

Reassessing the Visionary Thinking of H. P. Scholte

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Two compatriots whose influence on Hendrik Pieter Scholte remains undisputed are the poets Isaac Da Costa, a Messianic Jew turned social critic, and Willem Bilderdijk, the professor never accorded a formal academic appointment. Existing scholarship tends to deal with the undeniable impact of these individuals on Scholte's theological views. It deserves also to be noted that Scholte, whether or not a conscious imitator of these mentors, enjoyed in them powerful potential role models for his rugged individualism, enthusiasm for alternatives to established institutions, a penchant for social criticism often leveled from outside the cultural mainstream, and a craving for recognition of authority while disdaining prevailing conventions of hierarchy and status.

Da Costa and Bilderdijk, for their part, saw in Scholte a protégé of kindred zeal and impulse.

Da Costa cherished the hope that Scholte would restore spiritual Israel, and dedicated the poem "Nehemia IV" to him.¹ Until recently, an anthology of Da Costa's collected essays on the spirit of the times, inscribed "Van den Autheur," remained in circles closely associated with Scholte and his family. The volume contained the pamphlets *Bezwaren tegen den geest der eeuw*, *De Saduceën*, *Geestelijke wapenkreet* and *Aan Nederland*; it seems to have served as a kind of *vade mecum* for quick reference on Da Costa's social thought.²

Bilderdijk, for his part, commemorated Scholte's enlistment in the military with a poem that anticipates the young recruit's later career as a soldier of the Lord.³ Dated October 11, 1830, the verses appear in an album containing inscriptions from such other notables of the Reveil movement as Capadose, Kohlbrügge, and still others too numerous to list here.⁴

Ga heen, mijn Vriend, en voer, in 's Allerhoogsten zegen,
Bij 't zwaard van 't Godd'lijk woord den fieren Heldendegen,
Verweer, in 't Vaderland, des Heilands Kruisbanier,
En keer gezegend weêr met palm en krijgslauwrier.

Near the end of Bilderdijk's life, Scholte displayed almost filial piety by seeing to press some of the master's otherwise unpublished poems.⁵ For some time after the poet's death, Scholte corresponded with members of the Bilderdijk family.⁶ To this day, the Scholte House contains an enviably complete early imprint of Bilderdijk's works, and the master's wooden penbox with the inlaid name "Bilderdijk" that never left Scholte's desk.⁷

Before emigrating, Scholte sold at auction most of the volumes in his extensive library.⁸ Among the works kept were books of law, theology, and other fields in which it would be necessary to maintain a personal reference library in the new homeland. For Scholte, this included items associated with his role as actual or supposed heir to the mantle of Da Costa and Bilderdijk, men who questioned key contemporary assumptions - concerning ecclesiastical authority and governance, the dominance of reason over revelation, and the trustworthiness of prevailing public opinion.

Even in those instances in which Scholte openly expressed his indebtedness to the thinking of a given individual, however, he was slow to declare himself a follower. A case in

point involves John Nelson Darby, with whom Scholte corresponded, and whose works Scholte translated and introduced for publication in the Netherlands.⁹ From his earliest days as a seeker of unfettered Christianity, to the publication of *De Toekomst* in his final years, Scholte relied heavily upon Darby's chiliastic vision and assurance of the need to prepare for the imminent return of Christ.¹⁰ Scholte never became an affiliate of the Darbyite Brethren, though America would have afforded him ample opportunity to do so.¹¹ He preferred to remain, as stated on the masthead of *The Pella Gazette*, "in all things independent."

Independent is certainly what Scholte was forced to be when he was left bereft of immediate family at a relatively young age; it is also what he was allowed to be, thanks to private means that enabled him to look beyond the procurement of life's basic necessities.¹²

Related to these events of his personal destiny, yet at the same time a continuing force in the shaping of that destiny, were the "dynamics of independence" evident in Scholte's own personality. Supporters and detractors alike attested to Scholte's gifts of charismatic attraction, persuasion, and assurance.¹³ Never without a following, he presumably also never sensed in its fullness the pragmatic necessity of compromise and concession to other points of view. His "Reveil individualism, biblicism and romantic idealism," strengthened by the evident support of his adherents, left Scholte "unfit," as one scholar noted, "for bondage to crowd, creed or custom."¹⁴

