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John Calvin and "Uncle Kees": Contradictory Themes in the Work of Pierre van Paassen

I. OVERVIEW

Individual human lives, moulded by culture and history, may take on the coloration of an era. One sees this in the case of the once famous, now all but forgotten, Dutch-Canadian[2] journalist-author Pierre van Paassen (1895-1968). A *fin de siècle* child, his life reflects the enthusiasms as well as the disappointments characteristic of the generation that came of age just before and during the First World War[3].

Born on February 7, 1895 as Pieter Antonie Laurusse van Paassen, he grew up in the old walled city of Gorinchem, also called Gorcum, near the confluence of the Waal and Maas rivers. When their youngest son Josinus died of consumption, Adrianus and Antonia van Paassen, who had planned to emigrate to Canada, sent Pieter and his younger brother Thomas ahead by themselves. At 16 Pieter had completed three years of Latin school (Gymnasium). With very little in the way of language preparation or financial resources, the boys' first activity in Canada was farm work. Feeling hard done by - and not without cause - they made their way back to Toronto where Pieter managed to begin what he hoped would be his life's vocation.

The grandson and nephew of ministers, Pieter had long hoped and been slated to join their ranks. Perhaps persuaded by the earnest youth's commitment and knowledge of the scriptures, the Methodists of Toronto's Victoria College first sent him to Alberta to serve as a missionary's assistant. Some time later he was dispatched into the Timmins mining area in Northern Ontario. There Pieter became a probationary minister attached to three small churches in adjoining communities.

All seemed to go well; he preached, read, and made friends. But in 1914, when he was nineteen, Pieter rather hurriedly married a local girl without having obtained the permission of his clerical superiors. This misstep proved calamitous; the church and college put an end to his nascent career. Perhaps that was what made him a lifelong enemy of clerical authority. For the next three years he supported his wife and child, probably also helping his parents, by working in the mines. In that working class world he moved among socialist-oriented men and came to know radical literature. Consider the shock of transition: besides a probably unhappy marriage, with its attendant loss of a desired career, there was conscription looming on the horizon. On July 17, 1917 Pieter enlisted. In December his unit was sent to France.

He had hoped to be an interpreter, but was instead attached to a forestry and railway construction corps. During the spring of 1918, while stationed in the vicinity of Abbeville, he and seven other men were detailed to dig into the hillside a tunnel which was to serve as a field hospital. In several books he tells about the cave-in which crushed his left arm and nearly cost him and his comrades their lives. The fearful hours in the dark and cold, with one of the men pinned down by a boulder and seriously wounded, became for the young Pieter a life-changing event:

> I had a sudden feeling that, though within an inch of death, I was not going to die. I had no brilliant or gorgeous dreams of the future. Everything was utterly matter of fact. I was innerly convinced beyond all doubt that I had been in contact with a real, though invisible world of spirit and life.[4]

He had spoken and wrestled with God, the way Jacob had done one fateful night at a river bank. Perhaps the crisis of the cave-in also influenced him toward altering the Calvinist God of his childhood to resemble more closely his Uncle Kees' faith in a universal humanity of reason and goodwill. Certainly it made him determined to go on a pilgrimage to Palestine, which he did a decade later.

Early in 1919 he returned to Canada. In spite of memories of hardship and a permanently crippled left arm, he brought back with him a lasting love of France, the sonorous French language, and the francophone

first name "Pierre". But in the year and a half at war his world at home had changed. His marriage was no more; without training his job prospects were poor; he would have to work at various odd jobs. Eventually there was a piece of luck: the staid Toronto Globe took him on as an apprentice reporter. There he was to bloom, showing a remarkable flair for seeing the unusual in quite ordinary events. At that time the newspaper was the main medium of everyday entertainment. Here the young Pierre could put to work his wide-ranging interests and imagination, linking observations and gossip, ideas, humour and pathos into an amalgam that would soon became his stock-in-trade.

