



Wim Berkelaar

Martin Luther King

Offprint of 'For us it is an honor and a pleasure'
Honorary Doctorates at the VU University since
1930

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Memorialtablet for Martin Luther King Jr., design: Fenna Westendiep.

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INTRODUCTION

The date for the first appearance of the honorary doctorate is not easy to determine. The time of the doctorate itself can be determined fairly closely – in the Middle Ages. The term ‘doctor’ was first used in our sense of the word in the Faculty of Law at the University of Bologna, one of the first universities in Europe. The term referred to a scholar in jurisprudence who did not necessarily give lectures. In the twelfth century the meaning shifted gradually, and those who lectured on civil law were called ‘doctor.’ A century later the meaning changed again. The term referred to an academic degree for those who had been educated in civil and ecclesiastical law. Outside of Bologna the term was used to designate someone who lectured. In Paris, another old European university, the term ‘doctor’ was probably introduced by theologians. A century later the term was also found in other faculties, such as medicine.¹

A famous doctor in the late Middle Ages was the highly honored Desiderius Erasmus, who acquired the doctor’s hat on 4 September 1506 in Turin. Thanks to the medievalist Jan van Herwaarden we know that Erasmus had been delighted with the prospect of a doctorate for years, and traveled specifically to Italy to receive the degree. By this time he had already obtained a thorough theological education at the University of Paris, among other schools. Initially Erasmus had thought to graduate from Bologna, but that did not work out.

Because the highest official at the University of Turin was a second cousin of Pope Julius II (1503-1513) who was later much criticized by Erasmus, this city attained the goal. The efforts of Turin to bind Erasmus to the city demonstrated that it concerned a prestigious candidate. Erasmus defended himself effectively against the Turin faculty and was found worthy of the doctorate. The promotor (the person who presents the candidate for an honorary degree) carried out the customary promotion rituals of that day by showing Erasmus an open and a closed book, giving him the kiss of peace, and pronouncing a paternal benediction. And even though Erasmus showed himself, in his letters, to be self-conscious about his place in history, he did admit that the doctoral hat provided him prestige. This was, however, only partly true. Successive popes honored his worth, but among theologians his doctorate gave rise to additional ridicule. In Turin, Erasmus’ promotion was to result in a long aftermath. Exactly 370 years after the date, on 4 September 1876,

a memorial plaque was unveiled in Turin; on this occasion academics from the left claimed Erasmus as their liberal 'forefather' – a typical example of presumptuous contemporary appropriation.²

The Erasmus case, meanwhile, demonstrates that it was easier to obtain the doctorate at one university rather than at another. Moreover, the pope exercised his influence on a doctorate, either directly or through his envoys. During the Middle Ages, emperor and pope also had authority over the right to grant degrees and thus could create doctorates, with or without preceding examinations. Even though the pope gave up this practice in 1568, the emperor continued it. Thus the counts palatine in the Republic of Venice readily conferred the doctorate to many jurists, which was one of the reasons that the University of Padua attracted many foreign students and overshadowed Bologna.³

These doctorates cannot be called honorary degrees, which are conferred to honor someone's exceptional contributions to scholarship or society, even though Erasmus' doctorate in 1506 resembled it somewhat. In the early modern period honorary doctorates remained the exception rather than the rule. Universities generally wished to guard their academic reputation. Thus the quality of the degrees was at times watched carefully, as can be demonstrated with an example from the University of Leiden. There concerned curators concluded in 1643 that students in the Faculty of Law were granted a degree too easily, which was considered damaging for the reputation of the university.⁴ Wherever a university kept a close eye on the quality of regular degrees, honorary degrees were watched even more closely.

In Europe the recognition of honorary degrees became common in the second half of the nineteenth century. The occasion was used not only to pay tribute to the honorary doctor (who could be a prominent academic as well as a deserving outsider), but also to put the spotlight on the university-frequently to add luster to an anniversary.⁵ In the Netherlands this development proceeded in a similar manner. Those who, in their own way, had made a contribution to scholarship were occasionally surprised by an honorary doctorate. Such a person was school principal Arie De Jager; in 1850 he received an honorary doctorate from the linguist Matthias De Vries of the University of Groningen, because of the numerous literary publications that he had written through the years. Of course, the danger of inflation was always lurking; it certainly was tempting for universities to honor deserving scholarly contributions, but also to become connected with prominent figures from society (heads of nations, politicians, captains of industry). The esteem of the honoree could also elevate the prestige of the university. Only a good university could resist such a temptation.

Such resistance was not always demonstrated. Thus Queen Wilhelmina, who never was known for her scholarly qualifications, became an honorary doctor in literature at the University of Groningen in 1914. As if that were not enough, eleven years later she received an honorary doctorate in law – this time in Leiden. It

tempted historian and critic Menno Ter Braak in February 1925 to write a satirical poem, 'Two Kinds of Promotion,' in the rebellious student magazine *Propria Cures*:

I must brownnose many profs,
I must swallow a thousand books,
Formulate twenty propositions,
And correct many grimy drafts.
I must get it printed and bound
(With a party for my friends).
Produce a shower of tips
And pay for a new tuxedo.
I must talk drivel for an hour
And paralyze my tongue.
And with all these hazards
Must keep my good humor.

