

# **Church versus culture. The past, present and future of the history of religion in the Netherlands**

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## *Introduction*

This article offers a brief reflection on the state of affairs of church history and religious history in the Netherlands. I have not restricted myself to the mere portrayal of ‘facts’, since facts need to be interpreted, weighed and contextualized. Four interpretations follow: first, an explanation of the complex nature of the Dutch religious past; second, a reconstruction of traditions in church history and religious history; third, an assessment of the institutional framework within which these disciplines are now practised; and fourth, a very brief attempt to gauge future developments. The *leitmotif* of this essay is the contradistinction, and to some extent opposition, between ecclesiastical or church history on the one hand, and religious and cultural history on the other. The contrast is characteristic of developments in the field over the past few decades.

## *1. Which religion?*

Anyone reading up on the ecclesiastical history of the northern Netherlands would be wise regularly to pose the question, ‘which church, exactly?’ The religious diversity of the ‘Low Countries’ is almost proverbial. The complicated nature of the Dutch history of church and religion can be explained in part by politics. It is standard textbook knowledge that the Dutch Republic originated in the Eighty Years’ War or Dutch Revolt against the (lawful) Spanish overlord, and that this had important implications for organized religion. The Dutch Republic was a federation of seven independent sovereign provinces or ‘states’ (i.e. estates) united on the basis of the Union of Utrecht of 1579, a document contrived as an emergency measure during the Revolt. Under the Union, which functioned as the Republic’s ‘constitution’ until 1795, each of the seven provinces expressed its preference for the Calvinist confession. However, the Republic had no formal state church. The Reformed Church was a ‘public’ church, the only church to have full access to the public domain, i.e. to enjoy freedom of worship and the official support of the civil authorities. Its orthodox Calvinist confession was fully defined at the Synod of Dort of 1618-1619.

At the same time, the Union specified in article 13 that each individual was free to choose his or her own confession. People were not forced to enter the public church. The religious-political arrangement was confirmed at the ‘Grand Meeting’ of 1651, which ratified the Union following the settlement of European affairs at the Treaty of Westphalia. This, then, was the political basis for the famous Dutch policy of toleration. It is important to recognize that toleration in the Republic was neither unique nor principled: at best it reflected a pragmatic approach that could be found throughout early modern

Europe.<sup>1</sup> But its extent was relatively broad, as was the degree in which it was exercised. Protestant groups benefited especially, albeit in different degrees, according to their specific denomination; Roman Catholics did so much less.

The Dutch Republic was abolished and the public church disestablished in 1795; and under the new nation state founded during the Napoleonic period the religious diversity that had existed for more than two centuries was measured for the first time. The census of 1809 shows just how intricate Dutch church history is – we shall discuss below the influence this had on Dutch historiography.

The religious outcome of the *ancien régime*, as quantified in 1809, included one large Calvinist or Reformed church nominally comprising about 55% of the population. A dissenting Calvinist church, the Remonstrant Brotherhood, represented the party that had lost out at the Synod of Dort. The Walloon churches had always been widely regarded as an extension of the public church, to which many had Huguenots reckoned themselves. There were also Mennonite assemblies (called *vermaningen*, which literally means ‘admonitions’). The Lutheran church had long functioned as an immigrant church, its members more or less assimilated into Dutch society. Together these smaller churches represented no more than 5% of the Dutch population. The Jewish ‘nation’ comprised about 1.8%. Finally, there were two Catholic churches. The Roman Catholic Church catered to a very substantial minority (about 38% of the population). The ‘old-episcopal cleresy’ (later known as the Old Catholics) was a very minor group with ‘Jansenist’ sympathies which still regarded itself as part of the (Roman) Catholic community. A summary of the situation in 1809 is given in Tabel I.

**Tabel I. Division of population according to religious denomination, 1809**

Year	1809
Population	<b>2,205,505</b>
Catholics	<b>38.3 %</b>
Reformed	<b>55.5 %</b>
Mennonites	<b>1.4 %</b>
Lutherans	<b>2.8 %</b>
Remonstrants	<b>0.2 %</b>
Jews	<b>1.8 %</b>

After the separation of church and state in the wake of the French invasion of 1794-1795, all denominations possessed freedom of worship. It took, however, until 1848 (and beyond) for the various churches to actually take possession of the public domain. Catholics, for example, were for a long time confronted with prohibitions on monasteries and processions. They were able to reinstall the

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<sup>1</sup> See Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by faith. Religious conflict and the practice of toleration in early modern Europe* (Cambridge MA, 2007); Joris van Eijnatten, *Liberty and concord in the United Provinces : religious toleration and the public in the eighteenth-century Netherlands* (Leiden etc, 2003).

church ‘hierarchy’ (the episcopal structure) only in 1853, following the liberal constitution of 1848. The constitutional guarantee for religious freedom enabled the further development of ‘free’ churches. In result, by the end of the nineteenth century what had once been the ‘public’ Reformed church had undergone at least five major schisms and sub-schisms and produced as many churches, with a promise of more to come – which they did. Tabel II offers a simplified overview of the situation in 1909. Major secessions took place in 1834 (the *Afscheiding* or ‘Secession’) and 1886 (the *Doleantie* or ‘Protestation’). Many orthodox Calvinists, secessionists as well as members of the mainstream Reformed church, called themselves *gereformeerd* (meaning ‘reformed’). The mainstream Reformed Church called itself *hervormd* (which also means ‘reformed’). In the following *hervormd* will denote the mainstream Reformed Church of the nineteenth century; *gereformeerden* will refer to the orthodox Reformed both within and without that church.

