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Farewell to Organised Religion — Contemporary Dutch Prose, a Few Texts, Paratexts, and Contexts

Abstract: The article outlines the phenomenon of a literary success of three contemporary Dutch authors (Maarten 't Hart, Franca Treur and Jan Siebelink) whose prose works, while representing various genres (e.g., essay, short story, novel) are united thematically by their preoccupation with the waning socio-cultural regime known as pillarization. All the three authors, raised in the strict Calvinist traditions typical of the northern Netherlands, give voice to disappearing communities and emancipated groups and individuals nowadays characteristic of this highly secularised society. Their texts ridicule Calvinist biblical literalism ('t Hart), paint inward-looking niches ('t Hart and Treur), and contemplate the mystique of grace (Siebelink). Following T. S. Eliot's reflection from 'Religion and Literature' that secularising culture produces literature in which religion passes from omnipresence, through contestation to virtual irrelevance and anachronism, we see that in his essays, memoirs and stories, 't Hart approaches Calvinism (and Christianity at large) still as a fierce ideological enemy and favours derision as an instrument of confrontation, while Treur and Siebelink, in their slightly nostalgic tone and ambiguity, seem better equipped to act as agents of conventionally conceived heritage.

Keywords: secularism, Dutch literature, religion, atheism, pillarization, Netherlands, Calvinism

When I mention religion I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England.

Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*
at: <http://www.azquotes.com/quote/608358>

Reading contemporary Dutch literature that thematises religion in a way insensitive to its embedding in social, political and cultural processes is bound to generate interpretive blindness. While a host to more than a million Islamic citizens, the Netherlands has had a rich if now waning Christian tradition. The status of Christianity in the Netherlands is complex: it covers a broad spectrum of Chris-

tian denominations, both Catholic and Protestant, the latter featuring radically different groups that range from the hyper-orthodox to the likes of a notorious Reverend Klaas Hendrikse from Middelburg, known as the ‘atheist pastor’, an author of *Geloven in een God die niet bestaat* (‘Believing in a God that does not exist’), in which he advises that you do not have to believe that God exists in order to believe in God.

As regards the ideology of the ruling elite, the Netherlands is a traditionally Protestant country, and one in which church authority has been subordinate to the state (Art 2004). The Dutch royal house are members of the Dutch Reformed Church, and until the adoption of the 1848 liberal constitution Catholicism was merely tolerated, practically pushed to the background and effectively marginalised (Lechner 2008). Before Dutch society became secular to the present high extent, with atheism or agnosticism reported by as much as 44 percent of the population (Zuckerman 2007:50), the regime that regulated people’s lives was one known as pillarization.

My aim here is to shed some light on a few literary representations of the waning Dutch orthodox Protestantism, being aware that these voices flow from one of the most secularised societies in the world. I am inspired by the optimistic claim of philosopher Martha Nussbaum that ‘good literature is disturbing in a way that history and social science writing frequently are not’ (1995:5), realising that measuring literature’s agency in the social world is always a vexing task. One of the main questions preoccupying me is imagination and memory as spaces accorded to Christian religion which used to be a major dimension of cultural belonging in this highly secular society.

The authors and texts of my choice represent various genres. *Knielen op een bed violen*, 2005 (Eng. *In My Father’s Garden*, transl. 2013) by Jan Siebelink (1938–) is a novel, and one that enjoys a status of a best-selling national classic: it won the literary AKO award in 2005 and has been a bestseller since then. Next to it I analyse selected texts by Maarten ‘t Hart, his memoirs *Het roer kan nog zesmaal om* (‘*The course can be changed still six times*’) (1984) and *Magdalena* (2015), the 2004 collection of essays *De bril van God*, and the 1975 collection of short stories *Het Vrome Volk* (‘*The Pious People*’), all of which are broadly autobiographical. Franca Treur’s (1979–) *Dorsvloer vol confetti* (2009) (Eng. transl. ‘*The Threshing-floor Full of Confetti*’), a novel with a clear autobiographical dimension to it, completes this by necessity selective overview.

All of these texts have been culturally resonant. Siebelink’s novel has a near-canonical status and is a recommended high-school read. Following the Dutch daily *Nederlands Dagblad*’s sales-based estimate one million Dutch readers have read it, and its success has been stable. Reviews and interviews with the writers invariably underline the fact that their popularity has to do with religious themes they elaborate in the context of nearly completed de-pillarization. Indeed these narratives give voice to disappearing communities and no less so to emancipat-

ing groups and individuals, and to expanding physical and mental landscapes. It stands to reason that the authors, separated by generations, settle their different and separate accounts with multiple Protestant worlds. They ridicule Calvinist Biblical literalism ('t Hart), paint inward-looking niches ('t Hart and Treur), and contemplate the mystique of grace (Siebelink). Essay, satire, personal history, short story, novel are the tools used to further disarm the increasingly spectral, but still punishing, Protestant God.

To make the picture complete, the interesting case of equally waning Dutch Catholicism deserves a separate study. Secularization has affected it no less than it has its Protestant rivals. Catholicism remains alive through its defiance. As the Dutch cultural critic Kees Fens explains, 'The only thing that has managed to remain intact in the Netherlands is anti-Papism, which seems fiercer than ever but at the same time betrays a Don Quixote character: more and more protest against something that no longer exists' (2002:27).

Calvinist schisms, the Bible Belt

While in the Netherlands at present church members constitute a minority (Grotenhuis and Scheepers 2001, Knippenberg 1998, Need and de Graaf 1996, Vermeer and Janssen 2011, Zuckerman 2007), the country has grown into what it is by efficiently dealing with its social segmentation organised along ideological and religious lines. Secularization has resulted both in shrinking church membership and marginalisation of Christianity as well as complex relocations in the sphere of belief. These include the advent of New Age movements, the evangelic revival, privatisation of belief and — most importantly, agnosticism or atheism as default ideological positions for large parts of society. Finally, the literary authors' media presence and their personal pronouncements speak volumes about 'deprivatization of disbelief' well known to social scientists (Ribberink, Achterberg and Houtman 2013).

