

NETHERLANDS, THE, UNBELIEF IN. In the Netherlands, native country of the internationally famous humanist Desiderius ERASMUS, the first real freethinker probably was Herman van Rijswijk, who in 1512 was burned at the stake because of his liberal ideas. Other forerunners of the FREETHOUGHT movement were the humanist Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert, an advocate of religious tolerance; and the philosopher Baruch SPINOZA.

Nineteenth-century Dutch freethought history begins with a book—and ever since, Dutch freethinkers have been prodigious writers and readers. In 1854 Franz Junghuhn published *Licht- en schaduwbeelden uit de binnenlanden van Java* (Images of Light and Shadow from Inner Java). In this moving and influential study, the author expressed his indignation at the way missionaries in the Dutch Indies propagated their ideas. Junghuhn rated the native religions, based on nature and reason, at least on a par with Christianity and saw the Christian faith as destructive.

In October 1855 Junghuhn and publisher Frans Christiaan Günt launched the freethinker periodical *De Dageraad* (Dawn). One year later, on October 4, 1856, a society of the same name was founded by Günt and some fellow members of the unorthodox Amsterdam masonic lodge *Post Nubila Lux* (After Darkness the Light). The ubiquitous light-and-dark metaphor refers to the contrast between the obscurity of the Christian revelation and the enlightenment associated with human reason, science, and the autonomy of mankind.

The “heroes” of *De Dageraad* were Spinoza, the polemical author MULTATULI, Jacob Moleschott, and Johannes van Vloten, as well as the German materialists Ludwig FEUERBACH and Ludwig BÜCHNER.

The theoretical base of the freethought movement in the Netherlands was twofold. The majority adhered to the materialist monism of philosophers like Feuerbach, Büchner, and Moleschott. A small minority supported the spiritual monism of Spinoza, Felix Ortt, and Bart de Ligt, for whom not only the organic world but also the inorganic realm was “animated”: even, as Gustav Fechner asserted, the whole cosmos.

In the first decade after 1856 most members of *De Dageraad* were deists (see DEISM) and socially conservative. In the latter part of the century, ATHEISM spread. A considerable minority inclined toward social revolution, while others, such as Adrien Henri Gerhard, became social democrats. In 1883–84 the tension between the followers of a more social approach and the so-called hard atheists came to a head. The radicals, among them the anarcho-socialist Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, left *De Dageraad*. Among the more moderate stay-behinds were men like Gerhard, who would in 1894 be prominent among the founding fathers of the Dutch Labour Party SDAP.

Prior to the gradual introduction of a national social security system (starting in about 1900), *De Dageraad* founded its own life insurance company, *Aurora*, in 1887;

a relief fund for poor freethinker families in 1888; and an orphans’ fund to place orphans of freethinkers into freethinkers’ families or in a free orphans’ house in 1896.

By the early 1900s *De Dageraad* membership had declined to around five hundred members, though this number included many celebrities. The group’s fiftieth anniversary in 1906 marked a revival, and by 1908 a new and independent freethought periodical, once again called *De Dageraad*, had joined the existing *De Vrije Gedachte* (Freethought). In 1909 *De Dageraad* organized protest meetings against the murder of the Spanish anarchist and secular school reformer Fernando FERRER. In 1911 a permanent Commission for Separation from the Church was instituted, whose members gave free legal support to people who wanted to leave their church. Pieter Frowein and Domela Nieuwenhuis were very active at international freethought congresses.

When the freethinker C. J. Vaillant died in 1914, he had himself illegally cremated. The executors of his will, fellow members of *De Dageraad*, were prosecuted, but in the end the high court acquitted them. From then on, anyone in the Netherlands could demand to be cremated.

From about 1912 *De Dageraad* mounted growing protests against growing militarism, nationalism, and colonialism across Europe. After the outbreak of war, freethinkers such as the clergymen de Ligt and N. J. C. Schermerhorn and feminist Wilhelmina Drucker vehemently denounced war atrocities. After 1918 this pacifist and antimilitarist movement remained strong among freethinkers, and many became active in the International Anti-Militarist Union.

The postwar years were a boom period for *De Dageraad*, with increasing membership and new programs including Sunday morning lectures, public debates, brochures, and extensive propaganda tours. Half a dozen printing houses published a steady stream of freethought books. In 1928, a Freethinkers’ Broadcasting Society was organized. Among the radio speakers were *De Dageraad* celebrities such as Gerhard, the jurist and philosopher Leo Polak, and Jan Hoving, the inspiring president of *De Dageraad* from 1917 until 1938.

As the activities of *De Dageraad* increased, this prompted opposition from the religious. Confessional groups launched specialized periodicals to fight *De Dageraad*, such as *De Middaghoogte* (Mid-day Zenith). *De Dageraad* tried to penetrate the homogeneously Catholic southern province of Limburg, where Catholic bishops and priests controlled trade unions, political parties, schools, and the press—a very inhospitable setting for freethinkers and social democrats. The “atheists” from the north were often met with aggressive, sometimes violent counterprotests led by priests.

Major targets of *Dageraad* protests in the 1920s included the imprisonment of conscientious objectors in the army, the execution of the anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in the United States, Benito Mussolini’s fascism, and the pope, because of his 1929

“concordat” with Mussolini. In the 1930s De Dageraad spearheaded the attack on anti-Semitism in Europe. It organized meetings, issued pamphlets, and broadcast radio speeches denouncing all sorts of nationalism and fascism in Germany, Italy, and Spain. Politically and intellectually, 1933 was De Dageraad’s “finest hour,” and its membership in that year—twenty-seven hundred—has never been equaled. However, in that same year the government forbade all civil servants to belong to “subversive organizations,” and De Dageraad was number one on the red list. Repression came not only from Catholics but also from the National Socialist Party. By 1936 the freethinkers’ radio broadcasts, always subject to censorship, were prohibited altogether.

However, De Dageraad members remained active, campaigning for the right to say a solemn pledge instead of swearing an oath on the Bible; advocating human-centered morality and education (“humanity first”), a more enlightened approach to sexual morality, and nondiscriminatory marriage legislation; promoting birth control, cremation, the antivivisection movement, and vegetarianism; and pursuing the humanization of criminal law.

After the German invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940, De Dageraad, with its anti-Nazi record, instantly dissolved itself. After the war De Dageraad resurfaced, its periodical *De Vrijdenker* resumed publication, and program activities recommenced. However, two kindred humanist organizations were soon founded: Humanitas (Social Work) in May 1945 and the Humanistisch Verbond (Humanist League) in February 1946. Both appealed explicitly to people outside the churches, but without identifying their position with atheism (see NETHERLANDS, THE, HUMANISM IN). Both humanist organizations soon grew larger than De Dageraad, which today has some twelve hundred members. Relations between humanists and freethinkers, though mutually benevolently critical, can be described as cooperative.

In 1958 De Dageraad changed its name to De Vrije Gedachte (Freethought), and the name of its main periodical into *Bevrijdend Denken* (Liberating Thought). Since 1978 its periodical has been called *De Vrije Gedachte*.

Freethinkers and unbelievers in the Netherlands stand for a nondogmatic, independent, rational, and human way of thinking. Their ideal was and is a combination of freethought and solidarity.

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