She need to fear no prof,
Or read a single book.
She need not deal with dubious questions,
Nor touch a printer's proof.
To get the doctoral degree
She needs do nothing...but be silent.
Because William the Silent was great,
When the nation was in peril,
And the country in commotion,
When my forbear was a farmer.⁶

When the honorary doctorate was conferred on Wilhelmina, the *vu* University (*Vrije Universiteit*) was still developing. Founded in 1880 by Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), who wanted to engage in scholarship 'free from the church, free from the state, bound only to the Word of God,' the 'vu,' at its founding, counted only three faculties – theology, law, and literature. There was diligent study, but so far without much social status or recognition. In 1905 Kuyper himself had to step in as prime minister to confer legal recognition to the degrees of those educated at the university – with the provision that the *vu* University establish a fourth faculty within twenty-five years.⁷ Attempts to create a Faculty of Medicine were not successful, but just before the end of the 'ultimatum' period, the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Science was born in 1930. The continuation of the university was assured, and the golden anniversary could be celebrated.

Neither cost nor effort was spared for the anniversary. For three days the treasure chest was emptied to add luster to the anniversary. On the *dies natalis*, 20 Octo-

ber 1930, the university was addressed, among others, by prime minister Ch.J. M. Ruys De Beerenbrouck, Esq., who emphasized 'the value of a religious formation of countless confessors of Christ in the public arena of this day.' The address took place in the Keizersgracht Church in Amsterdam, which offered ample space and lent a special atmosphere to the commemoration. The independent university also received felicitations from other universities. Even that honorable bastion of the University of Leiden declared itself delighted with the younger, independent sister institution. As its rector magnificus J. Ph. Vogel stated: 'As Plato declared correctly, he who attacks religion, takes away the foundation of human society itself; and one must listen to those who do not want that in the High Council of the Sciences the earnest voice of religion is silenced.' The vu University seized the opportunity, for the first time in its existence, to confer four honorary doctorates, three in theology and one in law.

In 1880 the senate had already wanted to grant an honorary doctorate to the German theologian Paul Geyser (1824-1882). Geyser had caused a ruckus in Germany by turning against the liberal theological climate of the day. As vicar in Chur, his orthodox sermons had caused so much commotion that he was no longer allowed in the pulpit. In 1861 he accepted a call to Elberfeld, where his preaching again raised a storm. Here he came in contact with kindred spirits from the Netherlands who visited him regularly. Geyser was enthusiastic about the founding of the vu University, where no liberal spirit would blow, and Reformed theology would flourish. However, he did refuse the offer of a professoriate. Then there was a discussion whether to offer him an honorary doctorate. On Monday, 1 November 1880 rector magnificus Kuyper proved himself a supporter, in the conviction that the vu University could use Geyser's honorary doctorate to promote his 'right' for a position in the world of learning. Through the honorary doctorate Geyser would be strengthened in his struggle against the 'influences in Germany that hinder his work.'

But the party did not happen. Curator L. W. C. Keuchenius (1822- 1893) had earlier asked the curators' meeting, 'whether it is not rather strange that as long as there is not a single student who has become a candidate, to declare a candidate *honoris causa*.' Keuchenius received support from his colleagues De Savornin Lohman and Van Beeck Calkoen. Professor F. L. Rutgers was not a supporter for conferring a doctorate on Geyser either, but for substantive reasons: a doctorate in theology was conferred much less frequently in Germany and had much greater significance. For that reason Rutgers urged calmness; he doubted if there was haste in this matter.⁸ That was the end of it. It would be nearly fifty years before the honorary doctorate at the vu University would again appear on the agenda. During the deliberations in the senate for the golden anniversary the professors did all kinds of proposals. Historian A. Goslinga was an enthusiastic proponent for a prize-contest; literary scholar J. Wille pleaded for a commemorative book; and theologian H.H. Kuyper favored the granting of honorary doctorates. All three proposals were

adopted by the organizing committee for the anniversary. The committee favored the conferring of 'a small number of honorary doctorates,' and suggested that the senate should decide the question whether the honorary doctorates should be conferred on persons who 'have made themselves deserving through their contribution to the general cultural aspects of the Reformed movement, or on those who have gained laurels in Reformed scholarly areas, or on persons in either group.' The senate did not deliberate this question. Article 33/4 of the constitution prescribed a decision by a faculty.

Shortly before the anniversary two faculties (the theological and the juridical) proposed four honorary doctors – three theologians and one man without an academic career, but with great fame and name: Hendrikus Colijn, who had been designated for an honorary doctorate in law. He was considered everywhere as the standard bearer of the Reformed world, since he had served as minister of Defense (1911-1913), as prime minister (1925-1926), and as negotiator with the International Conference of the League of Nations since 1927, and moreover, for the vU University he was of incalculable significance as director of the Society for Higher Education on Reformed Principles, that governed the university.⁹ Honorary promotor P. A. Diepenhorst had to admit to the senate on 30 May 1930 that Colijn had engaged in virtually no scholarly studies, but that 'his position in the area of national and international politics' completely justified the conferring of the honorary doctorate.¹⁰ The university had to act firmly and quickly – firmly because Colijn had initially expressed objection to an honorary doctorate from the vU University, with which he was so closely associated, and quickly because Diepenhorst did not rule out that a competing university might preempt the vU University and show off the prestigious former premier who enjoyed such international renown.