Anyone familiar with Dutch culture will know that the term 'Christian' has been monopolised by Calvinism, which explains why such concepts as Christian life, Christian family or Christian school unmistakably refer to one of its many denominations. The Catholic pillar used to be and often still is described as emphatically *Roman* Catholic or simplistically '*Rooms*' (Roman). By the same token, the term 'Reformed' unambiguously signifies Calvinism. The Netherlands is thus traditionally a 'Christian' country, and one in which the 1994 'purple' government comprising liberals, socialists and liberal democrats was the first one since 1918 without any Christian part in it. This regular presence of Christian representation in the Dutch political life regulating the proverbially tolerant society finds reflection in a short quote below:

On 6 March 2001, the national Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* published an interview with the Archbishop of Utrecht, Cardinal A. Simonis. The interview was announced on the front page under a heading taken from a statement by the Cardinal himself: 'Purple is banishing religion'. 'Purple' is the name given to the coalition of socialists, liberals and liberal democrats that has been governing the Netherlands since 1994, the first government since 1918 without any Christian representation (the Catholic party, formerly a separate entity, merged with two Protestant parties in 1973 to form a single party, the CDA or Christian Democrats). The 'purple coalition' had come about as a result of the staggering losses suffered by the CDA in the 1994 elections. Simonis' complaint was that the government was ignoring the churches entirely; the Christian faith seemed to have not the slightest influence on government policy. So the Prime Minister and the Cardinal got together over a traditional Dutch cup of coffee to discuss the Catholic allegation. Not long afterwards, the mayor of Amsterdam officiated at the first gay marriage and the euthanasia act was passed in the First Chamber, the Netherlands' upper house, with the Christian parties and the smaller extreme left parties voting against.

Fens (2002:21).

History of Dutch Calvinism is extremely intricate as it has thrived on schism based theoretically on competition at who represents the scriptures best. As a result of this theological struggle in which economy always supported the winners it has generated two mainstream Calvinist camps: the Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*) and the Re-reformed Dutch churches (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*) comprising followers of the Separation of 1834 and the 1886 Secession, with a high number of subgroups within each.

The doctrinal differences underlying these schisms — which often tore families apart — cannot be given full justice in this limited context. In *De bril van god. De schrift betwist II*, Maarten 't Hart writes how he experienced them in his own family: 'My ancestors on my father's side belonged to the rebels who liberated themselves from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1834. Put briefly, they were the *afgescheidenen* ("the secessionists"). My ancestors on my mother's side were the *dolerenden* ("the grieving ones"). The *dolerenden*, under the inspired leadership of Abraham Kuyper, wrestled themselves free from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1886. In 1892, the *afgescheidenen* and the *dolerenden* joined ranks. They created the *Gereformeerde Kerken van Nederland*. There were actually quite many *afgescheidenen* who did not feel like uniting with the *dolerenden*. The *afgescheidenen* who wanted to stay apart formed the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* (the Re-reformed Christian Churches)' (2002:174). The process of splitting (and occasional lumping) continued, which 't Hart, a militant atheist, itemizes with a clearly gleeful sense of revenge. One of the conflicts underlying the 1926 schism, the *Vrijmaking* ('Liberation') concerned the issue of the Biblical speaking serpent who addressed Eve in the paradise. Calvinists who refused to unconditionally believe that the snake did address Eve gave vent to their instincts by setting up the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Hersteld Verband* ('the Re-Reformed Churches in the Reinstalled Union'). Maarten 't Hart recollects thus in *Magdalena* (2015) that

the difference between the A-Protestantism of his father and the B-Protestantism of his mother (described above) has been a source of a very real and sustained conflict in his family.

These fine theological disputes, relevant thus no less to those who are not savvy about theology, have given rise to different habitus patterns rather difficult to detect for an untrained eye. What seems to stand empirical testing, however, are differences between Catholics and Calvinists (especially its orthodox branch) understood as ways of living, social behaviour and embodiment. The country, torn between the Catholic south and the Protestant north, with the rivers geographically separating them, consolidated distinct sub-cultures with characteristic life styles, aesthetic choices, body languages, clothes and gestures. The epitome of Dutch Calvinism is the geographically distinct Bible Belt which stretches from the province of Zeeland, through rural areas of the West-Betuwe and Veluwe, to the northern parts of the province of Overijssel. Historically, the Bible Belt is the living monument of the reconquista of Flanders and North Brabant during the Eighty Years' War by Spain and forced movement to the north of population resistant to Catholicism, a seat of conservative pietist movements of Further Reformation of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Divided into the Catholic south and the Protestant north, the nation gradually stabilized into the 'land of merchants and vicars' (Knippenberg, Lechner). Voltaire's *Candide*, when in Holland, echoing contemporary sentiments knew that 'everybody was rich in that country, and that they were Christians'. Since his imaginary visit to the Low Countries, the Netherlands stopped being 'Holland', became the Netherlands, 'lost' Belgium, and in the long 19th century developed segmented social worlds within it known as pillars. Pillarization, an apartheid organised along ideological, especially religious, lines, complicated national identity so, unsurprisingly, its many faces have been explored by a whole spectrum of social science: historians (Righart 1986; Rogier in Belzen 2010:216), cultural psychologists (Belzen 2010, Belzen and Geel 2003), political scientists (Lijphart 1968), and anthropologists (Verrips 1978). Surprisingly, literary scholars have given it little attention.

