and he lent himself to head the Netherland-America Foundation (NAF). This Foundation had as its purpose to advance the educational, cultural, and scientific relationships between the two countries and to foster mutual understanding. Bok's latent ethnic feelings surfaced when he retired in 1919 and his old fatherland needed his help. The vicissitudes of the postwar situation kindled Bok's interest in his old country.

Autobiography

The best chance of connecting with the other Dutch was when Bok published his autobiography in 1920, immediately after his retirement. This book made his Dutch background explicit by proudly stressing that it was the story of a "Dutch Boy."

The book breathed a spirit of gratefulness for the chances for advancement, but Bok wanted to say more. He made an effort to raise the level of idealism in the USA. Therefore, he started his book with a beautiful story about his grandparents on the island of Texel who left a legacy of responsible behavior and idealism. Bok himself believed the myth that they had transformed the Texel wilderness into an earthly paradise. He adopted the motto with which his grandparents had sent their children out into the world to do good, as his own: "Make you the world a bit more beautiful because you have been in it." Bok used this inflated story to lend meaning to his own work and life. For him the story expressed the essence of America, and it would result eventually in the building of the Bok Tower in Florida.

His book followed the tradition set by Benjamin Franklin who also started in poverty and climbed to wealth by self-education and virtue. Bok presented personal features such as industry and honesty as the keys to success and thought he proved that any immigrant could achieve this. Convinced of the fact that he belonged to the "hooggeboren" class in the Netherlands he had no false modesty and approached the upper crust with self-confidence. He used the Netherlands to chastise America for its vices, such as lack of thoroughness, wastefulness, and disrespect for authority. With careful orchestration the book became a big hit, sold 200,000 copies and received the Pulitzer Prize for Biography in 1921. The liberal press in the Netherlands also praised the book and gave it wide attention, because it had high expectations of Bok as an ally to advance Dutch business interests in the United States. However, the abridged translation proved too American to appeal to the Dutch who were unfamiliar with this kind of autobiography or the genre of success literature.

Contrary to the jubilant press in America, the book was largely ignored by the Midwestern Dutch. Although Scribner's advertised the book in the English language magazines of the Reformed Church in America, it did not create an enormous demand. Individual members of this church wrote Bok that they identified with him. One of them naively confided that it could have been so different if Bok had moved to Michigan, where his father would have made it to mayor or president of Hope. Most opinion leaders of the Christian Reformed Church, however, reviewed it only to stress their dissatisfaction. They considered the book a propaganda effort to "Anglicise" the immigrants, threatening their Dutch heritage and their attempts to maintain a firm ethnic cohesion. More generally, these critics rejected Bok's worship of success and found him lacking in true godliness and respect for fundamental religious issues. They had other standards for success. A common ethnic background was not sufficient cause for endorsement. Apparently, the love of previous years had cooled down.¹⁴

World View

Influenced by Abraham Kuyper, the Reformed Dutch, whether they were explicit Kuyperians or not, found the ideas about the relation between God and man, man and society, man and himself of utmost importance for their identity. The more Bok revealed about himself and took a stand in national debates, the more this led to reservations among the Calvinist immigrants.

In his youth Bok did not have an explicit philosophy of life. His mixed religious background, Mennonite and Remonstrant, precluded strong identification with a denomination and made him susceptible to fashionable currents. In Brooklyn the eminent orator Henry Ward Beecher became Bok's guru. Beecher directed Bok to a non-sectarian faith, embracing the immanence of God, denouncing dogmas, emphasizing the moral and cultural value of the Bible, and stressing the needs of the individual. This did not go well with the Reformed tradition, which emphasized creeds, community, strict census mores, discipline, sacrifice, and denominational loyalty.

