Herman Venema. Een Nederlandse theoloog in de tijd der verlichting
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The life of Herman Venema (1697 - 1787) is almost conterminous with the period in European civilisation which is usually called „Enlightenment“: it seems as if new light is shed upon the world and its phenomena. Reason, in bygone times a medium to arrange the fundamental and incontestable truth into rational structures, is now used as an instrument to probe critically the manifold manifestations of man and nature, hampered neither by preconceived principles nor by dogmas. The direction of reasonable thinking is reversed: not from principle to fact, but from newly found or rediscovered facts to new conclusions. England, France and Germany had modelled this new way of thinking each according to their own character and disposition, but to all appearances the Netherlands are backward and clumsy in comparison with their neighbours. Yet it can be said that the Enlightenment in the Low Countries has been a river basin for a kindred cultural and spiritual tradition of unprejudiced scholarship, critical research and a tolerant mind, which reaches back to 16th century biblical Humanism, and which in the years to follow had had a chance to stay alive and well next to, and sometimes opposed to, official orthodoxy. Thus in the 17th century this tradition was preserved and developed in heterodox groups like Remonstrants and Mennonites, but could also be found within the realms of the reformed church: Johannes Coccejus, whose theology of the Covenants stirred up the rigid doctrines of calvinistic Protestantism by its interest in the historical development of scriptural salvation, focused attention on the importance of language and text of the Scriptures in a way that did not fit into the strict framework of the prevailing orthodoxy. His thought and methods were clearly linked with the earlier Humanism. His ideas proved a fertile soil for an 18th century cultural and scholarly current which can safely be characterized as a typical Dutch reformatorical Enlightenment.

Above all Franeker university was a nursery for this modern learning, especially in exegesis and in the study of the related oriental languages. Herman Venema first, in 1711, registered at Groningen university, but soon the studious boy from Wildervank found out that, owing to continuous bickering between the professors and between staff and magistrate, here was nothing to gain, and so he turned to Franeker in 1714. Here he found celebrities like the orientalist Albert Schultens, the graecist Lambertus Bos, later succeeded by the famous Tiberius Hemsterhuis, and, above all others, Campegius Vitringa, professor in exegesis and church history. His son Campegius Vitringa, professor next to his father,
was not only a teacher to Herman but also became a close friend. In 1719
Venema concluded his studies with two exegetical dissertations and was
ordained as a minister in Dronrijp, a small village between Leeuwarden
and Franeker. But when in 1723 young Vitringa suddenly died, Venema
was nominated as his successor. In 1724 he married the widow of his late
friend and predecessor.

In his two concluding theses he had already shown himself a follower of
the modern trend, which curiously enough Schultens had at one time called
,,the old way" (vetus et regia via) because of the long standing tradition of
learning: Venema had chosen critical linguistic and historical research as
the basis and starting point of biblical exegesis. In his inaugural speech
four years later he showed the first unmistakable signs of a tolerance
which was to be his guiding principle during the rest of his life.

In 1729 he succeeded Albert Schultens as academy preacher. His
sermons, though rational and sober, showed feeling and warmth; he and
his pupils contributed much to improve the style of preaching of their days.

In 1729 his sense of freedom of conscience made him join in a
dispute, by publishing an anonymous booklet, about the question whether
it were allowed to diviate from the official order of baptism. Later he chose
infant baptism as subject for one of his Dissertationes Sacrae (1731).

The Groningen professor Antonius Driessen in 1731 launched a
campaign against Venema’s ideas, which he called „hypotheses arminiani-
santes“, and insinuated that the harmful effect of his opponent’s heretical
Teaching reached out as far as to Hungary. In two pamphlets Venema
defended himself. He was able to knock the bottom out of many of
Driessen’s accusations, but he did not make himself sufficiently clear
about the calvinistic doctrine of predestination. When in 1741 the Deputy
States of Friesland asked the advice of all theological faculties of the Dutch
universities about the reputed Socinianism of the Mennonite minister
Joannes Stinstra, Venema was the only one to intercede on his behalf.
These events contributed to his reputation as a heterodox, the more so
because he continually stood up for freedom of conscience and toleration.

Staunch champions of the cause of orthodoxy like Comrie and Holtius,
and later Petrus Hofstede, had to deal with this „enlightened” mentality of
Venema and his followers. But it was also that very mentality which, in the
second half of the century, gradually gained momentum in society in
general.

Like so many enlightened scholars Venema was neither inclined to nor
very well versed in the intricacies of systematic theology; more often than
not his dogmatic arguments were defective and inconsistent, although he
considered himself a true adherent of the reformed creed. But his main
interest lay in the history of God’s promise and His salvation as written
down in the Holy Scriptures. Hence his affinity with the theological ideas of
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Coccejus and Vitringa, which led him to a meticulous treatment of text and language of the Bible, using the philological principles and methods of Schultens and Hemsterhuis. Many voluminous books testify to his unbiased research, conscientious scholarship and receptivity towards new ideas and discoveries, qualities which are to a high degree characteristic of Dutch humanistic traditions. As historiographer he modified the conceptions of his predecessors. He showed a great interest in the Maccabean period, which he considered an anticipating example of the Messianic Kingdom. He rejected Coccejus' and Vitringa's far-fetched explanations of prophetic predictions, which suggested fulfillment in post-Christian events, whereas he saw the prophecies realised immediately in the regime of the Maccabeans; only on a second level, using the principle of plural sense of the Scripture, did he think reference to Christ and His history justified. One must admit that his way of arranging the periods of history in accordance to the prophetic and apocalyptic indications is not up to the standard of modern conceptions of history. In the field of historical research however he showed scholarly erudition both in his openminded examination of the sources and in his fair treatment of dissenters and heretics. His philosophy of history, however naïve, has kept alive a sense of the changes and movements of history which was lacking elsewhere in European enlightened thought. His main historical work, the „Institutiones Historiae Ecclesiasticae“, contains notes of his lectures since 1735, when he was nominated to teach church history.

In 1751 he was invited for a membership of the „Hollandsche Maatschappye van Weetenschappen“, an homage to his versatile and manysided, indeed enlightenend, learning.

Renowned in his own country and abroad, highly esteemed as wise adviser by the stadholders Willem IV and Willem V, he was a modest and amiable man to his family and friends; his students expressed their affection for their master by calling him „Father Venema“.

He was not very much involved in the great philosophical, political and literary issues that racked enlightened Europa, but there is every reason to consider him as an important link in the great humanistic tradition; indeed, he was the embodiment of Dutch reformatorical enlightenment, which was manifested mainly in the field of philological studies.

He died 26th May 1787 in Leeuwarden. He was buried in Franeker, just at the moment when feelings of political uneasiness had come to a revolutionary outburst of sorts — foreboding the great revolution which was to change the world he had lived in.