**Tabel II. Division of population according to religious denomination, 1909**

Year	1909
Population	<b>5,858,175</b>
Catholics	<b>35.2 %</b>
Mainstream Reformed ( <i>hervormd</i> )	<b>44.3 %</b>
Secessionists ( <i>gereformeerd</i> )	<b>9.7 %</b>
Mennonites	<b>1.1 %</b>
Lutherans	<b>1.7 %</b>
Remonstrants	<b>0.5 %</b>
Jews	<b>1.8 %</b>

Since 1909 the religious field in the Netherlands has changed considerably, of course, but this is not the place to discuss this history in any detail. Suffice it to note, firstly, that the divisions between mainstream churches shown in Table II remained intact until the 1960s; secondly, that after the 1960s, the confessionally once so stable Netherlands became one of the most highly secularized countries in Western Europe; and, thirdly, that religious belief, wherever it did occur after the 1960s, developed partially outside the traditional churches. Interest in ‘New Age’ as well as in Asian religious forms grew during the 1970s and 1980s, as did ‘spiritualism’; Islam, the religion of North African and Turkish immigrants, increasingly became a factor of importance. Within the mainstream Christian churches neo-orthodoxies grew, while outside them evangelical and Pentecostal movements operated with increasing success. It is in this context that cultural history arose as an apposite approach to the Dutch religious past.

## 2. Which past?

Probably the most widely disseminated account of the Dutch religious past was *Nederlandse kerkgeschiedenis (Dutch Church History)* by the church historian Otto J. de Jong. The first edition appeared in 1972, a second in 1978, and a third in 1986. Before we glance at this important milestone in the modern religious historiography in the Netherlands, it may be helpful briefly to discuss the prehistory.

Modern church history begins, to all events and purposes, with the *Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche hervormde kerk (History of the Dutch Reformed Church)*, a monumental study that appeared in four volumes between 1819 and 1827. It was written by two *hervormde* theologians, Annaeus Ypeij (1760-1837) and Isaac Dermout (1777-1867). New to this portrayal of ecclesiastical history from the Reformation to the early nineteenth century was its focus on the piety and faith of individual believers as constitutive for the formation of churches.<sup>2</sup> Ypeij and Dermout rejected the view of the church that had been prevalent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Where early modern church historians had regarded a government-supported accumulation of external rites, synods, formularies and doctrines as the chief source of ecclesiastical legitimacy, Ypeij and Dermout shifted their attention to the inner religious and moral fashioning of individual believers. Beliefs sincerely held by a population of educated men and women, they thought, inevitably gave rise to an institutional structure appropriate to the people among whom it originated. They found proof of this in the Reformation, which had eventually given birth to a Protestant church of national proportions. However, the opportunity to establish a church founded in the hearts and minds of the Dutch population had been squandered by the Synod of Dort. Ypeij and Dermout looked upon the Calvinist synod as a blemish on the history of the church because it had failed to guarantee the unity of Christendom within the Dutch nation. It had sacrificed the reasonableness of sincere, heartfelt beliefs to complicated doctrinal points upheld by a synodal institution. Ypeij and Dermout welcomed the downfall of the *ancien régime*. The nineteenth-century Netherlands, they believed, fully met the conditions for developing a truly broad and liberal church. Discerning a moral streak in Dutch religious history, they believed the Dutch were particularly susceptible to sensible ideas about freedom, tolerance, piety and education. If the Synod of Dort had thwarted healthy developments towards unifying religion and church on a national basis, it was up to their own time to readjust this historical trend.

The general approach to religion underlying Ypeij and Dermout's account is prevalent in all overviews of Dutch church history, up to and including that of De Jong in 1972. There was, of course, nothing specifically Dutch about this vision. All Dutch church historians were heavily influenced by their German colleagues, beginning in the eighteenth century with Johann Lorenz Mosheim. A similar proposition underlay their work: church history is the history of the inner beliefs of individual

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<sup>2</sup> Peter van Rooden, *Religieuze regimes. Over godsdienst en maatschappij in Nederland, 1570-1990* (Amsterdam, 1996), 147-168; idem, 'Dutch Protestantism and its Pasts, in: R. Swanson ed., *The Church Retrospective* [Studies in Church History 33] (Woodbridge, 1998), 254-263.

