In dienst van het koninkrijk: Beroepsontwikkeling van hervormde predikanten in negentiende-eeuws Nederland

Bos, D.J.

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David Bos, Servants of the Kingdom. Professionalization among ministers of the Nineteenth Century Dutch Reformed Church

The present historical-sociological study analyzes the evolution of the ministry in the Dutch Reformed Church — Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, the Netherlands' largest (protestant) denomination — during the nineteenth century. Even after its disestablishment in 1795, the reformed church was widely regarded as the most 'national'. This gave its clergymen a prominent social position. But how could they maintain this rank in a rapidly changing society?

In the Introductory chapter it is argued that the social position of a professional (occupational) group is not only changed by the societal transformations it is subject to, but also as a result of the strategies its representatives employ, in order to win prestige, authority, income or autonomy. Since the 1970s, sociologists have focused on these courses of action. This fitted their theories of 'professionalization' for analyzing the historical proceedings of an occupational group (or its representatives). By focussing on the actions of professional associations, however, the role of other (collective) actors is neglected. In recent sociological theories, 'professionalization' is understood as the evolution of the relations between a handful of collective actors: the occupational group itself, its 'clientele', its (academic) training institutions, the state, and other relevant occupations. A profession, in this view, is a 'figuration' (Norbert Elias), 'a structured and changing pattern of interdependent people'. This study aims at analyzing such a pattern among ministers of the nineteenth-century Dutch Reformed Church.

By way of introduction into nineteenth-century churchdom, in chapter 1, a description is given of clerical duties and of the shifts which took place in their conception and implementation. Traditionally, delivering sermons was most important to Dutch, reformed clergymen, who were commonly called 'teachers' (leraars; cf. Ephesians 4:11) or 'preachers' (predikanten). As before, the average sermon usually took one hour (much longer than in other European countries). But more than ever before, clergymen reckoned with the way in which their sermons were experienced by parishioners. Laymen's religious experience was also taken into consideration where other rituals were concerned. Now that baptism and wedding had lost their secular, administrative functions, these rites of passage (and Holy Supper alike) were primarily expected to produce a religious mood. For that purpose, many clergymen altered or even abolished the traditional, sixteenth-century litanies. Ministering burial services was not a clerical duty; reformed ministers had originally not even been allowed to give funeral sermons. In the nineteenth century, however, they began to deliver graveside orations and to perform further funerary rites. Catechizing was also a relatively new task. 'Public catechizing', continued religious education for adult members, was gradually abolished but giving confirmation classes grew more important. Since the schoolmasters had been released from clerical supervision (around 1800), ministers could no longer entrust them with the religious socialization of children. Nineteenth-century ministers agreed that 'teaching' was their main task; the way it was executed, however, revealed a growing pluraliformity. Pastoral care traditionally implied the house-to-house visiting of parishioners in order to invite them to (or exclude them from) Holy Supper, which was celebrated four times a year. In the course of the nineteenth century, ministers developed a new form of parish-visiting: a confidential, preferably private conversation,
not with a view to celebrating Holy Supper but on the occasion of life-events of their individual parishioners. In this respect, house-to-house calling grew more or less similar to the visitation of the sick. Traditionally, this was primarily meant to prepare parishioners for death. In the cities, ministers often left this task — as well as a large part of religious instruction — to their inferiors (‘sick-visitors’ or ‘catechists’). Nineteenth-century pastoral care for delinquents acquired a less official, a more private and educational character. This shift was caused by the disestablishment of the Reformed Church — by which its ministers were discharged from their role in the execution of the condemned —, by the transformation of prisons into institutions for moral reform, and by ministers’ exploration of a new field of activities: ‘Home Mission’. Even though these activities were discovered by one religious movement (the Revival), eventually no minister could do without. As a result, the set of clerical duties grew even larger than it had been. In this respect, ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church resembled clergymen in other North-West European countries and the United States, who also attempted to establish closer contacts with their parishioners (and outsiders). Unlike their British and German peers, however, nineteenth-century Dutch ministers of religion did not begin to emphasize the spiritual nature of the office they held — by wearing distinctive dress, etc. — or of the rituals they performed. They rather aimed at making their contacts with parishioners less official and more personal. This resulted in a growing plurality in clerical practice and teaching.