The three theologians might be less known outside the vU University, but they had made considerable contributions for the extension of the Kuyperian legacy. J. C. Rullman had instructed Reformed people in the history of the Reveil, the Anti-revolutionary Party, and the struggle for public funding for Christian schools. Moreover, with his *Kuyper Bibliography* (*Bibliographie van dr. A. Kuyper's werken*) he had delivered a significant contribution to the canonization of the great helmsman. The same could be said about the Hungarian J. Sebestyén, who had proved with his double degrees in theology as well as philosophy that he could hold his own – even though he had spread Kuyper's views primarily in his home country. The Reverend D. Bakker, inspired by Kuyper's missiology, had traveled to Indonesia and had made the far East familiar with the Reformed variation of Christianity.¹¹

The four laureates were lauded in the Reformed press in a tone in which (with all humility) self satisfaction was not hard to find. In paying homage, *De Standaard* and *De Heraut* published the complete addresses of both the honorary promoters as well as the honorary doctors. In the same newspapers the founding of the vU University was literally lauded as a divine miracle. *De Heraut* of 26 October 1930

noted that ‘Our faithful God has heard our prayers. The mightiest opposition did not make the university disappear. In spite of all weakness and struggle, failure and sin, He preserved, gave expansion, and in the midst of our fears He drew nigh and said, ‘Fear not!’”

This is prose from a bygone era when each group had its own rituals and customs and honored its own leading men (women hardly counted at this time). This era has been called the period of ‘pillarization,’ in which every social current (Roman Catholic, Social-Democratic, Communist, Protestant) had distinct groupings and organizations. In those days even the Liberals did not escape big words, as was shown when an honorary doctorate was conferred on princess Juliana in Leiden, also in 1930. After the princess had passed university examinations in three subjects, she was summoned by Queen Wilhelmina to devote herself to other tasks. The princess was in danger of becoming a washed-up student – something that jurist W. J. M. Van Eysinga (an ardent adherent of the royal House of Orange) wanted to avoid. A decision was made to grant her an honorary doctorate in literature and philosophy – a task assumed by historian Johan Huizinga on 31 January 1930. Mindful of the ancient bond between Leiden, the Netherlands, and the House of Orange, he addressed the princess: ‘In you, Royal Highness, we honor the descendant of that House, whose lot and whose deeds are interwoven with the entire history of our state and our nation – we, who are the temporary bearers of all the spiritual obligations laid upon us through the honor of belonging to the oldest body of scholarship in the Netherlands. The University of Leiden now again seals the ancient bond with the Royal House, which is valued and dear to us, in order to show that its history is the nation’s history and is a living entity, and its heroic origin from Leiden’s courage and Prince William’s wisdom can still guide and inspire us even today.’¹²

Juliana herself was of the opinion that she did not deserve the honorary doctorate – an opinion shared by the professor of ancient history at Utrecht (and social-democrat) H. Bolkestein. He expressed his irritation in the *De Socialistische Gids*, the academic monthly of his political party: ‘The honorary doctorate is hereby diminished to an homage of (if possible) still less significance than knighthood, which is at least conferred on the basis of personal contributions – not on the achievements of ancestors.’¹³ Seen from that perspective the other early honorary doctorates from the VU University do not compare unfavorably. The four honorary doctors were kindred spirits – they had achieved some scholarly and societal success, no matter how hagiographic the work of some of them (Rullman) may be judged by the proverbial wisdom of retrospect.

After the exuberant celebration of the golden anniversary the VU University remained cautious with the granting of honorary doctorates. This was a disappointment for Dr. Abel Faze, who came to the senate on 26 November 1931 with the request for an honorary doctorate (he obviously evaluated his own achievements rather highly). The minutes noted diplomatically, ‘He shall be notified that the

principle and position of the University forbid the consideration of this request.' The only person who was considered for an honorary doctorate in the 1930s was the minister of Defense, as well as director of the Society for Higher Education on Reformed Principles, J. J. C. Van Dijk, who received the honorary doctorate in law in 1938. At the time this choice was not contested, but after the war this choice would probably never have been made; after 1945 a discussion erupted about the question whether van Dijk's defense policy had been the reason for the quick capitulation to Germany in 1940.

Many people during and after World War ii would have considered the period between the two world wars as a 'world of yesterday,' but the Reformed were not at all tired of this period. They were not concerned with the 'Breakthrough' – *Doorbraak*, an attempt to divorce political parties from religious influence. Several Dutch Reformed (*Hervormde*) intellectuals, among whom were Willem Banning and Gerardus Van Der Leeuw, played an important role in the Breakthrough, until they were seduced by the Social-Democratic Labor Party founded in 1945. The Reformed again formed their own pillar, which actually emerged from the war stronger rather than weaker. The vu University continued, for the time being, to be a part of this pillar. There was a difference, however; until 1930 the center of gravity was located in the Faculty of Theology, but after 1945 the juridical faculty became dominant. Was this the reason that at the seventieth anniversary of the university the honorary doctorates were conferred only by the Faculty of Law? Whatever the reason, the theological element still weighed heavily in the granting of the degree to the brand new honorary doctors. The Swiss international jurist Max Huber might not be a Calvinist, but his Christian philosophy of life was regarded as the core of his juridical viewpoint. With the Czech juridical philosopher Josef Bohatec it was simpler – he had been busy his whole life with the study of Calvinism. Finally, in the case of the Anti-revolutionary self-made man Jan Schouten the case was even more clear. In 1950 he was considered a Calvinist incarnate.