In its extreme manifestation, this all led to the impetuosity that constituted more than one contemporary's lasting impression of Scholte. Compared to the traits of other separatist leaders, however, Scholte's personality was not altogether unattractive. At the end of 1850, J. A. Wormser wrote to Guillaume Groen van Pristerer "zoo heb ik in de Afscheiding altoos moeten tobben tusschen de onbezuisdheid van Scholte, de bekrompenheid van Van Velzen, en het weifelen van Brummelkamp."¹⁵ The record attests to the fact that, in many a situation, it was Scholte's precipitous zeal for his cause, any shortcomings notwithstanding, that won the hearts of those seeking a persuasive leader.¹⁶

Others have asserted--convincingly, I feel--that most Dutchmen came in colonies to America, a spiritual and cultural diaspora as it were, whereas Scholte had already become an American at heart even before his colony was fully established.¹⁷ After all, Scholte had openly stated that there was nothing left to accomplish in the Netherlands.¹⁸ Long before migration, Scholte had become "independent in all things," or, as he later stated, "niet gedreven door enige politieke of godsdienstige partij- of sectengeest,"¹⁹ and hence had assumed a stance more compatible with the free market of ideas in mid-nineteenth-century America than with the social climate of the Netherlands in that period. Scholte's tragic flaw may well have been the assumption that the hearts of his followers embraced the same affection and enthusiasm that he harbored for the culture of the new homeland.

And make no mistake about it: Scholte exhibited record speed in the acculturation process.²⁰ In a letter from Pella to J. A. Wormser, dated August 4, 1848, Scholte lists his proudest accomplishments in the new homeland. Among these he notes "mijn correspondentie gaat tegenwoordig goed in het Engelsch en ik denk spoedig eene Godsdienstige bijeenkomst in die taal te houden met Amerikanen."²¹ Scholte was intrigued by the idea that ever more dominant use of English, "together with intermarriage between native and foreign born citizens, will leave in a few years, but little difference between Pella and other more exclusive American Towns."²²

Immigrants less centered on (perceived) American values than Scholte may have accepted cum ganu salis proclamations that those who truly rejected citizenship in Babylon ("enige buurschap in het grote Babylon") would realize that "in Christus [is] niet Dutch, German, or [sic] American, evenmin als Presbyteriaansch, Episcopaal, Congregationaal, Baptist of wat men ook sedert de Apostelen heeft uitgevonden", but may have been hard pressed to swallow the pronouncement that "zij, die van het behouden of het verwerpen van het woord Dutch een levensvraag der kerk maken" are not truly "bereid . . . om den Heere te gemoet te gaan."²³

In view of all this, it is not surprising that Scholte was known far and wide for his familiarity with, and involvement in, contemporary issues of American life. He was a long-standing supporter of Henry Clay and a member of the Whig Party.²⁴ He authored the first anti-slavery tract published west of the Mississippi River.²⁵ Like Christian Metz, the contemporary leader of the nearby Amana Colonies, Scholte's opposition to slavery was tempered by a fear of the divisive potential of Abolitionism.²⁶ At different times, he promoted both the Democratic and Republican parties.²⁷ He sought to bring Iowa's state capitol to Pella. When that attempt failed, he noted in a published statement redolent with unabashed self-confidence that "two years ago we petitioned to have the State Capitol located in Pella, and if the offer which accompanied that request had been accepted, the State House would have been built by this time."²⁸ In a word, America allowed Scholte to be fully independent in espousing and promoting an idiosyncratic combination of ideals, beliefs, and causes.²⁹

This may go a long way toward explaining the ease with which Scholte embraced ideas whose eclecticism seems to have baffled many. It also helps to set the context for understanding the well-nigh inevitable rift that developed in Pella between Scholte and his compatriots.