believers, which in turn are constitutive for the formation of institutional churches. (In the early modern period, church history had been based on the reverse proposition.) But because organized churches reflect and affirm individual beliefs, functioning as administrative containers for, and spiritual expressions of those beliefs, modern church history focused predominantly on the institutions, their leaders and their doctrinal particularities. This is not the place to fully discuss the period between 1819 and 1972; the number of local and regional histories is very large. However, it is possible to take stock of the general textbooks and overviews of specific denominations that preceded De Jong. They were all written from within the ‘classical’ or ‘grand German’ tradition, emphasizing the fundamental coherence of personal belief and church organisation and setting great store by education as a means of defining the nation and shoring up religious institutions. The national element is evident, for example, in church histories of the Netherlands before the Reformation,<sup>3</sup> or in complete overviews of Christianity in the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, church historians produced specifically Dutch histories of every church registered at the censuses of 1809 and 1909. There were histories of the *hervormde* church in the tradition of Ypeij and Dermout;<sup>5</sup> Lutherans, too, had their church history,<sup>6</sup> as did Mennonites<sup>7</sup> and Jews.<sup>8</sup> There was a Catholic historical tradition<sup>9</sup> and an Old Catholic one.<sup>10</sup> Even religious groups outside the official churches, such as Collegiants<sup>11</sup> and Socinians<sup>12</sup>, were given a history – the point made by these authors was that individual beliefs need not necessarily be reciprocated by hierarchic organizations and formalized doctrine. De Jong was preceded by an ‘ecumenical’ textbook in which the history of the Protestant churches was juxtaposed to that of the Catholic church.<sup>13</sup> But De Jong, too, stood in the ‘grand’ German tradition. If his vision was ecumenical, his point of departure was wholly traditional. He employed Karl Barth’s insight that church history is that part of history formed by the Bible’s message, and applied it to the Netherlands. This enabled him to discuss the various kinds of Protestants as well as Catholics and Jews.

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<sup>3</sup> Willem Moll, *Kerkgeschiedenis van Nederland vóór de hervorming* (Arnhem, Utrecht, 1864-1871); R.R. Post, *Kerkgeschiedenis van Nederland in de middeleeuwen* (Utrecht, 1957).

<sup>4</sup> Jan Kuiper, *Geschiedenis van het godsdienstig en kerkelijk leven van het Nederlandsche volk (100 v.C.-1903)* (2nd ed. Nijkerk, 1903; 1st ed. 1900).

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Reitsma, *Geschiedenis van de Hervorming en de Hervormde Kerk der Nederlanden* (Groningen, 1893; 2nd ed. 1899); Laurentius Knappert, *Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk onder de Republiek en het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden* (Amsterdam, 1911-1912); Th.L. Haitjema, *De nieuwere geschiedenis van Neerlands Kerk der Hervorming* (The Hague, 1964); Albert Jan Rasker, *De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk vanaf 1795. Geschiedenis, theologische ontwikkelingen en de verhouding tot haar zusterkerken in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw* (2nd ed. Kampen, 1981; 1st ed. 1974).

<sup>6</sup> Jakob Loosjes, *Geschiedenis der Luthersche Kerk in de Nederlanden* (The Hague, 1921).

<sup>7</sup> W.J. Kühler, *Geschiedenis van de doopsgezinden in Nederland* (Haarlem, 1932-1950).

<sup>8</sup> Hendrik Brugmans, *Geschiedenis der Joden in Nederland* (Amsterdam, 1940); J.C.H. Blom, R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld, I. Schoeffers eds., *Geschiedenis van de joden in Nederland* (Amsterdam, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> L.J. Rogier, *Geschiedenis van het katholicisme in Noord-Nederland in de 16e en de 17e eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1947; 3rd ed. 1964); idem, *Katholieke herleving, geschiedenis van katholiek Nederland sinds 1853* (s.l., 1956); Pontianus Polman, *Katholiek Nederland in de achttiende eeuw* (3 vols.; Hilversum, 1968).

<sup>10</sup> B.A. van Kleef, *Geschiedenis van de oud-katholieke kerk van Nederland* (Rotterdam, 1937). Dick J. Schoon, *Van bisschoppelijke cleresie tot Oud-Katholieke Kerk. Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van het katholicisme in Nederland in de 19de eeuw* (Nijmegen, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> J.C. van Slee, *De Rijnsburger collegianten. Geschiedkundig onderzoek* (Haarlem, 1895); C.B. Hylkema, *Reformateurs. Geschiedkundige studiën over de godsdienstige bewegingen uit de nadagen onzer Gouden Eeuw* (Haarlem, 1900-1902).

<sup>12</sup> W.J. Kühler, *Het socinianisme in Nederland* (Leiden, 1912); J.C. van Slee, *De geschiedenis van het socinianisme in de Nederlanden* (Haarlem, 1914).

<sup>13</sup> A.G. Weiler ed., *Geschiedenis van de Kerk in Nederland* (Utrecht, 1962).