Just as twenty years earlier, at the fiftieth anniversary, a location for the events was chosen outside the university – now the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam served as the décor to add luster to the assembly. During the fifties and sixties splendid buildings in Amsterdam served to confer honorary doctorates even more frequently. In 1952 the Royal Tropical Institute served as the décor to honor two South Africans. The 75th anniversary of the vu University was celebrated in grand fashion in the rai exhibition hall where the only honorary doctorate of that year (the French theologian E. G. Léonard) was honored. With minor ceremonies, such as the conferring of honorary doctorates in the late fifties on the politician H. W. Tilanus (1958) and the biologist and director of the vu University, A. A. L. Rutgers (1959), the Woestduinkerkerk was the stage. However, with the next grandiose celebration of the 85th anniversary in 1965 the Concertgebouw was again rented.

Until that time the vu University was, at its core, still the same as before the war.

Representatives of international Calvinism were honored. That among these there were supporters of the apartheid regime of South Africa was still not an obstacle at that time. After all, the honorary doctors Van Rooy and Van Der Merwe, who were awarded that degree in 1952, belonged to the 'Netherlandic tribe,' a concept that did not carry the freight at the vU University or elsewhere in the Netherlands that it would acquire in the turbulent sixties. In 1965 student pastor S. J. Popma pursued the issue of 'the people behind the vU University.' He noted that the bond between the university and its supporters had grown weaker. Even the 'most dedicated enthusiast for the vU University would no longer be able to recite the names of all the professors.' The student of 1965 no longer (as his predecessor of 1920) sang, 'Kuyper, we honor you; Kuyper, we remain true to you,' and Popma approved of this development. The students no longer came to the university exclusively from close-knit Reformed families, but often from the periphery of the church or had no church background at all. This sometimes resulted in 'shocking language' in the student newspapers, which could disturb the supporters. Popma wanted to reassure the supporters by putting a cold washcloth on their foreheads. Don't worry! Everything is fine as long as these independent young people are met by professors with the same basic conviction. The professors might differ among themselves, as long as they are not indifferent. The vU University, as a university with a philosophy of life, was needed as much as ever in 1965. Even stronger: 'If the vU University were not here, it certainly would have to be invented now.'¹⁴

In a certain sense the vU University did reinvent itself in the sixties. The windows and doors to the world were opened. Before, the emphasis had especially been on 'praying for the world'; after the sixties it became especially 'working in the world.' This changed position could also be seen in the choice of honorary doctorates. The distinction for an honorary doctorate did not come only to the solidly Reformed literary scholar and critic C. Rijnsdorp, but also to the French sociologist Jacques Ellul, the development economist Paul Hoffman, and the black minister Martin Luther King. Even Prince Bernhard was deemed suitable for this list, at least in the newspaper *Trouw* (allied with the vU University). In the main editorial of 21 October 1965 the paper highly praised the six honorary doctors of that year: 'The vU University has manifested itself 'in accord with what the founders and especially Abraham Kuyper originally intended with this university.' Kuyper 'did not want scholarship to be isolated from the life of the world, but to have an influence on all of human life, national and international- to take a stand in the midst of the current of time.' If Rijnsdorp represented a 'typical Dutch atmosphere,' Ellul represented international Protestantism. The other honorary doctors, among whom Hoffman and Martin Luther King, represented 'the great problems of this era, the struggle for international justice, freedom, and the true communal humanity of the peoples of the earth.' The doctorate of Prince Bernhard would be 'a synthesis of national and international aspirations.'¹⁵

It may seem remarkable that this qualification of 1965 was not seized upon by the students and then struck down. Looked at more closely, however, this is less remarkable than it appears. The 'red years' (so called by the philosopher Antoine Verbij¹⁶) came in the seventies. This interpretation seems to be shared by historian A. Th. Van Deursen. In his recently published history of the vU University (*Een hoeksteen in het verzuild bestel. De Vrije Universiteit 1880-2005*), he sees the 'shadow of Marx' fall on the seventies. At that time the ghost of communism also roamed around the vU University. And even though it was only a minority that was bewitched by this ghost, this minority bestirred itself forcefully and politicized every proposal. It is no wonder that the honorary doctorates did not escape this influence. After all, in the eyes of the radical students, the honorary doctors were introduced by a small opaque clique. And if those honorary doctorates were also suspected of collaboration with politically right regimes, then there was the devil to pay.

The senate was confronted with a significant student protest against an honorary doctorate for the first time in 1972. The 'political' student council of the vU University wrote an unprecedented sharp protest against the decision to confer an honorary doctorate on the Indonesian jurist O. Notohamidjojo, who was suspected of collaboration with the military regime of General Suharto. The senate reacted to the protest with the discomfort of those who have never been challenged. The fact that the minister and fighter against apartheid, C. F. Beyers Naudé, had also received an honorary doctorate six months earlier was not able to temper the protest. It is telling of the changing relationships at the vU University that this time it was not the students who signed a protest against the proposed laureate, but members of the senate.