What was Dutch pillarization? 'Pillarization stands for the formation of world-view groups within Dutch society that built pillars that included not only congregations, but schools, magazines and newspapers, broadcasting networks, and political parties', explains van Beek (2012). Ter Borg identifies pillarization with a broad and rather unique social religious regime, and goes so far as to claim it predominated the class structure of society (2009). Popular explanations of pillarization mention a social order that enabled individuals organised in groups (Catholic or Protestant, socialist or liberal) to live their lives from the cradle to the grave within the confines of their in-group, thanks to an intricate system of institutions, education, political parties, and media that afforded their communities self-sufficiency. Pillarization compartmentalized social life and rendered un-

obvious the notion of a shared national culture in ways alien to homogenous societies. It legitimated loyalty to one among many in-groups within a single Christian religion, until ca. 1970s breeding primary social identification within it. It is worth underlining that the Protestant and Catholic pillars were the most developed and catered best to their members' needs. Frank J. Lechner, tracing developments of Dutch nationalism in the age of globalisation, makes an interesting remark about it: 'From the mid-nineteenth century until the 1960s, the Dutch claim to national fame would lie in the accommodation of difference rather than the affirmation of commonality' (2008:117), and goes on to argue that this factor precisely accounts for the invention of the 'common Dutch tradition of tolerance' (2008:117). Nation, religion and national character are all essentially indebted to pillarization: 'The nation was Christian in its roots and component parts but had to be (or become tolerant) above all' (Lechner 2008:119).

Secularisation in the Netherlands meant thus dismantling the pillars when and as both Catholic and Protestant communities came to lose grip on individual lives. Protestant orthodoxy, while still alive, receded into a number of niches, most of which situated in the Bible Belt. Post-war affluence, social mobility, rationalization, globalisation and a facilitated contact with the outside world have all contributed to it. So has an expansion of higher educational system. What ultimately ousted the hyper-organised denominational life in the Netherlands is difficult to pinpoint. Jan Art attributes secularization to the vitality of Protestant tradition of freedom of conscience and separation of state and church(es) (2004). In his view, advanced secularization bears a Protestant signature as, accordingly, a Protestant culture would be secularising in a Protestant manner. Writing about the gradual deconstruction of the Catholic pillar after World War 2, Kees Fens highlights some cultural factors that affected in equal measure Dutch Protestant community:

What was most devastating, in my opinion, was the questioning of the sense of almost everything. 'Sense' is easily identified with 'usefulness'. Not only are the Dutch a highly practical people, but their culture is characterised by the absence of a feeling for tradition - unlike that of, say, the English or the French. The Dutch have the worst memories in Europe. In fact, the Dutchman is a 'momentalist'. I believe that this momentalism, combined with the conviction that upon examination religious values and practices serve no useful purpose, has been partly responsible for the massive departure from the Church. It cannot be denied that the many priests and religious who have abandoned their vocations have impressed the laity with the seeming ease with which they did it.

(2002:26)

And to quote Frank J. Lechner once again, 'Secularization and the expressive revolution, the move from ritual to Rituals, had shaped a new, consensual national culture — the "loose and unrestrained" Dutch became quite uniformly committed to similar progressive views... National identity, not a kosher topic in the aftermath of World War II in any case, was assumed rather than defined. When it became an issue again in the 1990s, the fallout of secularization and the sixties framed the way the Dutch reimagined themselves' (2008:135).

Faith, culture, embodiment

While secular Dutch Catholics and Protestants have retained their respective cultural codes that enable them to detect each other in the public sphere, a systematic empirical study of these diacritics remains an ethnographic challenge since access to orthodox Calvinist communities is nearly closed. This leaves analysts with secondary representations, and makes literary texts especially valuable. Siebelink's text, for one, is precious by virtue of its attention to detail and nuance, and the author's ability to dramatize the doctrine.

Anthropologists and cultural psychologists interested in orthodox Calvinism point to an essential difficulty of access to these niches, their hermetic isolation and distrust of the outside world (Belzen 2010:155; Van Dijk). When outlining the diacritics of Calvinist cultural belonging Belzen's study is of particular interest. The author quotes a relatively early (1943) article by A. Chorus which itemises 'a series of variables' that separate the Catholic and Calvinist subcultures. However reductive and fragmentary, it rings disturbingly true when juxtaposed with the literary texts on the topic. The variables that Chorus (himself Catholic) mentions include choices of first names (Latinate for Catholics, Reformation-related for Protestants), the style of dress (Catholic — flamboyant, Protestant — sober), the style of interiors (as the previous) and the like. To quote Chorus,

The Catholic has more of a preference for decoration, embellishments and ornaments, linguistic differences up to facial expression: 'Among Protestants these are generally more severe, somber, more closed, and sometimes more dour. Their glance in particular seems more confident, sometimes haughty, and often aggressive ('the typical "*geuzenkop*"!'). Take a look at people as they leave the church: the Catholics are lighthearted and go (or went) to the village for a nip or a glass of beer. The Protestants seem much stiffer when they leave church, as though stooped under a curse.'

quoted by Belzen (2010:226)

This stereotyped characterisation of the Protestant subculture as dour, sober, introspective and cheerless, and as such to be contrasted with an exuberant, extrovert, sociable, earthy and symbol-sensitive Catholic life has kept its currency. There are other essential elements of the Calvinist world that resonate in life and in art: the Calvinist God watches the faithful, and the most man can expect is a sign of election to relieve his salvation anxiety. Good works that largely constitute a Catholic ticket to heaven have a different place in the Calvinist framework of predestination. Oedipus, unable to break through a chain of actions preordained by fate is a Calvinist hero. His story, while clothed in a mythical context, shows within a tragic horizon what anxiety of fate means to a morally committed individual. In the modern context, the notion of salvation anxiety led Max Weber to believe it to be a wellspring of capitalist ethics.