The 1970s brought renewal. The decade not only produced ecumenical church history in classical vein, but also saw the integration of church history into ‘secular’ history. Trendsetting in this respect were several studies by the ‘general’ historian Arie van Deursen, a (Protestant) scholar of early modern history. Selecting for his 400-page monograph the most controversial episode in Dutch church history – the Calvinist-Remonstrant conflicts surrounding the Synod of Dort – he focused on the beliefs and attitudes of ‘ordinary’ people rather than on dogmas and theologians. In this way, he assimilated Dutch church history into a broader, social and cultural perspective.<sup>14</sup> He continued this approach in similar books on religion and popular culture, including *Plain lives in a golden age*, first published in Dutch in four volumes between 1978 and 1981.<sup>15</sup> In the latter study, Van Deursen states the aim of his book in a single sentence, claiming that his intention was nothing more nor less than to simply relate how ordinary people in Holland lived during the war against Spain.<sup>16</sup> If this was highly readable history, it was all but lacking in theoretical grounding. The basic assumption of Van Deursen’s work was, it seems, the continuity, and indeed the unchanging nature of, Calvinist piety. His work as a cultural historian fitted in with the so-called ‘cultural turn’<sup>17</sup> as far as its object of research was concerned; but it lacked the focus on theory and methodology, for which Van Deursen had a pronounced distaste. From this perspective, his strongest point was also his greatest weakness. Van Deursen achieved renown for his inimitable style but contributed little to the intellectual basis of the history of religion. He simply subscribed to the basic assumption of classical church historians that the religious (i.e. biblical and hence unchanging) inspiration of individual believers is the basis of religious history.

A totally different approach was taken in the 1980s by Willem Frijhoff. He produced a mode of history that was theoretically well-informed, in particular by French social and cultural history as studied by the Annales school. He first outlined his views on church history for a Dutch academic public in an article bearing the somewhat triumphant title, ‘From *histoire de l’église* to *histoire religieuse*’.<sup>18</sup> Frijhoff politely but firmly debunked the institutional, church-centred approach of classical church history, replacing it with a focus on lay devotion and popular religious culture. To some extent, his history of mentalities (as French-style cultural history was then often called) produced results similar to those of Van Deursen: both historians emphasized culture, popular and elite. Their attitude to theory was, however, completely different. In fact, it is probably fair to say that Frijhoff’s talent in combining abstract theory with concrete history has had a greater impact on Dutch historians than his foregrounding, at the cost of church history, of *histoire religieuse*. Academic church historians did not, at any rate, take their cue from him. The Frijhoff of the 1980s and 1990s was

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<sup>14</sup> A.Th. van Deursen, *Bavianen en slijkgeuzen. Kerk en kerkvolk ten tijde van Maurits en Oldenbarneveldt* (Assen, 1974).

<sup>15</sup> Arie Th. van Deursen, *Plain lives in a golden age. Popular culture, religion and society in seventeenth-century Holland*, 1991.

<sup>16</sup> A.Th. van Deursen, *Mensen van klein vermogen. Het kopergeld van de Gouden Eeuw* (2nd ed.; Amsterdam, 1991), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Philippe Poirrier, *L’Histoire culturelle : un «tournant mondial» dans l’historiographie ?* (Dijon, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Willem Frijhoff, ‘Van “histoire de l’église” naar “histoire religieuse”. De invloed van de “Annales”-groep op de ontwikkeling van de kerkgeschiedenis in Frankrijk en de perspectieven daarvan voor Nederland’, in: *Nederlandsch archief voor kerkgeschiedenis* 61 (1981), 113-153.

very much part of the cultural turn. The fact that religious history as a method failed to catch on in the twenty-first century is due partly to the waning of the Annales School itself, but most of all to the very conventional manner in which church history as a discipline continued to be practised in the Netherlands.

A third alternative to the classical tradition in church history was made by a church historian. In 1995 Peter van Rooden challenged his immediate colleagues in a book that fully integrated the general history of the Netherlands into a macrohistory of the churches. The title of the book betrays the influence of Michel Foucault: Van Rooden called it 'Religious Regimes'.<sup>19</sup> His interest was as much political as it was social, economic and cultural (or even anthropological). Distinguishing between three different 'regimes' that appeared consecutively after 1500, Van Rooden discussed the religion (*nota bene*: religion rather than churches) in terms of discourse. His primary focus was power, or discourse as power, and in this sense he reflected not so much the cultural as the 'postmodern turn'. The reception of this thought-provoking book has been telling. It had a large impact, especially among 'general' historians. Most of these did not, however, pick up Van Rooden's concept of a 'religious regime', probably as a result of their unfamiliarity with religion in what, by the 1990s, had become a highly secularized environment. Among church historians the work never became very popular, perhaps because it was little understood.