However, for the time being the tide was against the opponents. But the radical students were also dissatisfied- for them the honorary doctors were not far enough to the left. This became evident at the centennial celebration in 1980, when as many as nine laureates were announced. At this anniversary there also was a reaching back to an old tradition – for the first time the honorary doctorates were conferred outside the new building of the vU University on the De Boelelaan, namely, in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam. However, even though in the past the reports about such an event were full of appreciation and even respect, that had changed. The student paper *Pharetra*, founded shortly after the war and since turned left, saw an opportunity to critically evaluate the honorary doctors. The paper determined dapperly that 'both the procedure for and the resulting recommendations of the honorary doctors confirm our impression that the centennial of the vU University is a cliquish affair of the professors.' Of the nine nominees only liberation theologian J. Miquez Bonino and polemologist Frank Barnaby could charm the students. Moreover, said *Pharetra*, the nine honorary doctors (eight men and Mrs. Sophia Kruyt, honorary doctor in medicine) 'were subject not only to a vU University regulation but also to a vU University T (vUT – an acronym for early retirement) regula-

tion. Their age once again accentuates the retrospective character of the honorary doctorate. There no longer was any idea of looking forward. The vU University is aging; it looks back and sees that it was good.¹⁷ However, that was not the intent of the honorary doctorates. With the honorary doctorate the various faculties of the vU University did not want to give expression only to their scholarly reputation but also to their involvement in society. Their relationship to liberation theology was striking. This relationship remained constant – in 1990 the Nicaraguan poet and (former) minister of Culture, Ernesto Cardenal, was given the degree. By then the Marxist alternative to capitalism, which had governed the twentieth century since the Russian Revolution of 1917, had gone bankrupt. Then something happened at the vU University that had never happened before – a former laureate (Jacques Ellul, 1965) protested against the conferring of the honorary doctorate on this revolutionary, since it would not be fitting for the vU University. But the vU University proved not to be one-sided. In 1988 it honored Russian psychiatrist Anatoli Koryagin. He had been imprisoned for years because he had helped political prisoners who had been considered psychiatric patients by the Soviet authorities.

Thus the university not only watched against one-sidedness, but it also wanted always to honor the Reformed roots of the university. This intent was desired in spite of the fact that the firm objective prior to the Second World War – that is, the practice of Christian scholarship, had been exchanged after 1960 for a more vague objective – Christians practicing scholarship. With the distribution of honorary doctorates, the representatives of that ‘Christian scholarship’ were not forgotten in recent decades. At the centennial in 1980 the Reformed hero Hendrik Algra, former chief editor of the *Friesch Dagblad* and for years a member of the Upper Chamber for the Anti-revolutionary Party, was granted an honorary doctorate. In 1995 that honor fell to the American philosopher Alvin Plantinga, who wrote his work in the spirit of vU University philosophers H. Dooyeweerd and D. H. Th. Vollenhoven. The less ideological honorary doctorates of recent decades still carry the hallmark of the vU University – not only scholarly competence, but also social involvement is noted in most of the honorary doctorates. For example, in an honorary doctorate for the self-made meteorologist H. C. Bijvoet in 1975, or the one for chemistry assistant G. De Vries in 1995, the main criterion was ‘professional achievement without scholarly recognition.’ Bijvoet and de Vries had, without even having an academic degree, made a substantial contribution in their field and were rewarded with this honorary doctorate.

In the time before the centennial of the vU University in 1980 there was a discussion in the College of Deans about the question whether the somewhat vague criterion ‘because of exceptional contributions’ should not be expanded to ‘because of exceptional social contributions in relation to the objective of the vU University.’¹⁸ The decision was to work on this proposal after the centennial. The question whether guidelines for the honorary doctorate should be incorporated in the board

constitution was denied by M. A. Daniels of the Office of Juridical Affairs. 'The granting of an honorary doctorate is conducted in a totally different manner than the offering of doctorates, which as a rule arise out of the scholarly activity at the universities themselves.'¹⁹ That left open the possibility that the College of Deans itself could formulate guidelines. And that's what happened. The College of Deans once more formulated the criteria for an honorary doctorate. Required is 'a professional performance without formal scholarly acknowledgement,' which comes to expression 'in publications of generally acknowledged high quality, in multidisciplinary scholarly research,' and in 'deeds of social and/or cultural significance that are befitting the special character of the vU University, or, as the case may be, persons in whose activities the special character of the university comes to expression.' That last criterion was formulated much more precisely than the somewhat vague 'according to exceptional contributions' that had obtained before.

Those 'deeds of social significance befitting the special character of the vU University,' resonated in the honorary doctorate of the Malaysian Irene Fernandez. In 2001 she became an honorary doctor especially because of her struggle for the oppressed in her country. Such was the case also with two recent honorary doctors, the Irish dentist Diarmuid Shanley and the British physician Ian Chalmers – both were selected in 2006 not only because of their professional knowledge, but were honored especially because of their social contributions. Shanley was honored for his role in the standardization of the practice of dentistry in the European Union, and Chalmers for his efforts to give the patient a greater voice in the medical field in general and especially in medical examinations.

Presently the vU University expresses its special character in social engagement. At first blush this is not very different from other universities. In Leiden and Utrecht people are also selected because of their social contributions, as were Nelson Mandela (Leiden, 1999) and Winnie Mandela (Utrecht, 1986.) The latter, it soon became clear, actually turned out to be a blunder. Winnie Mandela led a terror squad that ruled the townships of South Africa, and she even had given orders for murder. The vU University has never committed such blunders in its selection. At most, in the early years the 'pillarization' of the university could be reflected in the laureates, as in later years the interest in social sentiment. Obvious flirting with the powers-that-be or with the Royal House cannot be deciphered from the laureates – unless it is the unavoidable Prince Bernhard. But the Prince received the honorary doctorate in 1965, when his successful activities as a lobbyist for the Dutch business community were still regarded as proof of the creativity of Dutch business, which was partly responsible for the unprecedented explosion of prosperity after World War II. It became known a decade later that the Prince had accepted bribes from the airplane manufacturer Lockheed. In spite of that, the Nyenrode Business University did not bat an eye to brashly pay tribute to the Prince with a new honorary doctorate.