Scholte arrived in Iowa in a period marked by an unparalleled proliferation of nearby utopian and communitarian societies, both secular and sectarian.³⁰ Because of his strongly millennial vision and personal dynamism, Scholte may well have been perceived by outsiders who observed him as the would-be leader of just such a community. In point of fact, however, Scholte spoke out against the attempts of the Communists, Fourierists and other communitarians whose ideals of shared property he considered destructive to any society, and specifically incompatible with American (and hence his own) values.³¹ On at least one occasion he rejected slick promotion that would lure the gullible (or simply those traumatized by the economic depression of the mid 1840's) to Pella,³² and complained when the less enlightened townsfolk placed greater expectations on the resources and support structures of their new homeland than on themselves.³³

Though Scholte's vision for man's ideal state was decidedly millennial, it always remained one that rejected human attempts at theocratic administration in anticipation of the Lord's return. This position was compatible with the basic tenet of American social order that there must be a separation of church and state, an idea that attracted Scholte, while still in the Netherlands, according to the American church historian Robert Bird.³⁴ Even as an ardent supporter of American cultural values, however, Scholte rejected the idea that it was the United States that was divinely destined to lead a theocratic world republic.³⁵

Like Luther, whom he often cited, Scholte conceded having seen Christian rulers, but never a "Christian government" as such, declaring categorically "dat de regeringen dezer wereld onder invloed staan van den Overste dezer wereld."³⁶ [Scholte's emphasis] On another occasion he summarized his millennial yet anti-theocratic stance with the statement:

Het is gewis onze roeping om het goede te zoeken voor het land onzer inwoning, ja, voor de geheele wereld; laat ons echter nooit voedsel geven aan de dwaze inbeelding, dat dit goede verkregen kan worden door menselijke wijsheid en kracht, door verandering van regeringsvorm, of door dwang der wet; maar dat dit goede alleen verkregen kan worden door bekering tot God, door onderwerping aan Christus, door geloof van [sic] het Evangelie der genade.³⁷

The extreme extension of such thinking, for Scholte at least, was that any system of governance within the Church represented the influence of the Prince of this world. Hence Scholte maintained that "overal, waar men de openbaring van het Koninkrijk vermeent to bezitten in hetgeen men de Kerk noemt, daar is het beginsel van het Pausdom, en dit is helaas het geval met alle protestantsche kerkgemeenschappen."³⁸

Lying at the heart of all this, of course, is the fact that in neither church nor state would Scholte tolerate, for himself at least, anything short of absolute independence. It was particularly important that there be freedom from any categories of reference that would place inhibiting expectations on the individual. As stated near the beginning of the second and final volume of *De Toekomst*: "God zij dank, dat wij door geen titel, naam of woord belemmerd wordern."³⁹

Perhaps Scholte did not realize that in assuming the position of leader of the migration, expectations would inevitably fall upon him, and that he could not escape these. The "struggle between the virtual *owner* of Pella and many of the immigrants," as one scholar termed it, may well have been as much a reflection of contending views of the individual and the community as the actual and undeniable clash of personalities.⁴⁰

My purpose is not to justify or condemn Scholte's course of action, but to suggest that his actions were dictated by a system of thought based on a few guiding principles, yet with outworkings in so many areas of private and social life that it deserves careful consideration, rather than dismissal with a few facile shibboleths such as "autocratic" or "opportunistic." Who else in Pella, after all, had such a fully developed, closely reasoned, and urgent sense of vision?

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Endnotes

1. Oostendorp, *H. P. Scholte*, 38.
2. See the entries for Da Costa in the Bibliography. For a brief statement on Scholte and Da Costa, see Van Stigt, *History of Pella*, 5. Oostendorp, *H. P. Scholte*, 139, correctly points out that Scholte never credited Da Costa as the source for his theological ideas as openly as he did Darby, Bengel, and others. It might be argued, however, that Da Costa influenced Scholte as much or more in social thought and historical interpretation as in theological constructs.
3. Webber, "Willem Bilderdijk west of the Mississippi," reproduced 14; transcribed in Smits, *Afscheiding* 6, 318.
4. Webber, "Bilderdijk West of the Mississippi," 13, and Smits, *Afscheiding* 6, 311-37, esp. 318.
5. Bilderdijk, *Beschouwing*, with an introduction by H. P. Scholte.
6. Webber, "Bilderdijk west of the Mississippi," 12; for the correspondence with Lodewijk Bilderdijk, see Smits, *Afscheiding* 6, 22-29. When Scholte lay sick in 1836, he pondered "Wat er dus van mij worden zal zal de tijd leeren, ik heb al eens gedacht dat deze toestand veel overeenkomst heeft met die van Bilderdijk in zijnen laatste tijd," while noting by way of contrast, "doch deeze maakte nog heerlijke verzen." See also Smits, *Afscheiding* 5, 316-318.
7. A photographic plate of the penbox appears in Webber, "Bilderdijk west of the Mississippi," 14.
8. The copy of *Catalogus van een belangrijk gedeelte der bibliotheek van den wel eerw. zeer gel. heer H. P. Scholte . . . ten overstaan van den Boekhandelaren Kemink en Zoon*, now on display at the Scholte House in Pella, lists the proceeds of the sale for each item. The sale took place in Utrecht, Monday, March 8, 1847.
9. Smits, *Afscheiding* 1, 145; *ibid.* 3, 244, n. 1, and 249 f.; Oostendorp, *H. P. Scholte*, 137 f.