In chapter ii the history proper begins. This chapter describes how the early nineteenth-century reformed church got involved in processes of stateformation and nationbuilding. Now that the former federal Republic had been converted into a centralist Kingdom (established in 1813) the traditional church organization was considered obsolete. In 1816, the Crown imposed a new system of church-government, granting all power to colleges — local church councils, provincial church councils and the synod — in which only a small number of clergymen held seats. Whereas the Crown could influence all levels of supra-local church-government, the vast majority of ministers (let alone parishioners) no longer had a voice. Still, this reorganization was widely accepted. State intervention was thought to be not only indispensable for the church but even favourable to its clergy. Now that their salaries were largely paid by the state, Dutch reformed ministers grew less dependent on local patrons (magistrates, noblemen, etc.). This enabled them to develop a less ‘parochial’, and more ‘national’ orientation. Clergymen (whether reformed, ‘remonstrant-reformed, mennonite or lutheran) were encouraged to play a role in the process of nationbuilding, the cultural unification of the Netherlands. This is also made apparent by the reorganization of their university training. After 1815, all protestant students in theology had to be Bachelors of Arts; they were expected to be equally well at home with divinity and the humanities. Less emphasis, however, was put on orthodox (Calvinist) doctrine. The reformed synod was not even entitled to pronounce upon this; it rather functioned as a learned society — as shown by the presence of professors of theology — or a professional association of clergymen. In the first decades after its installation, the synod explicitly aimed at improving ministers’ social position. All in all, the structure of the early nineteenth-century clerical profession may be understood as a figuration, dominated by three ‘actors’: the state (notably the Ministry of Public Worship), the universities (the faculties of theology) and an élite of ‘practising professionals’ (prominent ministers, mostly in the cities). Representatives of these three parties met in the synod; in apparent harmony they governed the reformed church. Even for rank-and-file clergymen this arrangement had many advantages. There was no need to defend their position from competing professions: schoolmasters and Roman-Catholic priests remained their inferiors in many respects, whereas the ministers of dissenting protestant denominations were now regarded as colleagues. The clergy neither had to reckon with its ‘clients’ — even not after 1834, when large groups of orthodox parishioners (and a few clergymen) seceded from the reformed church. The oppressive government policy regarding these new dissenters (gereformeerden) might be seen as an indication of the strong position of the clergy towards the laity.

Chapter iii focusses on the universities. Their reorganization in 1815 led to advantages for the reformed church. Just as before the 1795 Revolution, the faculties of theology were primarily meant for the training of reformed ministers; they were the only ones who could boast a completely academic education. The drawback was that the church (the synod) had no direct influence on the training of its future pastors: the theological curriculum and the professors in theology were appointed by the Crown. This was all the more embarrassing because these professors held prominent positions in the church (e.g. as advisory members of the synod). In the 1840s, dissatisfaction with this situation found expression. On the one hand this was because the state (under king William ii) kept itself more at a distance from the ‘fatherlandish’ church. On the other
hand this was a reaction to the rise of the Groningen Theologians. Their explicit renouncement of Calvinist doctrine provoked protests by the Réveil. In the debate with the spokesmen of this movement — none of whom were theologians — the Groningen Theologians claimed professional autonomy. From this debate it appears that after 1840, relations were not as harmonious as they used to be: the ‘troika’ of state, clergy and university began to fall apart. New actors had entered the scene: Roman-Catholics and new dissenters (geregiformeerden) as well as self-confident schoolteachers and critical parishioners.

The assertive way in which theologians in the early 1840s claimed professional autonomy indicates an increased self-confidence. Chapter iv investigates into the origin of all this. In the first place, even though recruitment from the lower classes remained important, nineteenth-century theologians were of higher birth than previous generations. In the second place, the full-fledged academic training of theologians brought them into contact with other students. Both developments facilitated their integration into undergraduate life. Whereas in earlier centuries, the position of undergraduate theologians had been rather isolated, they now socialized with students in other faculties. By joining student fraternities, theologians gained access to the nation’s political and cultural élites. Their withdrawal from these students’ clubs in the 1870s, on the other hand, indicates estrangement: theologians lost the support and only too often the sympathy of other university men.

This process of integration and alienation is evident in Dutch literature. In the 1840s and 1850s, this field was dominated by theologians. In chapter v this well-known phenomenon is explained from the position of theologians in student society. Writing poetry and prose was not only a likely hobby for students who were so well-read in both classical and modern literature; it was also an attractive hobby for students whose social position was based on ‘cultural’ rather than ‘economic capital’ (Pierre Bourdieu). Moreover, literary activities served the quest for eloquence — the social ideal theologians now shared with poets, scholars, politicians, magistrates and all other men of culture. In the first half of the nineteenth century, ‘eloquence’ was not merely a technique of public speech but a habitus. Essays and manuals on this ‘art’ implicitly discussed the position of the educated classes in Dutch society. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, this connection between science, literature, art, preaching and politics was broken. Nevertheless, theologians continued to play a role in Dutch letters: not only as poets of religious hymns or light verse but also as journalists, editors or literary critics.