The world of strict Calvinism is one of sexual taboos, shame, burning sin. Calvinist childhood of Maarten 't Hart is thus a landscape peopled by countless enemies: one of the pastors enters his personal history by preaching against 'sport,

at large, and sport on Saturday — the Fore-Sabbath of the Lord, in particular... In his sermons he would address two or three chosen ones from our church and rage against those that are Rejected by God, the swine which swallow in the mud, the lightly reformed members of the *gereformeerde* church, the liberal Dutch Reformed, the great antichrist in Rome. Often during his sermon he would rant: “This brings us close to His Rod in order to beg, oh let Him raise it against us” (‘t Hart 2000: 268–269).

To give another broad-stroke picture,

What image of God was it on which the authors of the so-called ‘valedictory’ generation in the Netherlands, Jan Wolkers (1925–), Maarten ‘t Hart (1944–), Maarten Biesheuvel (1939–), Jan Siebelink (1938–) — all from strict Calvinist backgrounds — and others, turned their backs?

It was an omnipotent, all-seeing, vengeful God, who demanded absolute obedience and submission to his commandments and decided arbitrarily who was to be elected or rejected for all eternity. In an interview Jan Wolkers recounted how as a child he asked his father whether he would obey if asked by God to kill his son, as with Abraham and Isaac, and how his father replied without hesitation: yes!

Gerits (2002:51)

In My Father’s Garden

Jozef sat down on the bed, read a passage aloud: ‘Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day.’ Hans thought: I should never have invited him. How long is he going to stay? I don’t want him holding my Bible. ? I don’t want him sitting on my bed, being in my room. This is the first time and the last.

Siebelink kindle part 2 ch 14

The originally Protestant daily *Trouw* quotes Calvinist readers who enthuse over Siebelink’s bestseller seeing in it a representation of their own and many other families’ history:

‘Nico Sjoer, aged 48, says, “I’ve been recently called by one of my daughters. She says, I’ve just finished reading *In My Father’s Garden*. It’s only now that I understand what you’ve been telling us. Was it really like that as Siebelink writes? If so, it must have been pretty stifling ... And was it really so in the Sjoer family?” “I can recognise myself first of all the isolation of the Sievez family. Bonds with family, neighbours and our community were broken so badly that only the ‘pathways upwards’ remained. It means the only ties that remained were with the spiritual colleagues who shared our fascination for the pastor Paauwe. I have been raised in exactly the same way as Hans Sievez alias Jan Siebelink.”

Trouw (25-11-05)

In My Father’s Garden’s protagonist, Hans Sievez, a Calvinist flower nursery owner, gets in the spell of a hyper-orthodox sect that comes to predominate his whole life. Young Sievez’s chance encounter with a rather uninspiring represent-

ative of the sect will trigger his zealous and lifelong search for salvation which in the course of his life will defeat his other loyalties.

As the above reader recognises, the mysterious sect which invades Hans's life, its agents disappearing and re-merging against the protagonist's will, ring familiar to Calvinist audience: Siebelink styled the life of the sect after the '*thuislezers*' ('*home Bible readers*') milieu, followers of the heavy-duty Calvinist pastor Jan Pieter Paauwe (1872–1956). This single example epitomises orthodox Calvinism that comprises many smaller churches, like those 't Hart's family belonged to or many others.¹ As said above, the novel is an entry into a world practically closed to participant observation and welcoming only those who share the biblical 'language of Canaan' (*de tale Kanaans*) and cryptic behavioural codes. The story is a thinly disguised auto-fiction by the then already mature Siebelink who based it on his family history as he readily admits in the many interviews that have accompanied the bestseller. The whole generation who came of age at the peak of pillarization, survived the war, and confronted rather than welcomed the post-war affluent permissive society find the plot's elements familiar. De-pillarization celebrated by the majority of the Dutch society as a triumph of freedom over stiff social regime is just one factor explaining the text's resonance. The protagonist leaves his native Protestant region, moves to the city, sets up a family with a woman he truly loves who gives him two sons, relocates to the suburbs to start a business, is forced to do business with Catholics, copes with cultural change that causes a rift in his closest family, and witnesses waning of faith in those closest to him as his sectarian zeal sets him apart from his wife and sons.

Siebelink's novel is a near-textbook picture of social, institutional, individual and contingent factors behind the Calvinist processual conversion (Gooren 2010:139). Hans's encounter with charismatic figures, his pervasive anxiety aggravated by uprooting, his individual quiet pliability all answer in the positive a sociological questionnaire on religious re-affiliation.

Another dimension of the text's success however consists in its capturing of Calvinist conversion.

The Calvinist lifelong conversion

'For many are called, but few *are* chosen', says Matthew's gospel (22:14). What does it mean to a well-meaning, earnest, spiritually insecure Hans Sievez and the process through which his soul passes in its 'hidden friendship' with God (Psalm 25:14 as quoted by Belzen 2010:150)?

¹ The strict Calvinist churches are for example, *de Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland en Noord-Amerika*, *de Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland buiten Verband*, *de Oud-Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland*, *de Christelijk Gereformeerde Stichting 'Bewaar het Pand'* (van Dijk 1996:102).

Hans's life following the encounter with the sect paints a standard orthodox picture, kept alive and relatively stable as shared by about two hundred fifty thousand people (in the population of over 17 million) who share one Calvinist dogma but who 'operationalize it differently' (Belzen 2010:153). The *praxis pietatis* of house gatherings, prayer and individual theological study of the 'old writers' is the experience of Siebelink's hero too. Hans's eponymous, repeated and often badly timed kneeling on the bed of violets is both more and less than a symbol of it. The enticing forces of the secular world that his family accommodate to do not manage to turn him away from the mystery of conversion, one very different to St Paul's road to Damascus episode. In the Calvinist framework conversion means salvation itself, and it is a painstaking, sustained, introspective process.