With a moving story about two priests, one French and the other German, both recent missionaries in Borneo, where they had been ignorant of the war between their countries, Pierre earned his own byline. Now a newsman, he joined the Atlanta Constitution, where in 1923 he launched a long-lasting and widely syndicated column "The World's Window." Two years later he was in New York where the Evening World made him its foreign correspondent headquartered in Paris. There began a decade-long zigzag journey into Europe's political adventures and consequent upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa. From Paris he went to report on the plight of Poland's impoverished Jewish masses, the rise of Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany, the changes in Stalin's Soviet empire, the pioneering exertions of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine, and the battle fronts of Ethiopia and Spain.

His dispatches from the civil war[5] in Spain, having consistently favoured the loyalist side, appears to have so enraged Toronto's Catholic hierarchy that they accused him of having reported Spanish battles from the safety of Paris cafés. That is why the Toronto Star, under considerable pressure, fired its popular foreign correspondent[6]. For van Paassen that event proved a watershed; he left France for America to lecture and write his memoirs. *Days of Our Years* (1939) put him on the best-seller list for two years. Over the next twenty-five years he produced eleven more books, some important and well received, but none quite as successful as the one that ushered in World War II.

Here we can only briefly refer to Pierre's changing career from journalism to book authorship. In the 1940s he mainly attended to matters of politics, strongly informed and driven by the dread fate of Jewry under the Nazi heel. But by the end of that decade he had already turned to religious themes. Whether because of this belated change, his failing health, or a new generation's lack of interest in the issues of the pre-war era, his last book was anything but a success. Prophetically named *To Number Our Days*, it also numbered his days as one of the most colourful polemical journalist-writers of the era. That book, lively but redundant, was his final bow to his old adversary, Cardinal Spellman. While he had finally scored over the cleric-prince, no President would come to his funeral, nor would a Pope pray: "May his brave, Christlike, priestly soul rest in peace." But then van Paassen, a pretty brave soul himself, would not have wished to have such words of praise applied to him.

II. Van PAASSEN ON CALVINISM

In succeeding passages we quote rather frequently and lengthily from van Paassen's books, not only for reasons of substance but to faithfully convey a sense of the man's power of language. Appropriately we begin with a passage from Pierre's reminiscences of his pilgrimage to Palestine. He has been climbing the Mount of Olives, remembering a prophesy about "the last things" contained in the Book of Zechariah, when he tells us:

> At the age of eleven or twelve I knew the whole chapter by heart, though I probably mispronounced the Hebrew names which occur in it. I do not say this boastfully for there was really nothing remarkable about it; other little boys knew far more of the Bible by heart. This was something that almost went without saying in old-fashioned Calvinist families such as mine.

Then, as if wanting to enlarge on the "bible-centered" world of his childhood, van Paassen tells about a droll circumstance of his school days in Calvinist Gorinchem:

> It is no exaggeration to say that as children we knew as much about the topography and the geography of the Holy Land, the names and locations of its mountains, lakes, streams, villages, its flora and fauna and climate, as we did about these and similar subjects related to the Netherlands. In the elementary, Calvinist parochial school we used a geography book...in which the map of Palestine appeared superimposed on the map of Holland. The map was to bring home to us the fact that the two countries were approximately the same size and shape. Where the Zuyder Zee lay on that double map there also lay the Sea of Galilee. Amsterdam was Jerusalem, Rotterdam was Jaffa, the old university city of Utrecht was Jericho. ...
>
> Of course, there were also some striking differences... But that did not hinder the general purpose of that curious sample of cartography. The idea was to impress on us that we were as much a Chosen People as the Jews. The promises made to the patriarchs and sages of Israel applied with equal force to the descendants of the Water Beggars[7].

Elsewhere he recalls less favourable items of Calvinist practices:

...our life was overshadowed by a cloud of gloom. We moved in an atmosphere of joylessness, not unlike that which must have prevailed in the Geneva of Calvin's days,... Always the dominies held before our eyes the fact that man was a worm,...unworthy of the slightest loving kindness on God's part. Men and women went around with long faces to show that they were always conscious of their miserable state[8].