However, the vU University can call itself 'special,' not just for avoiding the above-mentioned blunders. Nor is the special character of the university expressed only in the social engagement of the honorary doctors. By granting an honorary doctorate to the American philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff on its 127th anniversary in 2007, the university demonstrates that the scruples about the Reformed tradition that held sway in the sixties and seventies, appear to have been overcome. In his philosophical work Wolterstorff consciously provides intellectual enhancement to the tradition from which the vU University came. Thus the vU University, with the College of Deans leading, has completed the circle. The first time that the vU University granted honorary doctorates, on the fiftieth anniversary of its founding in 1930, the four honorary doctors, no matter how different from each other, felt themselves bound to the Reformed tradition. No matter how much has changed at the vU University in 77 years, the honorary doctorate for Wolterstorff proves that the Reformed inspiration never disappeared (totally), and even seems to have returned at the De Boelelaan.

With all of this, one must remember that through the years more than 61 candidates were reviewed for the honorary doctorate. Many of these candidates are, in spite of appreciation for their qualities and contributions, not worth mentioning. But several are worth noting. In September 1979, the Indonesian author Pramudya Ananta Toer was proposed as a candidate for the honorary doctorate by the student subcommittee of the Sub-Faculty of Social-Cultural Sciences. The problem with the proposal, however, was the absence of an honorary promotor. Such a person could not be found any time later either. Even a committee with the mandate to find an honorary promotor did not succeed. All of this caused great annoyance among the student subcommittee who accused the staff of unwillingness to pay tribute to the dissident author. The board of the sub-faculty attempted to pacify the hot-headed students. It desired, according to the minutes, 'to emphasize the appreciation for the motives from which and the devotion with which the students have pleaded their cause in the council.' To reject an honorary doctor because one could not find a promotor – such was rare. More often a proposed candidate could not hold his own against 'opponents,' or the nature of his service was not considered sufficiently scholarly for an honorary doctorate. For example, in 1994 the Faculty of Literature presented the literary critic Kees Fens. J. D. F. Van Halsema, professor of contemporary Dutch literature, was convinced that he need not provide 'elaborate argumentation' to persuade the College of Deans. His elaborate petition, which he nevertheless provided, bore no fruit. The notice in the account of the meeting of the College of Deans on 27 April 1994 briefly states, 'The general picture is not persuasive; proposal not accepted.' The former minister of Foreign Affairs, Max Van Der Stoep, presented by the juridical faculty, was rejected for a practical reason – that year he also received an honorary doctorate from the University of Utrecht. This settled the argument for the College of Deans, which was opposed to a 'piling on

of honorary doctorates.’ In 2005 Willem Breedveld, a journalist of *Trouw* did not make it. The Faculty of Literature nominated him, because he had made clear to a wide public ‘the importance and methods of politics, in light of historic developments, and in relation to the role of the media.’ However, without the support of the Faculty of Social and Cultural Sciences, he was no match against the author Gerrit Krol whose works had more relevance for scholarship.²⁰

The 61 honorary doctors who knew that they were among the chosen, should be doubly grateful – others had been weighed and found wanting. The honorary doctorate meant, in whatever manner, an acknowledgement of scholarly or other contributions – and sometimes a not insignificant support for those who were embattled or persecuted in their own country. Thus the honorary doctorate was like the effort of a significant party game. The university enhanced its profile by attaching great scholarly, political, and literary names to itself, and the honorary doctors left the solemn occasion with an elevated status. As long as such is the purpose, so long shall the honorary doctorate be granted. That is, forever – also at the VU University.

NOTES

1. Cf. Mariken Teeuwen, *The Vocabulary of Intellectual Life in the Middle Ages* (Turnhout 2003) 76-77.
2. Cf. Jan Van Herwaarden, ‘Erasmus’promotie in Turijn, de vrije gedachte en Rotterdam: 1506-1876.’ Appeared earlier as ‘Erasmus’ promotie in Turijn, de vrije gedachte en Rotterdam, 1506-1876,’ in: *Rotterdams jaarboekje* x.9 (2001) 156-182.
3. Angela De Benedictis, ‘Universiteit en overheid in Italië’, in: *Spiegel Historiae. Maandblad voor Geschiedenis en Archeologie*, vol. 31, nr. 4/5 (1996) 167-172, see 70.
4. Willem Otterspeer, *Groepsportret met dame. Het bolwerk van de vrijheid. De Leidse universiteit 1575-1672* (Amsterdam 2000) 242.
5. Cf. Matti Klinge, ‘Teachers,’ in: Walter Rüegg ed., *A History of the University in Europe, III, Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries (1800-1945)* (Cambridge 2004) 123-161, see 158-9. With thanks to Ad Tervoort, who alerted me to this source.
6. Menno Ter Braak, ‘Tweeërlei promotie (Bij H. M.’s Eeredoctoraat),’ in: *Propria Cures*, 14 February 1925. Reprinted in: Menno Ter Braak, *De Propria Cures artikelen 1923-1925* (the Hague 1978) 215.
7. For an overview see A. Th. Van Deursen, *Een hoeksteen in het verzuild bestel. De Vrije Universiteit 1880-2005* (Amsterdam 2005) 15-77.
8. Senate Archives VU University Amsterdam, Minutes 1 November 1880.
9. Cf. G. Harinck, ‘Colijn en de Vrije Universiteit,’ in: J. De Bruijn and H. J. Langeveld (eds.), *Colijn. Bouwstenen voor een biografie* (Amsterdam 1994) 155-199.
10. Senate Archives VU University Amsterdam, Minutes 30 May 1930.
11. For the first three theological honorary doctors cf. Maarten Aalders, *125 jaar Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid aan de Vrije Universiteit* (Zoetermeer 2005) 371-373.
12. Cf. Anton Van Der Lem, *Johan Huizinga. Leven en werken in beelden & documenten* (Amsterdam 1993) 259.
13. H. Bolkestein, ‘Een ‘koningspad’ naar de wetenschap?’, in: *De Socialistische Gids. Maandschrift der Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij* 15 (1930) 174-175.