The strictly Calvinist world that we enter here is world-shy, closed and in-group oriented. Siebelink subtly ironizes the sect's murky economics required to keep them afloat. In real life, strict *bevindelijke* ('God-experiential') Calvinist communities reject television, fashion, contraception and life enjoyment and despite these sacrifices, they manage to maintain their demographics thanks to high fertility rates. The core of the *bevindelijke* Calvinism runs along the following lines: ongoing constant individual reformation in and *beyond* church through 'practical piety' and through spiritually central experience (*bevinding*) of God coupled with world-avoidance (Belzen 2003:269). Looming on the experiential horizon is the 'spiritual process through which the soul passes in its "hidden companionship" with God' which consists of misery, redemption and gratitude (Belzen 2003:270–271).

Search for a union with God is life-long but Hans's concentrated spiritual effort has one decidedly high point:

"Hans Sievez leaned backwards, as if the bench had a backrest, his face began to glow, blood throbbed at his temples. He lost all weight, all weight lost significance, became negligible. The sunflowers were suns, he saw suns, stars, terrible cold stars like the face of the popish idol. Heard the voice of his mother, heard the wailing of all the dead he had known, a horse came up out of the peat and galloped past, all sound died away. He was taken up like a leaf swept by the wind and drew near to the thick darkness where God was. In that dark silence the column of fire. That lit the path of the chosen people at night on their journey across the desert and in the column of fire a voice. That voice.

'Hans Sievez.' Majestic and fearful at the same time. Fear for who could stand in his Sight? And an all-consuming joy. 'Yes Lord. Here I am!' A column of fire or a pillar of fire. Fore. The voice again. 'Hans Sievez.' 'Yes Lord, here I am.' Fire that had not consumed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the furnace of Nebuchadnezzar. Even the hair on their heads was unsinged. 'Hans Sievez!' 'Yes Lord, here I am!' He received an answer. 'From this time forth, be my servant.'

Siebelink (ch. 34 kindle)

Writing about the tradition of Puritan conversion, on which *In My Father's Garden* is premised, Hans Gooren underlines the essentially gloomy character of this process, 'continuing true grief and hungering for grace, the performance

of works, the role of Scripture, the work of the Spirit, the sanctifying effect of his presence, the impulse toward prayer, a spirit of freedom from legal bondage and fear, a spirit of gentle mourning for sin, the infusion of longings to be with Christ, and boldness in coming to God' (2010:12–13). Human soul would be vain and sinful if it trusted that it has reached God. Life is a human journey in zealous contemplation and hope for election.

Calvinism abhors mysticism. Yet Siebelink's hero defies it — his life journey culminates in a mysterious experience in an open field. Yet what feels like a climax, opens a downward slide. Hans's life is ultimately tragic, and his God silent and spectral. Irresistible grace has a dynamic of illicit romance: it grows dangerously close to sin.

De dorsvloer vol confetti

Where Siebelink's novel leaves off, sending a clear signal that the orthodox community is in decline, Franca Treur's (1979–) debut novel *De dorsvloer vol confetti* (2009) begins. We enter a rural pocket of the Bible Belt in Zeeland, the small world of adolescent Katelijne Minderhout, born and raised in a Calvinist farmer family of seven children. The narrative is set in the mid-1980s onwards, the period that closes Siebelink's novel. As in Siebelink, the experiential world does not go far beyond family and church, a setting known from the Zeeland's Bible Belt countryside.

Reception of the novel has been very favourable among critics and a broad reading public, and even led to a film adaptation in 2014. In 2010 Franca Treur received the literary Selexyz prize for her debut which took place a year before. Interestingly, critics often point to what makes this text different to the other famous Dutch Calvinist valedictorians:

'Franca Treur is not another Maarten 't Hart, certainly not. She belongs to the following generation of writers who want to look at their *bevindelijke* childhood with mildness. But it is a fact that her intention is accompanied by a certain sense of alienation which slips very gently into her language', writes Enny de Bruijn in the conservative Calvinist daily *Reformatorisch Dagblad*. And in a similar vein, the *Trouw*'s Nels Fehner reflects, '*Dorsvloer vol confetti* lacks the sucking power of Siebelink's morass and the anger of 't Hart. Treur wants something else, pursues a roundabout path: sparkling joy on a farmstead of damnation' (2009).

Especially in the context of the author's apostasy in 2002, the novel outlines her first steps on the road to a later secular self. While references to strict Calvinism and quotes from the Bible do punctuate this uneventful narrative of everyday farming life, the main thrust is not doctrinal. It is a mildly and in places hesitant recollection of the world of childhood remembered as a foreign country. The novel combines the hermetic Biblical language of strict Calvinism, Zeeland's dialect

and an adolescent naive perspective. Katelijne who is raised with the Bible and who undergoes religious instruction all the time finds difficult moments in the church teaching of election: 'The unconverted, through true preaching, must be brought to envy to learn something about it... Brought to envy. Katelijne thinks. Why do they keep on telling us that the converted people walk stooped under the burden and that it's only later, in heaven, that it's always Sunday' (Treur 136).

Like Siebelink, Treur sheds light on the realities of lives lived in a niche: the family abstains from television, uses radio to listen to the news only, funfair in the nearby town is sin, and the Bible and the children's Bible are the only authority here. The tradition of Calvinist schism is alive here as well — the orthodox always will always encounter someone even more orthodox, and both will represent groups, as groups regulate individual life. The familiar motifs of resistance to modernity (insurance, vaccination, family size) mark limits of unworldliness. The way of life which grows exotic in contemporary contexts such as tourism in the area, mobility within the Netherlands, are facts with which the orthodox niches keep on coping. *De dorsvloer vol confetti* is another insider source of knowledge about the under-explored 'God-experiential' small fatherlands.