Had the legacy of the theologian-statesman of Geneva really become that dreary? That was evidently not the grown van Paassen's assessment when, at age 44, he wrote in *Days of Our Years*:

In Calvinism the Protestant Reformation attained the highest evolution of its religio-political principles. Without the fire of Calvinism there would have been neither a Dutch Republic nor a Republic of Geneva, that other refuge of the human spirit through the times of *autos-da-fé*, inquisition, and political proscription. Calvinism is one of the forces which has moved the world and determined the course of Europe's evolution. It has also functioned politically. From the beginning the strength of Calvinism resided in the fact that it sought to make of the believer a conscious and active instrument in the service of God,...who did not hesitate to pit his convictions against the power of the state, the princes and the dictatorships. It was Calvinism which formed the hosts which resisted and overcame the worldly dictatorships of France, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. It was Calvinism which broke the chains in which the spiritual dictatorship of Rome and the Jesuits sought to enslave western Europe. To be an «elect of the Lord» was not a mere theological phrase with which the inquisition had to reckon, but a political fact, a thousand times tested on the battle grounds of freedom[9].

Here van Paassen has rousingly linked the religious underpinnings of his Calvinist upbringing to political history. In *Days of Our Years* it was to serve him in arousing Americans, still stunned by the great depression, to the facts of an even greater horror. He meant to alert a still largely isolationist public to the enormity of the evils of Nazism.

III. ENTER UNCLE KEES

This figure, whom Pierre makes out to have been his mother's youngest brother, cannot be found on the family tree. He is said to have been an art painter, and although there were two male near-relatives in Gorcum who followed the trade of housepainter, none had ever been to an art academy, or had a fine art studio, as Pierre tells us. Furthermore, Uncle Kees is said to have died of a broken heart (or committed suicide by walking into the river) upon learning in 1919 that Pierre, his brother and parents were not returning to live in the Netherlands. To cap the story, Pierre tells that one day, while visiting Gorcum, he went to the cemetery to look for Uncle Kees' grave. He says that he was shown a marker without a name, but bearing in Dutch..." the words he had wanted to be remembered by, that old medieval saying of which he used to tell me that it was one of Erasmus' favourite bywords:

I do not know where I go
and I do not know whence I came[10].

A Dutch informant has told us that it is not legal in Holland to have a gravestone without identification of the person there interred[11]. We must therefore conclude that Uncle Kees is in fact a creation of Pierre's imagination. But being an artifact of the imagination does not make Kees less real. Who then was he to be, what was he to represent?

Kees meets us as a storyteller and intellectual who has introduced his nephew to the classics, notably French and German philosophers of the 18th and 19th centuries. Their ideas were discussed during long country walks and illuminated by current political events. In the context of this paper it is interesting to note that the uncle is said to have taken Pieter several times to see a motion picture[12] on the reactionary conspiracy against Captain Dreyfus. If Kees is an imaginary figure, the story of a possibly imaginary Dreyfus film tells in retrospect a great deal about Pierre. It tells about his subsequent projection onto his boyhood of his evolving concern for Jews. Not surprisingly then we find Pierre saying:

From...Kees came the only liberal influence I experienced in my youth. On my sixteenth birthday he presented me with the keys to a set of mysterious, black-painted bookcases which stood in a low-ceilinged room upstairs. "Here," he said, as he opened the cupboards one after the other and ran his fingers over the backs of the soberly bound volumes, "here are the lamps that never go out!"... For the first time I held a book by Voltaire in my hands. And there were...Rousseau and Bayle, Proudhon and Lamennais, Saint-Simon, Goethe and Tolstoy, and, on another shelf, the modern Dutch and Flemish poets whose works were proscribed at the *Gymnasium*...[13]

Portrayed as Pierre's non-traditional educator and mentor, Kees was not without his own juvenile traits.

Puritanical attitudes in the Calvinist community made it hazardous to attend public theatrical performances. Once, when a visiting troupe staged *Hamlet* in their town, Kees and Pierre decided to watch the performance on the sly, from outside the hall, perched high upon a ladder. The ladder broke and both uncle and nephew came tumbling down. For Kees it meant an injured leg, but that was not all: the clatter of the accident had disturbed the play and both culprits were given a tongue-lashing by the manager. For weeks afterwards they were ostracized by the folk of their own denomination, not because they had disturbed the play but because they went to see it. Uncle Kees was not always a wise mentor or a paragon of virtue, but he proved to be a steadfast older friend to a boy in need of a companionable father.