This was the state of affairs at the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Within several years, two studies symbolized the bifurcation that had all but taken place: on the one hand a focus on religious culture, which took into consideration the theoretical and methodological insights that emerged from the cultural turn; and on the other a continuation of the classical tradition of church history. It is worthwhile to compare these studies in the context of this article. A book by two 'general' historians, Joris van Eijnatten and Fred van Lieburg, was simply called 'Dutch Religious History' (2005). It explicitly integrated the work of Van Deursen, Frijhoff and Van Rooden (as well as the many studies they directly and indirectly inspired) into a historical overview of religion in the northern Netherlands, beginning with native religious culture during the Roman era and ending with de-Christianization and the rise of alternative religions ranging from New Age to Islam.<sup>20</sup> A robust social and political framework enabled the authors to eclectically integrate institutional church history into a broad survey of religion through the ages. Aiming at a general but educated reader, they claimed not to 'focus primarily on individual faiths and confessions, but on the shape that religion has taken in culture and society, and on the ways in which it has become manifest over space and time. The authors devote ample attention to holy sites, sacred objects and holy days, and also to the way in which individuals and groups – clergy and laypeople, broad churches and exclusive societies alike – have

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<sup>19</sup> Peter van Rooden, *Religieuze regimes. Over godsdienst en maatschappij in Nederland 1570-1990* (Amsterdam, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Joris van Eijnatten and Fred van Lieburg, *Nederlandse religiegeschiedenis* (Hilversum, 2005; 2nd ed. 2006). A German translation is due in 2010 (Vanden Hoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen).

appropriated sacral value in the past.<sup>21</sup> One year later, a group of church historians and general historians affiliated to religious institutions wrote a substitute for De Jong's church history. Called 'Handbook of Dutch Church History',<sup>22</sup> it signalled a somewhat surprising restoration of the grand German tradition. According to the editor, Herman Selderhuis, 'Religion and Christianity themselves have been determined by the message of the Church and by the structures and developments of the Church.'<sup>23</sup> The implicit understanding in this statement is, again, that individual believers inspired by the message of the Bible give rise to organized churches, which in turn again influence individual believers. There is no trace in this book of an attempt to develop a theoretical understanding of church history, let alone to engage with alternative representations of the religious past by reflecting on the structural continuity of subjectivities (such as 'mentalities') in history, or by discussing religion as a product of social, cultural and psychological forces that reach beyond personal faith.

### 3. Whose past?

As we saw above, classical church history in the Netherlands gave each organized religious minority its own specific institutional history. The 'new' religious history has treated religion in wholly different terms, as an integral aspect of a historical culture and society. These different approaches mirror different conceptions of religion. The first approach saw religion in terms of eighteenth and nineteenth-century theology, as a sincerely held belief in the message of the Bible, reflecting, or giving rise to, institutions with metaphysical qualities; the second saw religion primarily as an anthropological *sine qua non* or as a social construction. These different views of religion are connected with different target groups. This is evident from the two recent textbooks discussed above, both of which were issued by commercial publishers. The *Handbook of Dutch Church History* was written primarily for Christian readers, including, in particular, students at the theological faculties; *Dutch religious history* was simply aimed at a broad (which in Dutch terms means: largely de-Christianized) public. Interestingly, the writers working on the handbooks were academics based in very different institutions. It is worthwhile to pursue this line of thought, since it sheds some light on the present state of church history and religious history in the Netherlands.

To some extent, this theme involves reflection on two questions: not only 'who is *willing* to tell which history?', but also, 'who is *able* to tell which history?' The first question takes for granted that academics are free to write as they believe they should; the second assumes that they are constrained by forces institutional, political and/or commercial. The contemporary impasse in religious history, with two very different approaches existing side by side while the field itself is in decline, can only be explained by seriously answering the second question in addition to the first. In the contemporary Netherlands (as elsewhere in Europe) institutional, political and commercial forces are bound up with

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<sup>21</sup> Van Eijnatten and Van Lieburg, *Nederlandse religiegeschiedenis*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Herman Selderhuis et al, *Nederlandse kerkgeschiedenis* (Kampen, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Selderhuis, *Nederlandse kerkgeschiedenis*, 4-6.

each other, even more so than they used to be. Academic institutions are dependent on government funding but are at the same time required to tap new, predominantly commercial sources of revenue; the neologism coined in the Netherlands in this regard is ‘valorisation’. At the same time, universities are assessed according to the number of students they attract, so that, for better or worse, the student ‘market’ partly determines the content of academic teaching. Within this context several developments occurred over the past decade that had a substantial impact on the way church and religious history is practised in the Netherlands.