The cultural change the novel speaks to found response from the Calvinist reading public. Pastor Wim Dekker (quoted by Bonte) points to its value in the context of de-pillarization and shrinking horizons of faith. Not surprisingly, Dekker bounces back to the dimension of faith the text speaks to as well: 'In Franca Treur I meet a postmodern non-believer, who does not have much need to oppose anything but who strongly confronts myself as a believer with the question: is your faith and the faith as your community of faith experiences it more than just a form of religious folklore?' (Bonte 27).

The external world does indeed attack the enclosed little universe, and does so through no less than the word in its material form itself: the closing scene with Katelijne unexpectedly throwing newspaper confetti on the heads of wedding guests symbolises a playful triumph of the secular word, while the wind does the rest. Katelijne, not unlike Treur herself, leaves the 'farmstead of damnation' with a gust of wind which carries the words chaotically into the outside world.

Deconstructors of the doctrine, satirists of the way of life: Maarten 't Hart

It may be that a lot of people who believe that they're going to be rapt up into heaven are fairly dim creatures. On the other hand, Europe is full of dim agnostics.

Terry Eagleton in an interview <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2009/09/17/religion-for-radicals-an-interview-with-terry-eagleton/>

Acting from within another highly secular society that the UK is nowadays, the recently emerged improbable species of atheist apologists of religion such as Terry Eagleton and Alain de Botton speak for some practical virtues of religion. De Botton begins his post-secular lecture by saying, '[t]he most boring and unproductive question one can ask of any religion is whether or not it is *true*' (2012:11), and proceeds to generously praise religions for 'their sheer conceptual ambition', their being megaprojects with impressive achievements in many areas of social life (2012:14).

This moderate reverence for religion has a longer history. Voltaire, who entered literary history as an inventor of philosophical tale, a satirist of orthodoxy and organised religion, recognised Christian God's transcendence and famously argued that 'if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him' (Coleman 110). Questioning organised religion's basis, *Candide*'s narrator has the naïve protagonist raise questions about presence of evil in the world, and leave Christian theodicy an uncomfortably vexing question. Whether Voltaire was sincere or just strategic in his defence of religion is not a relevant point now. Whatever his intentions, a similar stance on Christianity will *not* be found in a contemporary Dutch agent of Enlightenment, natural scientist, public intellectual and immensely prolific writer of strict Calvinist background, Maarten 't Hart (1944–).

His links with Voltaire are striking. 'Obvious targets in Genesis were the Creation, the Fall, Noah's flood and Abraham. The Creation raises all kinds of awkward questions. Why are there apparently two different accounts of the creation of woman? What language did Adam use when he named all the animals? Where was the Garden of Eden, and how does it correspond with contemporary geography, since the four rivers mentioned as running round it are nowadays far distant from each other?', Graham Gargett lists just some questions that troubled Voltaire (2009:197). As we see these seemingly naïve questions keep reverberating in 't Hart's prose a few hundred years later. "One sees with a little surprise that God ... condemned Adam to death, and all his posterity to hell for an apple' [...]. Visibly, in all these and many other such passages, Voltaire heightens his critique by the liberal use of ridicule and *reductio ad absurdum*", says Gargett (2009:197) about topics and style that insistently re-emerge in 't Hart's prose.

Active on the publishing market since 1971, the author of over seventy books, many of them autobiographical and quasi-autobiographical, bestselling in Germany and not unknown to the Polish reader, Maarten 't Hart has been a leading pen assaulting biblical literalism, small town culture where the Bible is the source of authority, and the notion of God and religion as such. In contrast to de Botton or Eagleton, 't Hart celebrates the gradual disappearance of God from the Netherlands, along with the waning of close knit communities such as his native Maasluis in the province of North Holland, experiencing both as radical liberation from oppression. The questions that Voltaire raised about the Old and the New Testament, 't Hart picks up to tear both to pieces, doing so in the form of accessible

satirical essays. Published between 1997 and 2002, the two volumes deconstructing the Bible and Christian tradition keep the Dutch literary assault on Christian taboos alive. Since Dutch writer Gerard Reve's triumph in the 1966 court case over his blasphemous representation of God as a sexual creature, artistic freedom has reigned supreme there.

In the special edition of the literary journal 'De Gids' published on the occasion of 't Hart's sixty-fifth birthday, Dutch journalist Aukje Holtrop reintroduces him as a public persona: 'he rages, he loathes, he hates, he abhors. Other manners of Maarten 't Hart's literary anger are: jeer, ridicule, pestering, blasting. These are all the various forms of rage and irritation' (2009:799). Holtrop itemises the many objects of his sustained irritation: 'On top of his agenda you will have of course everything that has to do with his Calvinist (*gereformeerde*) upbringing: religion, God, various forms of religious expression, the Bible, the explication of the Bible, people who have made a living explicating and teaching the Bible, church schisms, mendacities and lies, hypocrisy' (2009:799). 'T Hart's oeuvre is disturbingly intertextual to the point of formulaic: characters, questions, motifs, and whole episodes, often self-contained and transferrable, migrate between and among his many texts. This makes opening Maarten 't Hart's stories a strangely reassuring experience: a popular reader feels invited on a secular crusade that she already knows.

Wie God verlaat heeft niets te vrezen. De Schrift betwist [Who leaves God has nothing to fear. The Bible contested] (1997) and *De bril van God. De Schrift betwist II [God's eyeglasses. The Bible contested II]* (2002), a series of columns originally published in the daily *NRC Handelsblad* showcase 't Hart in his standard capacity of a late enlightener. The voice we hear is that of a radical natural scientist atheist fully immune to the mystery of the scriptures and metaphysics, a satirist to whom the 'Bible as literature' is no good literature at all. In the universe he proposes God has no function as he is a sheer delusion, and organised religion, Roman Catholicism no less so, are naïve and dangerous errors that deserve to be banned.