As editor of the *Journal* Bok had assessed the religious situation in a Progressive vein. After the defeat of the Progressive Party in 1912, he announced that the nation stood at the threshold of a new period of moral and religious awakening. At the same time Bok worried that the churches would miss the opportunity or misunderstand it and he recommended modern advertising methods. The churches should learn from business.¹⁵

During the Great War he embraced a popular version of spiritism to sooth anxiety among women about the effects of the war, suggesting that the dead were only in "The Other Room" and not really gone. Simultaneously he emphasized the war as the very opportunity to build pressure for necessary reforms. In fact Bok encouraged his audience to a mood of denial.¹⁶

In the midst of these difficult times Bok published his own confession of faith in a song, "God's Hand," with the central lines: "Earth's deepest sorrows they last but a day; Fresh courage I will give you: I am the Way." The core term of this rhyme is that God gives "fresh courage." Bok expected neither divine intervention nor prescriptions except for brotherhood, nor did he wrestle with difficult spiritual questions. He mixed liberal theology with New Thought ideas to seek reassurance of the self.¹⁷

One may wonder whether the Dutch were familiar with Bok's religious subtleties, but what they noticed about it did not reassure them that Bok was one of them. In 1924 Henry J. van Andel, professor of Dutch Studies at Calvin College, himself an immigrant and belonging to the group of positive Calvinists commented upon the religious contents of the *Ladies' Home Journal* in his magazine *Religion and Culture*.¹⁸ He took issue against *Journal*-contributor William Lyon Phelps, a popular Yale professor of literature, who defended the reality of miracles and seemed an ally of the orthodox Calvinists. Yet, according to Van Andel, he missed the main miracle, namely that sin was a reality and that personal regeneration that could overcome sin was God-given. Van Andel attacked Phelps for his

conventional advice, which represented exactly what Bok stood for; "Shake off your selfishness and become a spiritual man; get away from your self-consciousness, individual pride, egotism, sensitiveness, and self-importance and become a social being!"¹⁹ Even stronger did *De Hollandsche Amerikaan* denounce Phelps, who recommended the Bible as great literature. This ultra-orthodox journal called Phelps' articles treacherous, because they only looked at beauty and not a truth. The title of the editorial was itself a warning: "Denk om de Bokspooten," [beware of the goat's legs]. The journal later prided itself for never having joined the adoration for Bok and his book.²⁰

The non-sectarian functional approach to religion was an asset for the *Ladies' Home Journal*, but a stumbling block for the Dutch-American community. The various factions within the Reformed immigrants showed a varying degree of appreciation of how others regarded the relationship between God and man.²¹ Whatever their position, the priority of most Dutch immigrants was to remain Reformed and they expected their ethnic tradition to assist them in this effort. In interpersonal relations, the man-wife relation was crucial. Initially, Bok and the midwestern Dutch shared the same point of view: they feared woman's suffrage would undermine the family. Bok gradually abandoned his caricature of the politically involved woman and when he discovered that the "New Woman" was not that bad, he accepted suffrage as unavoidable.²²

The earliest debates on woman suffrage in the 1870s escaped the attention of the Dutch in Michigan. In 1912 the spokesmen for the CRC concluded "We cannot afford to vote for a measure which if carried and enacted in to law, will destroy love, harmony, and intimacy and thus strike a blow at the very foundations of the ideal home."²³ Although the official position of the CRC was that since there was no rule for suffrage in the Bible, the church should abstain, most opinion leaders found biblical arguments against woman suffrage and most Dutch voted against the amendment that gave women this right.²⁴

When women got the vote in 1920 many Dutch Americans faced the dilemma between practice and principle. In Wayne County Michigan a referendum was held about the suppression of parochial schools. Since christian education was central to Dutch Calvinism, the question arose whether it was allowed to muster the support of women to defend the Dutch christian schools. The editor of the *Young Calvinist* strongly discouraged this strategy, arguing: "I would rather lose the schools in the way of the Word of God than save them in the way of the devil?"²⁵ Bok never faced that dilemma and would have given priority to education.

Time fails me to compare Bok's views on the self and manhood with the other Dutch immigrants, but the crucial difference is that were Bok had surrendered to man as an other-directed personality, who through his example would improve the world, the Dutch immigrants adhered to the older model of 'character,' the internalized features of the inner-directed man.