A report commissioned by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences on ‘the future of theology in the Netherlands’ in 2000 concluded that academic theologians needed to consider the cultural and social functions of their discipline, as well as its internal coherence. The writers of the report suggested, among other things, that each theological faculty ought to have a Chair for Church History.<sup>24</sup> However, already in 2000 a substantial part of what once upon a time had been a thriving theological culture had been all but decimated. Theological faculties had entered a crucial phase in the 1990s. The Royal Academy report listed the following theological faculties; a number of them have since then undergone fundamental changes:

1. *Nijmegen*: Faculty of Theology, Catholic University Nijmegen. In 2007 a new Faculty of Theology was established in which the clerical hierarchy of the Catholic Church has substantial influence. There is now also a separate Faculty of Religious Studies.
2. *Groningen*: Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen.
3. *Amsterdam (VU)*: Faculty of Theology, VU University Amsterdam.
4. *Leiden*: Faculty of Religious Sciences at Leiden University. In 2008, the faculty was integrated into the Faculty of Humanities and demoted to the status of a ‘department’.
5. *Tilburg*: Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University Brabant. In 2006-2007, the faculty was integrated into the Faculty of Humanities and demoted to the status of a ‘department’.
6. *Utrecht*: Faculty of Theology at the University of Utrecht. In 2007, the faculty was fully integrated into the Faculty of Humanities and demoted to the status of a ‘department’.
7. *Amsterdam*: Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam (here the former Faculty of Theology had already been closed down).
8. *Utrecht and Tilburg*: The Faculty of Catholic Theology, which is located both in Tilburg and Utrecht. This faculty (bound in confessional respect to the Catholic Church) emerged in 2007 with the abolition of the faculties of theology at Tilburg and Utrecht.
9. *Kampen*: Theological University of the *gereformeerde* churches at Kampen.

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<sup>24</sup> *De toekomst van de theologie in Nederland. Verkenningsadvies van de Commissie Geesteswetenschappen (CGW)* (Amsterdam, 2000).

10. *Kampen*: Theological University of the ‘free’ *gereformeerde* churches at Kampen.

11. *Apeldoorn*: Theological University of the *christelijke gereformeerde* (‘Christian Reformed’, a minor secessionist group originating in the nineteenth century) churches at Apeldoorn.

What remains now are three faculties of theology (nos. 1-3) and four departments of theology or religious studies (nos. 4-7) at seven full-fledged universities. The remaining faculties (nos. 8-11), which in practice function as seminaries for specific churches, are negligible in terms of size and academic stature.<sup>25</sup>

The priorities of theological faculties changed in the sense that more than ever they were pressured to train students as pastoral workers, rather than traditional all-round clergy. This development did not do church history any good, since historical training is a luxury few students are able, or willing, to afford. All faculties of theology or religious studies have to contend with the same problem. In addition, the founding in 2007 of a Faculty for Catholic Theology (Faculteit Katholieke Theologie or FKT) at Radboud University practically put bishops in charge there, which meant a renewed emphasis on church rather than culture, and on theology rather than history. Likewise in 2007, after lengthy discussions, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN: a fusion of the *hervormde* kerk with *gereformeerde* and Lutheran churches) concentrated its clerical training facilities in the Protestant Theological University (PTU); ministers-to-be now received their training exclusively at Leiden, Utrecht and Kampen. In this structure, the PKN synod lost some (but not all) of its influence. The point is that, in this context, it has been increasingly difficult to keep intact the infrastructure necessary for practising a viable form of church history. Indeed, as far as church history and religious history are concerned, the centre of gravity has shifted, at least in terms of quality, from theology to the humanities. Yet even within the broader humanity faculties the position of religious history is a precarious one. In 2002, a Centre for Dutch Religious History (ReLiC)<sup>26</sup> was established at VU University Amsterdam. Its aim was described as follows:

‘As a Centre for Dutch Religious History, ReLiC aims to initiate, stimulate, and coordinate research into the religious history of the (northern) Netherlands and enable the publication of findings in various media. ReLiC emphasizes the interdisciplinary and international dimensions of research on Dutch religious history; it encourages cross-border contacts between scholars, supports English-language publications, and seeks to foster the integration of traditional church history into general history.’

ReLiC had to be discontinued in 2007 due to lack of funding. In brief, then, the position of ecclesiastical history weakened considerably in the course of one or two decades, while institution-

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<sup>25</sup> This also includes the Theological University at Apeldoorn.

<sup>26</sup> ReLiC was an acronym for ‘Religionis et Libertatis Causa’, one of the traditional mottos of the Dutch Revolt. The point was that the ‘V’ in VU University stands for ‘free’, and that the word ‘relic’ combined the initials of religion, freedom, and centre.

based initiatives in the field of religious history did little better. The situation is unlikely to change soon.