'T Hart's militant atheism grows out of his life experience, and his many narrators are often his alter egos. The writer's life story fits the trope of deconversion, well known in the history of literature thanks to Edmund Gosse or James Joyce. The difference is that 't Hart's strict Calvinist childhood gives way to a mature *both* artistic and scientific self.

The Voltairean character of his prose is striking if we take a look at some more questions that bothered Voltaire about the Old and the New Testament. 'Even assuming that a man aged 600 and his family could build such a vessel, how could they have assembled so many animals, birds and insects in it, fed and watered them, and finally prevented the carnivorous species from devouring the rest? And, if they succeeded in this, what nourishment could they provide for the flesh-eaters?', asks Voltaire in his writings (Gargett 2009:197–198). In this quest for sim-

ple, rational, logical answers nothing is left holy. ‘The miracle at Cana in Galilee is a shameful trick, one moreover which is designed to please a company already drunk. Other “miracles” seem even less admirable. Why did Jesus blast a fig tree which could not in any case be in fruit, since figs were out of season? Why did he send a company of demons into a herd of pigs, which promptly rushed off to drown themselves, killing many innocent beasts and bankrupting their owner?’ (Gargett 2009:201). This is the problematic that ‘t Hart gleefully attacks in his prose. To take a few examples, the problem of theodicy that inspired *Candide* remains haunting. An innocent child narrator in *Magdalena* makes conscious efforts to redeem the animals from the flood, and his adult self clearly joins ranks with the author of *The God Delusion*. The concept of divine goodness does not make sense: ‘Goodness is no part of the *definition* of the God Hypothesis, merely a desirable add-on’ as Richard Dawkins puts it (2006:111).

‘And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good’, says Genesis 1:31. Where is the place for the eyeglasses of God, mentioned in the title, among the already perfect creation that ‘t Hart routinely bashes? ‘In chapter 1 God creates man and woman at the same time. In chapter 2 he creates Adam first and then from one of his ribs He cobbles Eve together (as a child I always thought man has one rib less). In Genesis 1 animals are created first and then are people. In Genesis 2, first man is created, “And the Lord God said, *It is not good that the man should be alone.*” Upon which from the dirt of the earth he creates all the animals of the fields and all the birds of the air’ (transl. from ‘t Hart 2002:18). ‘T Hart draws a thick line under the striking incoherence of the neighbouring passages, remembering local preachers’ sweating over difficult questions asked about it.

Noah’s ark is one of his favourite motifs, one that enables him to test and discredit literalism, an exegetic method only recently and timidly discarded by Calvinist teachers. In *Magdalena*, the child narrator walks purposely to the local port to time, using a mechanical clock, the loading of animal cargo in order to test plausibility of the biblical tale. This empirical test initiates his growth toward atheism. And so in *De bril van God*, a curious child asking how the animal cargo was carried in Noah’s boat is told by a pastor: ‘piled up in cages, two of each in one.’ The narrator adds that Noah did not forget to load two dinosaur eggs too...

The writer takes to task the Ten Commandments as well. Their weakness is their different versions, in Exodus 1 and Deuteronomy 5, and hence why have two, if they are written in stone? Exodus 1 verses 1 to 17 is especially under attack: ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me’ he reads as an awkward admission of existence of other gods (‘t Hart 2002:31). The commandment ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of *anything* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God *am*

a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers up that he on the children unto the third and fourth *generation* of them that hate me' is monumentally immoral. It vindicates revenge, and brings to mind Nazi mentality. The tenth commandment is a relic of the herdsmen's sexuality. Doctrine bashing is important since, as he argues, Calvinism unlike Roman Catholicism prides itself on being pure word, and so free from meddling traditions. Yet on close analysis, it is all tradition, man-made tradition. Crippling Sunday rituals of multiple church service and confession of faith at eighteen have no biblical grounding at all. More than that, knowledge of the Bible is deficient among his coreligionists, and this accounts for creation of stifling practices and customs. This is another reason why debunking pious lives is so high on 't Hart's agenda and which explains this encounter of biblical and atheist literalisms.

Practical piety claim makes 't Hart's writing very different from Siebelink's inner explorations. Calvinist merchants, church elders, pastors and other little people (*kleine luyden*) from many walks of life are nothing but a bunch of petty-minded, insincere, greedy conmen, simpletons and tyrants. The controversial pastor Zelle ('the cousing of Mata Hari') from *Het Vrome Volk* is a regular client of prostitutes, and falls through an envious intrigue of his congregation. Calvinist family is patriarchal, narrow-minded, prone to violence, frustrated, greedy, intolerant and mindless. Religious controversy, a source of unceasing Calvinist schisms, has a latent business character, and 't Hart, a gravedigger's son aware of what stumbling blocks to success can be, finds grotesque an ideal tool to unravel the nexus of class and religion. He repeatedly underlines the class nature of religious splits, a 'class struggle in disguise', a hidden competition between the richer and the poorer (2000:255; 2002:174). Religious quarrels are part of his own life story — his is a family torn apart by the major theological controversies that underlie the broad base of Dutch Calvinism.

What reactions to his own Calvinist legacy has the writer encountered? In his conversations with the writer published as *Een calvinist leest Maarten 't Hart* (1982) ['A Calvinist reads Maarten 't Hart'], Hans Werkman voices standard charges against 't Hart, and these are misrepresentation and caricature, generalisation, misunderstanding of the Bible, deliberate blindness to post-war liberalisation of Dutch Calvinism. Interestingly, Werkman blends 't Hart's texts, fiction and non-fiction, into a single matrix of personal testimony, and the response he gets is simple: a novel is not a theological treatise, and a writer is not a sociologist, and under no duty to represent a statistically justifiable reality in which 'not all organ players are paedophile' (Werkman 1982:151–152). Recent Calvinist media-sponsored reforms do not exonerate the doctrine which still leaves an individual helpless — the doctrine is in its essence harmful. Unredeemable is not an intensity of Calvinism but first of all the Bible's incoherence and the vision of the human lot: Christianity is a fraud, it made him and still makes people unhappy, which is reason enough for an ongoing atheist crusade.