10. See especially Oostendorp, *H. P. Scholte*, 188-91.
11. Pella Historical Society, *History of Pella* 1, 101; for a broader view of church history in Pella, including other Darbyite activity in the town, see *ibid.* 2, 97-117; 2, 119-28.
12. Among the various sources of Scholte's personal life, see Scholte, Autobiographical sketch; Oostendorp, *H. P. Scholte*, particularly part 1, 1-144; Smits *Afscheiding*, esp. 1, 46-57 and the entire third volume; Stellingwerff, *Amsterdamse emigranten*, 21-32 and passim.
13. See, for instance, Oostendorp, *H. P. Scholte*, 37-43; Stellingwerff, *Amsterdams emigranten*, 353-363; Van Stigt, *History of Pella*, 16-17 and passim.
14. Oostendorp, *H. P. Scholte*, 191.
15. Stellingwerff, *Amsterdams emigranten*, 354.
16. See also the report of Van Stigt, *History of Pella*, 16-17.
17. One of the best treatments of this idea is in Oostendorp, *H. P. Scholte*, 147-54.
18. Scholte, *Nieuwejaarsgeschenk*, as cited by Van Stigt, *History of Pella*, 12.
19. Scholte, *De Toekomst* I/1, September, 1866, 1.
20. For a compressed overview of this point, see Webber, *Pella Dutch*, 48-50 and the sources cited.
21. The letter to Wormser appears in Stellingwerff, *Amsterdamse emigranten*, 109-111.
22. *Pella Gazette*, 1 February, 1855, 2.
23. *De Toekomst* 2, 2-3.
24. Smits, *Afscheiding* 3, 329 f., and Scholte, Autobiographical sketch.
25. Scholte, *American Slavery*.
26. Scholte, Autobiographical sketch.
27. *Ibid.*; cf. Oostendorp, *H. P. Scholte*, 184-85, who correctly points out that Van Raalte, as well as Scholte, changed political allegiance from the Democratic to the Republican Party.

28. *Pella Gazette*, February 1, 1855; especially noteworthy are the front-page report by the governor of Iowa, and the reply on the following page of H. P. Scholte.
29. Scholte lists in detail his early accomplishments in the previously cited letter to J. A. Wormser, written from Pella August 4, 1848, and published in Stellingwerff, *Amsterdams emigranten*, 109-11.
30. For a brief overview of the situation in Iowa, see Webber, "Secular Communal Societies."
31. Nollen, *Tweede Stem*, 25.
32. See, *inter al.*, Van Stigt, *History of Pella*, 11, and statements of Scholte cited by Vander Zee, *Hollanders of Iowa*, 97, 99, and *passim*.
33. Pella Historical Society, *History of Pella* 2, 38, and Smits, *Afscheiding* 3, 329 cite material reflecting Scholte's disappointment with his followers, in the former instance for their naïveté concerning the economic realities of life in America, and in the latter for their general lack of formative education.
34. Oostendorp, *H. P. Scholte*, 139-40.
35. See material cited by Smits, *Afscheiding* 3, 330.
36. Letter of Scholte to J. J. L. van der Bruggen, October 22, 1857, in Stellingwerff, *Amsterdamse emigranten*, 285-87; on Scholte and Luther, see also *De Toekomst* 2, 38. Cf. Oostendorp, *H. P. Scholte*, 186-87.
37. Scholte, *De Toekomst* 2, 12.
38. H. P. Scholte, *De Toekomst* 2, 64.
39. *De Toekomst* 2, 3.
40. Oostendorp, *H. P. Scholte*, 171.