This outline of actual institutional developments in the world of academic theology seems to contradict the way theological faculties present themselves to the outside world. There are in the Netherlands two chairs for the history of religion not directly connected to a theological faculty. These are the endowed chairs for the ‘History of Dutch Protestantism’ at VU University Amsterdam (in the Faculty of Arts) and the ‘History of Dutch Catholicism’ at Radboud University (in the Institute for Historical, Literary and Cultural Studies). By contrast, within the theological faculties, the number of chairs specifically mandated to pursue church and religious history is enormous.<sup>27</sup> There are a number of *ordinarii* (general chairs): at Nijmegen (‘History of Christianity’), Groningen (‘History of Christianity including the history of doctrine and theology’, a post combined, incidentally, with ‘Philosophy of religion’), VU Amsterdam (‘Church history’), Tilburg (‘Cultural History of Christianity’), Leiden (‘History of World Christianity’ and ‘History of Modern Christianity’), and Amsterdam (‘History of the Christian religion and theology’ and ‘Hermetic philosophy and related currents’). A relatively large number of *extraordinarii* (endowed and personal chairs), some financed by exotic foundations providing no less exotic endowments, for example to foster research into ‘the history and principles of Unitarianism’ (financed by the Zwingli Foundation at Groningen University). Other extraordinary and personal chairs include ‘History of Reformed Protestantism’ (Leiden), ‘Freemasonry’ (Leiden), and ‘Cultural history of religiosity, especially since the early modern period’ (Nijmegen). In particular the Faculty of Theology at VU University Amsterdam has collected chairs by the dozen: ‘the archives and history of neo-Calvinism’, ‘the history of the Mennonites and related currents’, ‘history of the religious book’, ‘the history of the Reformation, and ‘history of Reformed pietism’; in response to the appeal for a cultural approach to church history there is even an endowed chair for ‘European culture and Christianity, especially in relation to the work of Augustine’. This overview may give the reader the impression that church and religious history is a booming business, and in a sense it is. Almost every conceivable minority is represented by a professor, which in the Dutch context refers to an academic temporarily or permanently in possession of the right to confer a doctorate. Appearances, of course, deceive. Inflation in terms of personnel does not necessarily correspond to a higher notch in international indices. It is not so much the quantity as the quality of research that is at stake here.

An indication of the actual status of academic research into religious history in the Netherlands is the number of institutes concerned specifically with the subject. There are, to be precise, one research institute and two archival institutes. The research institute is VISOR, the VU Institute for the Study of Religion, based at VU University. It maintains a promising research programme on “Tradition,

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<sup>27</sup> I am restricting myself to the history of the medieval, early modern and modern periods, and thus excluding Old and New Testament ‘history’ as well as Patristic Studies.

changes and identity”, which, however, has still to be developed.<sup>28</sup> The archival institutes are affiliated respectively to the (Protestant) VU University Amsterdam and the (Catholic) Radboud University. At VU University, the Historical Documentation Centre for Dutch Protestantism, founded in 1971, specializes in the history of Protestantism in the Netherlands from 1800 to the present day.<sup>29</sup> Although the Centre has attracted some research funding, it mostly manages archives and publishes books, exclusively on Protestantism. The Catholic Documentation Centre (Katholiek Documentatie Centrum), on the other hand, limits itself to managing the ‘archives, books, brochures, magazines, texts and images’ of Catholic persons and institutions in the Netherlands since 1800.<sup>30</sup> Both institutes have a clear function in that they provide information, through websites and activities, to a broader public. However, their *raison d’être* is more to facilitate research than to foster it.

Another way to gauge the health of church and religious history is to look at Dutch journals and series catering to scholars in the field, both professional and amateur. Developments on this terrain have been ambivalent but publications do give an indication of the ‘state of the art’. Traditionally, the most important journal for church historians was the *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* (*Dutch Archive for Church History*), since 1986 known also by its English title *Dutch Review of Church History*. The *Archief* began in 1829 as the *Archive for Ecclesiastical History, particularly for the Netherlands*<sup>31</sup> as a professional journal run chiefly by academics based at Leiden. This church historical function is reflected in its lengthy, largely national and predominantly Protestant existence, and its strong focus on the ecclesiastical history of the later medieval and Reformation periods. The journal has been published since 2006 as *Church History and Religious Culture*, suggesting an attempt to both expand internationally and innovatively exploit religious culture. This is a welcome attempt to encourage a more inclusive history, although recent issues do not show that the focus on the domain of religious culture has until now been successful in practice. By contrast, the Dutch-language journal *Trajecta* has rather effectively integrated religious history into social and cultural history. Established in 1992, this journal, too, stands in an honourable tradition, continuing the *Archive for the history of the Catholic Church in the Netherlands*<sup>32</sup> which had appeared since 1959 (and which itself was the result of a merger of earlier Catholic periodicals). As its subtitle indicates, *Trajecta* is focused on religious ‘life’; its subject matter, however, is restricted to Catholicism in Belgium and the Netherlands.<sup>33</sup> Clearly, these journals, the one chiefly Protestant, the other explicitly Catholic, mirror in a rather conservative way the major religious divisions in the Netherlands. Nor will it come as a surprise that practically each religious subculture produces its own specific periodical. Since 1975 students of Mennonite history publish the Dutch-language *Doopsgezinde bijdragen* (*Mennonite Contributions*). A group of Calvinist amateur historians since 1977 issue the *Documentatieblad*

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.visor.vu.nl/en/research/tradition-changes-identity/index.asp>.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.hdc.vu.nl>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.ru.nl/kdc>

<sup>31</sup> Dutch title: *Archief voor Kerkelijke Geschiedenis, inzonderheid van Nederland*.

<sup>32</sup> Dutch title: *Archief voor de geschiedenis van de Katholieke Kerk in Nederland*.