Conclusion

A fervent believer in the spiritual mission of literature, T.S. Eliot in 'Religion and Literature' writes that secularising culture produces literature in which religion passes from omnipresence, through contestation to virtual irrelevance and anachronism.

Religion as a dividing line may be indeed anachronistic for Dutch society at large but it does remain important, and not only if we think about Islam imported in the 1960s. In the prose discussed above Calvinist legacy features prominently even if invariably as a receding wave. In Maarten 't Hart's essays, memoirs and stories it is still a fierce ideological enemy, so derision is the instrument used to debunk the scriptures and social worlds that guard them. 'T Hart's writing and his vibrant media presence make this objective conspicuous. It is clear that his overtly and covertly autobiographical writing aims at 'undermining ... religious plausibility structures' and 'the erosion of traditional and or coercive religion' (Gooren 2010:6) characteristic of advancing secularization. 'T Hart's writing clearly belongs in the violent phase of emancipation from organised religion, typical of the time when he began his writing career. This accounts for the Voltairean thrust of his prose.

As Frank Lechner argues Christianity's decline has evacuated ground for an 'expressive revolution' and the sacralisation of the self, which are fond of personal narrative in many shapes and forms. This type of writing, while welcoming testimony and family history favour nostalgic modes of memory. This we find in Siebelink's literary worlds which are painted with a degree of ambiguity and respect for the mystique of faith. The same can be argued about Treur's pictures of a waning local culture. As such, Treur and Siebelink seem better than 't Hart equipped as agents of heritage, who, paradoxically, by striving to kill off residues of his own Calvinist past, manages to keep it well alive.

Literary success of these texts proves that religion has retained much of its power to mobilise readers: it still is part of both individual and collective memory. While church-going, Bible-study, and active involvement in denominational life have lost their primacy, religion has retained much of its appeal in the realm of memory and imagination. It is not inconceivable that through the tricky avenues of memory, remembrance, heritage and post-memory the Christian past will survive among the agnostic Dutch for long. If we continue reading these selected texts along Eliot's lines, we can argue that at present contemporary Dutch prose still sits uncomfortably in the second phase as it has not given up ideological battles.

Socio-cultural contexts are never a stable demarcated field from which literary texts could be picked and held up to close analysis. The link between texts and their contexts is dynamic, to say the least. Literary texts' popularity and their paratexts actively destabilise this context and themselves contribute to the changes in the belief structure and resulting social behaviour. Obviously, literary narration

documents social identities and cultural psychologies. Yet, it does more than that: it questions, opposes and destabilises worldviews.

One of the surprisingly few Dutch critics interested in secularization calls *De dorsvloer vol confetti* a token of a 'milieu de memoire' (Batteau 2009). Documenting a disappearing reality this text becomes a literary 'lieu de mémoire', a relic, for some possibly a monument. With a degree of a qualifying comment we might claim the same for the other literary representations of secularisation too. But in order to embrace all the texts that settle accounts with a strict and segregated denominational life, such as those presented here, we need a literary memory capacious and generous enough to accommodate not only nostalgia but also anger.

Pożegnanie z religią zorganizowaną. Współczesna proza holenderska: wybrane teksty, parateksty, konteksty

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł nakreśla zjawisko literackiego sukcesu trzech współczesnych pisarzy holenderskich: Maartena 't Harta, Franki Treur i Jana Siebelinka, których prozę, reprezentującą rozmaite gatunki literackie (między innymi esej, powieść i opowiadanie), łączy tematyka zmierzchu religii, w Holandii do niedawna jeszcze zorganizowanej na zasadzie tak zwanych kolumn ideologicznych, znajdujących oparcie głównie w protestantyzmie i katolicyzmie.

Pisarze ci, wyrastający z ortodoksyjnej tradycji kalwińskiej, dominującej na północy Holandii, reprezentują zarówno zanikające społeczności i emancypujące się grupy społeczne, jak i jednostki wchodzące w ich skład, typowe dla społeczeństwa holenderskiego, które współcześnie cechuje wysoki stopień sekularyzacji. 't Hart wyszydza kalwiński literalizm biblijny, jak też, podobnie jak Franca Treur, kreśli portret zamkniętych ludowych kalwińskich nisz, podczas gdy Jana Siebelinka fascynuje tragiczna mistyka łaski.

T.S. Eliot w eseju *Religia i literatura* zauważa, iż kultura odchodząca od źródeł religijnych rodzi literaturę, w której religia stopniowo zmienia swą pozycję — początkowo wszechobecna, z czasem staje się przedmiotem sporu, by ostatecznie być postrzegana jako anachronizm. Idąc jego śladem, zauważyć można, iż w prozie 't Harta kalwinizm (a właściwie cała tradycja chrześcijańska) jest nadal groźnym ideologicznym wrogiem, którego potrzeba obezwładnienia uzasadnia wszelkie chwytły, z nieszczydzącą niczego zjadliwą satyrą włącznie. Prozę Treur i Siebelinka cechuje natomiast nuta nostalgii i dwuznaczność, co lepiej predestynuje ich niż 't Harta do pełnienia funkcji strażników dziedzictwa kulturowego swoich środowisk.

Słowa-klucze: sekularyzm, literatura niderlandzka, religia, ateizm, pilaryzacja, Holandia, kalwinizm

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