14. S. J. Popma, 'Vrije Universiteit en volk-achter-de-vu: in de band van voorheen?,' in: *Trouw*, 16 October 1965.
15. 'Blij en voornaam feest van de v.u. Zes eredocctoraten verleend op 85e verjaardag,' in: *Trouw*, 21 October 1965.
16. Cf. Antoine Verbij, *Tien rode jaren. Links radicalisme in Nederland 1970-1980* (Amsterdam 2005).
17. Titus Williams, 'Ons kent ons,' in: *Pharetra. Studentenblad aan de Vrije Universiteit*, Vol. 36, nr. 1, 25 August 1980.
18. Archives College of Deans vu University Amsterdam, Guidelines Honorary Doctorates vu University, Minutes 30 November 1977.
19. Archives College of Deans vu University Amsterdam, Guidelines Honorary Doctorates vu University, M. A. Daniëls aan P. J. D. Drenth, 12 February 1985.
20. Archives College of Deans vu University Amsterdam, 8.56 Honorary Doctorates 115e dies natalis (1995), Folder 1: proposals not honored.

MARTIN LUTHER KING (1965)

To become an honorary doctor is a matter of honor. Whoever is chosen for this usually shows himself very pleased and responds by return mail. Not so the Reverend Martin Luther King (1929-1968). Since, as a leader of the black people in America, he delivered his famous *I Have a Dream* speech to thousands of his fellow-sufferers on the steps of the Lincoln Monument in Washington on 28 August 1963, he had become a famous personality. His dream of equality between black and white had also left an impression at the VU University. So much, in fact, that the Faculty of Social Sciences decided in November 1964 to award him an honorary doctorate, to be presented by sociology professor G. Kuiper. The senate did not have to think long about this recommendation. On 9 December 1964 rector magnificus professor R. Schippers notified King of the award, 'in recognition of your admirable achievements on behalf of those who are struggling to gain their rights and dignity.' Schippers was wise enough to assume that the name 'VU University' would not immediately ring a bell with world citizen King. For that reason he requested an American minister who was his student to tell King about the institution. Unfortunately, at the moment Schippers wrote his letter King was in Oslo. His secretary promised to relay the message, but no answer was forthcoming. Therefore the rector magnificus took up his pen once again two months later on 24 February 1965. He added to his praise for King and elaborated more fully on the reason for the honorary doctorate. Now it read that King would be honored personally, but that the honorary doctorate was also meant 'to lend support to the crusade against racial discrimination in which you are so actively involved.' As one of the oldest Christian universities in the world with contacts in Indonesia, South Africa, America, and Canada, the VU University deemed itself to be the right institution to support King's 'crusade.'

Once again Schippers received no reply for months. Via the Dutchman J. C. Hoekendijk, professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York since 1965, the rector magnificus learned on 22 June 1965 that King accepted the honorary doctorate and intended to be present at the ceremony. Promotor Kuiper showed himself happily surprised in a letter, but kept hoping for 'even one sentence' of the laureate himself, 'for we understand very well that you have other things to do which are more important than writing letters.' And indeed, King had

no time, not even for this one sentence. But, no matter, the University cheerfully publicized the news. However, if the University thought that everything had been arranged for this event, it was sadly mistaken. Generally speaking outrage and furious reactions followed, especially from America and South Africa where the 'negro problem' was very much on the mind of whites. So, for example, Sj. Steunenbrink from Houston ('as a Dutch immigrant physician from Holland who was brought up in a Reformed home, I learned this week that your university intends to offer Dr. Martin Luther King an honorary doctorate') asserted that King moved in communist circles, an assertion which he supported with American newspaper clippings. 'It is a wellknown fact here that many of his closest associates are red and belong to the atheistic minded.' Rev. De Koekkoek, a Dutchman who also lived in America, wrote along the same lines: King was said to be a 'fanatic,' who advocated 'violence' and called people to 'break the law,' and, last but not least, was supported by the communists. 'Does the Free have to go out of its way to honor such a man?'