<sup>33</sup> *Trajecta. tijdschrift voor de geschiedenis van het katholiek leven in de Nederlanden*.

*Nadere Reformatie* (literally: *Periodical for Documenting the Further Reformation*), which is devoted to the heritage of seventeenth and eighteenth-century orthodox theologians. Meanwhile, Protestant historians from various denominations issue a *Documentatieblad voor de Nederlandse kerkgeschiedenis na 1800* (*Periodical for Documenting Dutch Church History since 1800*). There is also a *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis* (*Journal for Dutch Church History*, established in 1998 and run in part by non-academics, including school teachers. Its approach is ‘church historical’ in the classical, nineteenth-century sense, but with a specific focus on local history. This brief list of minor church history journals is not inclusive. There are quite a few of them; most have to contend with a decline in the number of subscribers.

As far as journals are concerned, church history remains largely within the bounds set by nineteenth and twentieth-century theological tradition, while initiatives in the domain of religious history, or the history of religious culture, have had only limited success, on the national as well as the international level. Does the same hold true for book series? Again, there are several minor Dutch-language series, but only one with international ambitions. This is the series *Church History* (and its subseries *Religious History and Culture*), published with Royal Brill (Leiden). The series is limited in size but rapidly expanding; the number of volumes now runs to about forty.<sup>34</sup> Like the textbooks discussed above, the series is a commercial venture.

Textbooks, journals and series together reflect the academic and popular context in which Dutch research into religious history now takes place. These different contexts offer various commercial opportunities. So long as academic courses on religious history continue to be integrated into a relatively conservative university curriculum dominated by theology in a stricter sense (i.e. on the one hand Bible studies and doctrine, on the other pastoral training), traditional handbooks on church history will continue to sell. In a more interdisciplinary setting, students will be (and are) required to read textbooks on religious culture. As a whole, however, the commercial market for the history of religion, whether ecclesiastical or cultural, is small. A recent initiative to produce a richly illustrated overview of *Belief in the Netherlands (Geloof in Nederland)* in the course of 2000 years has been noticeably dependent for its revenues on a somewhat older segment of the public. The 34 thematic volumes published by Waanders in Zwolle include such topics as ‘art’, ‘literature’, ‘holy people’, ‘sex’, ‘clergy’, ‘media’ and ‘the Bible Belt’ (the latter refers to an orthodox Calvinist subculture). The readership proved to be predominantly over fifty years of age and interested especially in the twentieth-century, church-institutional context of religious history. This fact should be interpreted in the sense that, apparently, religious history is interesting to readers who were brought up within an overtly Christian context. This context has, however, gone into a rapid decline over the past three or four decades. The older generations will soon disappear; the younger are more interested in newer forms of religiosity, and not specifically in the history of Christianity, let alone the church.

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<sup>34</sup> Another fledgling English-language series is *Studies in Dutch Religious History*, published with Verloren (Hilversum).

#### 4. Which future?

Is there a future for religious history in the Netherlands? There may well be one, but only if the field is substantially reorganised, significant investments are made in innovative research and competent academic scholarship, and initiatives are taken to adequately respond to the changing social context. The signs are not very hopeful. University policies are conservative because the humanities as a whole are on a tight budget; there is, in consequence, a lack of *Nachwuchs*; meanwhile, religious traditions themselves have entered into a rapid decline. It is telling that Islamic history is 'done' almost exclusively by cultural anthropologists, and that new initiatives surface almost exclusively in Arts or Humanities faculties.

Perhaps I should conclude this contribution in a more positive vein, by taking a very brief look at the kind of history that would now give an intellectual boost to the field. Which histories should be told? Firstly, Dutch religious history would benefit greatly from thematic narratives rather than textbooks. A thematic approach limited to a specific period would result in such titles as "the confessionalization of the Netherlands between 1550 and 1650", or "the secularisation of the Netherlands in the long nineteenth century", or "Dutch religion in the sixties". Secondly, more attention should be paid to theory and methodology. Most church historians in the Netherlands are trained, not just as theologians, but as philologists, or at best as very practical, source-oriented scholars. Dutch church historians still define their discipline in the old-fashioned way, as a simple combination of theology and history, without recognizing that history as a discipline has radically changed over the past three decades. Hence their stronger points are archival knowledge and familiarity with primary material; their weaker ones, theory and methodology. In this sense, Dutch church historians still need to take the step their colleagues in 'secular' history departments took long ago. Given the role played by religion in the current context of, among other things, globalization, individualization, and mediatization, it will be imperative to offer some theoretical reflection on what such processes mean for religious history. Thirdly, a balance ought to be achieved between institutional and social-cultural historiography, so that 'the voice of the church' is counterbalanced by, or better still: integrated with, 'the voice from below'. Above all, it would be wise to recognize that there is no serious academic future for church history in the Netherlands. This seems a sorry thing, but there is hope. A once flourishing tradition failed to adapt itself and has all but collapsed; the best course now is to fully incorporate it into cultural and social history.