Conclusion

While most Dutch immigrants associated first with the Dutch-American community and only then with the Netherlands, individual or detached immigrants identified with America first, and then with the Netherlands. In Bok this identification surfaced when he formulated a larger meaning for his own actions and wanted to distinguish himself. As an advertising man he was sensitive to public relations, and helped to correct false images of the Netherlands.

Bok was not a representative immigrant. His durable citizenship, his solid reputation, and the absence of dilemma's of national loyalty in his immediate surrounding exempted him from anxiety about his ethnic heritage. During the war he failed to assist the Dutch immigrants under suspicion. He never made a special effort to underscore the differences between the Dutch and their German neighbors.

In many aspects Bok was close to the Dutch Americans, both felt at home in the Republican Party, there was not much opposition against Bok's product the *Ladies' Home Journal*, whose conventional wisdoms, for instance on the role of women, were appreciated. Initially the Dutch were enthusiast about Bok, but the more they got to know him the better they realized he differed too much. Bok did not become a leader of the Dutch-Americans because his religious views were too alien to the Reformed and he was really more interested in Holland than in the Dutch-American community.

We have seen that Bok's deviant immigrant experience and his preference for Holland over the Dutch-Americans prohibited him to act as the spokesman for the Dutch in Holland, despite his fame and influence, but most problematic was his world view, which prohibited him becoming their model. Subsequently, the Dutch ethnic press did notice Bok's death in 1930, but did not mourn for him as someone lost to the Dutch community. Bok had thought about Great Subjects, but to the Dutch immigrants his answers were not conclusive.²⁶

NOTES

1. Samuel M. Zwemer, "The Duty of Conclusive Thinking" (Baccalaureate Sermon, Hope College, 1920), 5.

2. Louis Adamic, *A Nation of Nations* (New York: Harper, 1944), 116-117 described the most prominent Dutch-Americans and allotted most lines to Bok.

3. *Christian Intelligencer*, 20 January 1892; see also the issue of 11 October 1893 stating that the rev. P. Moerdyke unsuccessfully invited Bok to speak on the occasion of the Netherlands Day at the World Fair. The editor regretted that Bok had to decline the invitation: "... as he, too is in some respects a representative Hollander."

4. *Banner*, 29 October 1914.
5. Edward W. Bok, *Twice Thirty: Some Short and Simple Annals of the Road* (New York: Scribner's, 1925), 251-264.
6. I have described his life in *The Model Man: A Life of Edward W. Bok, 1863-1930* (Ph.D. dissertation, Leiden University, 1995); see for a description of his career in journalism, Salme H. Steinberg, *Reformer in the Marketplace: Edward W. Bok and the Ladies' Home Journal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).
7. Hope College Collection of the Joint Archives of Holland.
8. *Anchor*, January 1909, 27.
9. Robert Schoone-Jongen, "The Dutch Experience in Southwest Minnesota During World War I," *Origins* 7.2 (1989): 2-8, and Garret Pothoven, "Peoria, Iowa: The War Years 1917-18," *Origins* 7.2 (1989): 9-12; Jacob Van Hinte, *Netherlanders in America: A Study of Emigration and Settlement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in the United States of America*. Robert P. Wierengaa, ed., Adriaan de Wit, trans. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985 [orig. Dutch ed. 1928]), 759-763; the Dutch government was too concerned with securing shipments of cereals and other goods from US harbors to notice the harm done to its former citizens. See C Smit, ed., *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlandse politiek van NederlandI, 1848-1919*, Derde period, vijfde deel 1917-1919, eerste stuk (Den Haag; Martinus Nijhoff, 1964, 271-275.
10. C. Smit, *Tien studiën betreffende Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Groningen: Tjeenk Willink, 1975), 107-124; Walter H. Salzmann, *Bedrijfsleven, overheid en handelsbevordering. The Netherlands Chamber of Commerce in the United States, Inc., 1903-1987* (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Leiden, 1994), 59-62.
11. A. Lammers, *God Bless America. Zegeningen en beproevingen van de Verenigde Staten* (Amsterdam: Balans, 1987), 52-54. About the diplomatic crisis: Weekly Despatches, 8 March 1920 and 5 July 1921, reel 6 of the Records of the Department of States relating to Internal Affairs of the Netherlands 1910-1929 (M682), National Archives.
12. Salzmann, *Bedrijfsleven*, 65-69; J.T. Cremer to W.W. Miller, 12 May 1919; W. de Beaufort to George Creel, 13 December 1919 and Creel to De Beaufort, 13 January 1920. Gezantschap VS, 2.05.13, inv. nr. 852, Algemeen Rijksarchief, afdeling II, Den Haag. *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 31 March 1920; *Maasbode*, 12 August 1920.
13. Warren F. Kuehl, *Hamilton Holt: Journalist, Internationalist, Instructor* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1960), 134-165.
14. *Banner*, 27 October 1921; J.G. vanden Bosch, *Religion and Culture*, March 1924; *De Hollandsche Amerikaan*, 22 November 1921; 19 and 26 February, 1924; 8 April 1924;