In a later book van Paassen compares and contrasts his mother and her putative brother Kees:

> My mother and uncle both possessed the art, each in a different way, of kindling new life in the young. ... But there was also a wide divergency between them in temper and mood. Where Kees had the blessed gift of hearty laughter, my mother was severe, opposed to levity in any form and impatient of controversy. She could not easily make a declaration of affection, though this reserve was often more painful to her than to others. Something of the inflexibility of the Calvinist doctrine and home environment clung to her all her life[14].

What then is to be made of this recurring figure, especially if he is indeed a product of van Paassen's imagination? Let us offer a plausible explanation. Since neither the Gymnasium nor the home had provided Pierre with a model of the independent and free human being he wanted to be, he created one. Kees, the bachelor-artist-scholar, seems that unbounded creature. Appearing again and again in Pierre's writings, Uncle Kees may have become as real for his creator as for his readers and listeners. Pierre van Paassen's son recalls that stories of Kees were often told at dinnertime. The stories were so convincing to the boy that years later he could not conceive of the figure of the great-uncle as fictitious.

But Uncle Kees was probably not created as a mere model of manhood or just to bolster Pierre's freewheeling journalism. He likely was also a playful reminder of a person able to face unpleasant facts without hiding. How effective was this Kees model in Pierre's life? Pieter did not fit very well into the conventions of his home town or accept the Calvinist definition of man as a worm. Yet he loved that town and paid homage to Calvin's genius. Perhaps it was precisely the tension between the parts of Calvin and Kees in Pierre that enabled him to see through political smoke screens and discern dangerous truths. Certainly he was not taken in by Nazi propaganda and often single-handedly sounded the alarm.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have drawn on autobiographical sections of some of van Paassen's writings, especially those in which he juxtaposes the outlook of a quite possibly mythical "Uncle Kees" with that of the John Calvin of his boyhood in the Netherlands. Conflicts between the values of Calvinist theology and the libertarian ideas ascribed to Uncle Kees remained symptomatic of Pierre's life. But trying to fit antithetical ideas into a single point of view, Pierre seems to have made use of a mediating theme. For clues let us again go to his own writings:

> In my childhood in Holland - I may have been fifteen or sixteen years of age - I remember one evening accompanying my parents to church when prayers were offered there for return of the People of Israel to the Holy Land. There was no haughty condescension or self-righteousness about those prayers. The congregation consisted of humble Calvinist shopkeepers and farmers, a cross-section of the *kleine luyden*, the small people of the Netherlands... The Master of the Universe was implored to restore His People of Israel to the land He had promised them, because in the Christian world, throughout which they were dispersed, they had almost everywhere been treated abominably. It was said from the pulpit that the sins of the Czar of Russia (for it was a time of pogroms in the Ukraine) were our sins. It was by our fault, the fault of universal Christendom and therefore of every individual Christian, that despite two thousand years of preaching the Gospel's lesson of brotherly love, the Jews could still not live in peace in our Western world[15].

In *To Number Our Days*, his last book, van Paassen recalls how he himself came to be drawn into the circle of Zionism. While still a resident of Atlanta and a member of the Constitution's editorial staff, he had the opportunity to cover a meeting of the Zionist Organization of America, at which the invited speaker was "a certain Dr. Joseph Silverman, rabbi emeritus of Temple Emanu-El in New York":

> The novelty about Dr. Silverman's position was that he, a rabbi in the Reform branch of American Judaism, after a lifelong opposition to the rebuilding of Palestine on a national-political basis, had been converted to the Zionist ideal following a visit to the Holy Land where he had seen the initial

stages of the land redemption program which in our day has flowered into the progressive democratic State of Israel[16].