Professor Schippers took all the time he needed to answer the critics. He observed dryly, 'We differ substantially in our appreciation of the work of Dr. King.' In his clarification he wrote that the struggle against racial discrimination ought to be 'the calling' of every Christian. He indicated not to be much impressed by the criticism that King was assisted by communists. 'Christians in our country were accused by the Germans of the same thing during the Second World War. Nevertheless Christians and communists often had a good working relationship in their opposition to the Nazis.' According to good Reformed practice, Schippers did not budge an inch. His position, based on principle, was facilitated by the interest shown in the Netherlands for this honorary doctorate. Queen Juliana had asked in a conversation with her confidant De Gaay Fortman and King's confidant Hoekendijk if King 'could spare some time for her after the ceremony.' Schippers skillfully seized on this proposal. To take the wind out of their sails, especially of critics in the United States, he suggested to King to have his picture taken with the queen at the palace. Those pictures would then have to be published in the American press. It would be a nice counterbalance to pictures which featured King in the company of people who were dubbed 'communists' in the American press.

The ceremony in which Kuiper publicly praised King's 'excellent contributions in the struggle of those who were denied justice or were without justice, which is to say all races not receiving equal rights,' was a great success. King was the dazzling central figure. Several people who were present indicated afterwards to have been deeply impressed, among whom King himself. Also now his reaction came indirectly. His assistant, Andrew Young, spoke words of thanks for the hospitality and kindness shown, and also his wife, Coretta King, showed her appreciation. It must be granted that a news item in *Trouw* on that same day cast somewhat of a

pall over the event. 'Why honor this man?' Dutch-American Paul Schrotenboer, chairman of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, asked in an interview. After all, King was known as an advocate of 'civil disobedience' – and was civil disobedience now supposed to lead to civil rights?

After 20 October the protests continued to dribble in for a little while. The most important protest came from the *Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk* in South Africa, which called the award not in keeping with the principles of the university. Professor of New Testament Herman Ridderbos, of Kampen Theological School, defended the vU University in his *Gereformeerd Weekblad* (*Reformed Weekly*) and in unambiguous language disapproved of the action of the South African church.

With this the storm about honorary doctor Martin Luther King abated. And then, on Thursday, 4 April 1968, King was assassinated. The vU University, through De Gaay Fortman who (in the meantime) had become rector magnificus and A. Krikke, chairman of the Student Council, indicated its shock. On Friday, 5 April, Fortman delivered a speech in which the bewilderment and bitterness about the event was quite obvious. In order to keep King's memory alive, Fortman and Krikke thought that a plaque should be placed next to the plaque that commemorated those of the vU University who had fallen during the Second World War. But this proposal failed because of lack of money and a general lack of interest. Nevertheless, this time all was not lost that was delayed. On 5 April 1982, exactly fourteen years after the suggestion was made, rector magnificus professor H. Verheul unveiled a plaque made by artist Fenna Westerdiep. With this the bond between the vU University and Martin Luther King was reaffirmed.

LIST OF HONORARY DOCTORS

1930-2007

1930

H. Colijn, Law

J. Sebestyén, Law

D. Bakker, Theology

J. C. Rullmann, Theology

1938

J. J. C. Van Dijk, Law

1950

Max H. Huber, Law

J. Bohatec, Law

J. Schouten, Law

1952

A. J. Van Der Merwe, Letters and
Philosophy

Joh. C. Van Rooy, Letters and
Philosophy

1955

E. G. Léonard, Theology

1958

H. W. Tilanus, Law

1959

A. A. L. Rutgers, Law

1965

J. Ellul, Law

E. Jonckheer, Law

C. Rijnsdorp, Literature

Z.K.H. Bernhard Prince of the

Netherlands Prince of Lippe

Biesterveld, Economics

P. Hoffmann, Economics

Martin Luther King Jr., Social
Sciences

1966

T. S. G. Mulia, Theology

1970

M. Ruppert, Law

1972

O. Notohamidjojo, Law

C. F. Beyers Naudé, Theology

1975

C. F. Von Weizsäcker, Law

H. C. Bijvoet, Mathematics and
Natural Sciences

Dom Helder Camara, Social Sciences

1980

J. Miguez Bonino, Theology

Yap Thiam Hien, Law

Mw. S. Kruyt, Medicine

F. E. R. De Maar, Medicine

C. F. Barnaby, Mathematics and
Natural Sciences

A. G. M. Van Melsen, Mathematics

and Natural Sciences
G. Duby, Literature
A. B. Frielink, Economics
H. Algra, Social Sciences

1985
J. P. Horder, Medicine
R. Girard, Literature
Oe. H. Kapita, Theology

1988
A. I. Koryagin, Law

1990
D. Hoogendoom, Medicine
L. Wilardjo, Physics and Astronomy
C. Sprey, Biology
E. Cardenal, Literature

1995
N. S. Ndebele, Law
G. De Vries, Chemistry
A. Plantinga, Philosophy
M. T. Turvey, Kinetics

2000
I. Fernandez, Medicine
K. Ward, Theology
C. Foias, Exact Sciences
L. J. Eaves, Psychology and Pedagogy

2002
K. Knip, Exact Sciences
H. Oosterhuis, Theology

2005
A. Bos, Law
Gerrit Krol, Literature
J. Martin, Social Sciences
J. M. Hull, Social Sciences
J. Waller Hunter, Earth Sciences

2006
D. B. Shanley, Dentistry
I. G. Chalmers, Medicine

2007
N. P. Wolterstorff, Philosophy

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