Holland (California), 1 March 1924. He also received private correspondence from other Dutch immigrants; Cornelius Butt, minister Dutch Reformed Church Buffalo, 10 January 1921; G.D. Heuver, minister in the Presbyterian Church in Rockford IL, October 1921, RCA minister of Metuchen NY, N.J.M. Bogert; a silk-manufacturer, Henry Westerhoff, Ephrata PA, who recognized many of Bok's experiences, 18 December 1921; the Rev. John J. Banninga from Union Theological Seminary in India, 21 December 1921, wrote that he missed any interest in mission work in the book; Scrapbook "Americanization," Bok Tower Gardens Library, Lake Wales, Florida.

15. Editorial, *Ladies' Home Journal* (hereafter *LHJ*), October 1915. George C. Shane, "Should a Church Advertise?" *LHJ*, January 1916. Editorials in *LHJ* October 1904 and November 1916. On the business model for church see editorials in *LHJ*, February and April 1917.

16. George B. Parks reviewed Bok's anonymous book *Thy Son Liveth* for the *New York Times Book Review*, 16 November 1919, 664. It was published in November 1919, the same month in which it appeared in the *LHJ* on pages 7, 8, 67, 68, 71, 72, 74, 77, and 78. Bok frequently referred to "psychic survival," see editorials in *LHJ*, January, April, May, and December 1916 and Bok's second autobiography, *Twice Thirty*, 293-296. For the short-lived spiritualistic approach to death around the Great War: James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920*. American Civilization (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 144-145.

17. *Twice Thirty*, 117; Ethelbert Talbot, DD, "Is One Church Possible?" *LHJ*, March 1919.

18. *Religion and Culture* 5 (March 1924): 157-159; Jaames D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 99-101.

19. *Ibid.*, 158. Although technically outside Bok's authority -- Bok had retired five years earlier -- Phelps represented the dominant religious views in the *Journal*, which were fully supported by Bok.

20. *Hollandsche Amerikaan*, 22 November 1921, and 8 April 1924.

21. Unlike *De Hollandsche Amerikaan*, Van Andel did not completely reject Phelps. The Dutchman appreciated Phelps' common sense and preferred him over a cold atheist. Moreover, he accepted the popularity of modern pantheism as an incentive to spread the true gospel.

22. See paper "Christian Church Versus Feminism, 1912-1913" Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids.

23. J.G. van den Bosch, "A Burning Question: The Equal Suffrage Question," *The Banner*, 31 October 1912, 684.

24. N. Burggraaf, "Report of the Committee on Woman's Suffrage," *The Banner*, 4 May 1916, 290. Only the Rev. Johannes Groen defended woman's suffrage because he interpreted man's rule over woman as a result of sin, not of creation. He was, however, too liberal to be tolerated.

25. "Our Reply," *Young Calvinist* 1 (May 1920), 122-124.

26. *The Holland Evening Sentinel*, 9 January 1930; *De Hollandsche Amerikaan*, 10 January 1930; *De Hope*, 14 January 1930.