After an editorial drawing attention to the forthcoming visit by Dr. Silverman, he heard him speak and wrote a second one:

I expressed the view that a reconstituted "national home for the Jewish people in Palestine" was one of the most worthwhile and hopeful changes in the international scene to issue from the Great War. To this I added a word of hope: that our generation might yet see the lamps on Zion's hill rekindled and, according to the prophet's vision, that Torah, i.e. teaching, enlightenment and inspiration for all mankind go forth from Zion once more.

If we have correctly understood van Paassen's work, he seems to have placed the miracle of Jewish national renaissance as a buffer between John Calvin's sombre world view and Uncle Kees' joyous affirmation of everyday life. Being both ancient and modern, sacred and secular, Zionism may have become Pierre's mediating theme between Calvin and Kees, making them appear less contradictory. To this idea, we remind the reader of the idea of *elective affinity*. Goethe, in discussing with a correspondent the development of personality asks "Who dares estimate the influence of elective affinities?"[17] A century later Max Weber made use of the term in his studies of the sociology of religion. Weber let *elective affinity* denote the power of ideas in shaping social actions[18]. In line with both usages, we are suggesting that the religio-cultural ideas of Zionism provided the stuff for an elective affinity between Calvin and Kees.

Van Paassen, who seems never, even as a Unitarian, to have quite abjured certain particularistic elements in the faith of John Calvin, nevertheless made his political stand with the universalism of Uncle Kees. With prophetic Judaism and Zionism as the mediating position, the elective affinity, between Calvin and Kees, we understand why Pierre unhesitatingly threw in his lot with the hounded Jewish people of the Hitler era. Though agreeing with many of his contemporaries who viewed and denounced war as an institution, he came to regard the war against Nazism as necessary if Democracy, Christianity, and Judaism - in other words Western civilization - were to survive. Van Paassen's disappointed longing for the life of a country parson[19] reflects what the generation of 1914 experienced as the lost promise of a peaceful Twentieth Century.

NOTES

1 / The authors are currently writing a biography of Pierre van Paassen.
2 / He became a Canadian citizen shortly before enlisting in the Canadian army in WWI. During the 1940s he lived and worked in New York City and in 1947 he took out American citizenship. For three decades he was indeed a Dutch-Canadian.
3 / See Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, Harvard University Press, 1979
4 / *A Pilgrim's Vow*, 1956, p. 17.
5 / The quotation marks are Pierre van Paassen's, indicating that he thought of that war not primarily as a conflict between Spaniards of different political allegiances but Mussolini's and Hitler's war on the Spanish people.
6 / See Ross Harkness, *J.E. Atkinson of the Star*, U. of Toronto, 1963, pp. 302-3; and Jock Carroll, *The Life and Times of Greg Clark*, Doubleday, 1981, p. 183.
7 / *A Pilgrim's Vow*, pp. 66-7.
8 / *Days of Our Years*, p. 23.
9 / *Days of Our Years*, 1939, pp. 23-4.
10 / *Ibid*, p. 496.
11/ Private communication by Mr. William Constandse.
12 / This film would have had to be made before 1911; we have been unable to find any reference to such a film.
13 / *Days of Our Years*, p. 19.
14 / *Visions Rise and Change*, 1955, pp. 7-8.
15 / *The Forgotten Ally*, 1943, pp. 9-10.
16 / *To Number Our Days*, p. 249.
17 / Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Werke*, XLIII, p. 153.
18 / see G. Duncan Mitchell, *A New Dictionary of Sociology*, London 1979, p. 63.
19 / Pierre van Paassen's disappointments are reminiscent of sentiments in verses that appear in George Orwell's essay "Why I Write" (1946):

(1)
A happy vicar I might have been
Two hundred years ago,
To preach upon eternal doom
And watch my walnuts grow;
(2)
But born, alas, in an evil time,
I missed that pleasant haven,
For the hair has grown on my lip
And the clergy are all clean-shaven.
(3)
And later still the times were good,
We were so easy to please,
We rocked our troubled thoughts to sleep
On the bosoms of the trees.

(9)
I dreamed I dwelt in marble halls,
And woke to find it true;
I wasn't born for an age like this;
Was Smith? Was Jones? Were you?

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