A closer look at the relationship between clergy and other university men is taken in chapter vi. Traditionally, very few theologians took their doctor’s degree: graduation was expensive, whereas it offered little advantages for a clerical career. In the nineteenth century, the number of Doctors of Divinity grew. This can be explained from the increased number of theologians from higher classes, the more academic character of theological study and the integration of divinity students in undergraduate life. In the third quarter of the century, even more theologians took their degree. This is explained as a symptom of ‘scientification’. Now that the clergy, after the 1848 liberal revolution, could no longer count on the state, it sought support in the universities. ‘Modern’, ‘scientific’ theology offered both practising and academic theologians a new legitimation of their role. Now that the rights of their faculty were once again questioned, the professors of theology began to strive for ‘scientification’ of their discipline, notably by historical-critical analysis of the Bible. The results of these academic inquiries spread far outside the university: Modern Theology became a trend among more or less educated parishioners. Its rise is bound up with the 1848 revolution: now that the middle classes had gained political power, they would no longer put up with a catechism-reply to every question. Modern Theologians attempted to meet this demand — even if their answers shocked orthodox parishioners and colleagues. Whereas the clergy succeeded less and less in keeping up a ‘fraternal appearance’, its members were successful in forging new relationships with their clients: not so much as incumbents of an office but rather as members of a university trained profession, a branch of science.

The success of Modern Theology was partly a result of the new relations within the profession — the theme of chapter vii. Unlike previous generations — and in contrast with clergy abroad — nineteenth-century Dutch, reformed ministers did not begin their careers as ‘assistants’ (curates) to established clergymen. This strengthened the young theologians’ sense of autonomy and intellectual independence. Whereas the ‘underclass’ of poor clergy in spe disappeared, the number of ex-ministers grew. This was mainly a result of the alternative careers which had come into being, notably in journalism and secondary education. The success of apostate theologians undermined the clergy’s career structure. Traditionally, its top positions had been re-
served for the professors of theology and the ministers in the largest cities. In the eighteenth century, these two élites had been almost interchangeable. In the nineteenth century, however, the various top positions increasingly diverged. Fewer and fewer ministers in large cities were appointed professors in theology or nominated as members of the synod. This can be explained as an effect of the contrary forces the clerical profession was subject to. Whereas academic theologians had to defend the position of their discipline among the sciences, practising professionals (clergymen) were more and more obliged to meet the demands, needs, questions and moods of 'laymen'.

This relationship between the profession and its clientele is the theme of chapter VIII. Dutch, reformed clergymen of old enjoyed a high degree of professional autonomy; once they were appointed it was almost impossible to remove them from office. Parishioners usually had no voice in their appointment. The right to nominate an incumbent often rested with local élites (magistrates, nobility or gentry) or with the Crown. Even in parishes where this right rested with the elders, rank-and-file parishioners usually had little or no influence: the members of the church council were co-opted. Though the 1848 revolution did not directly put an end to this, it led to an enlargement of parishioners' influence. In the first place, the rights of patrons were restricted. Some of them — from conviction or out of indifference — voluntarily gave up their advowsons. In the second place, the new constitution occasioned a democratization of church-government. According to the 1852 canon law, parishioners would have the right to nominate their pastors, elders and deacons. In 1867, this decision was effected: 'ecclesiastical franchise' was conferred on all male, adult parishioners (except those who were on the rates or had been censured). This led to a landslide in reformed churchdom. In many parishes (notably in the largest cities), 'modern', liberal ministers were suddenly confronted by orthodox church councils. Fundamentally new relations between clergy and 'laymen' were created by orthodox ministers who let the good understanding with their parishioners prevail over the solidarity with their peers. Particularly Abraham Kuyper, Amsterdam's first elected rector, followed this strategy. He, the leader of the Neo-Calvinist party in the reformed church (and in parliament, later on), mobilized parishioners and church councils to undermine the régime of liberal ecclesiastics. By founding an orthodox university, Kuyper succeeded in doing so: from 1886 onwards, hundreds of thousands of parishioners (and some eighty clergymen) seceded from the reformed church. Even though the total loss of members amounted to no more than 6%, this new schism had far-reaching consequences for the reformed church and its clergy: they could no longer claim a special status in Dutch society. Their state salaries, for example, were not withdrawn but in future they would no longer be adapted to inflation. The obvious result of this was that clergymen grew more and more dependent on their parishioners. This was also evident in other respects: the appearance of new competitors — dissenting ministers but also socialist leaders and atheist intellectuals — forced clergymen to reach out for their parishioners. This led to an extension and intensification of their activities, notably in the field of pastoral care. Whereas in the early nineteenth-century clergymen had usually been compared to lawyers — professionals of public speech like them, with a similar training in the Faculty of Letters, a similar cultivation of 'eloquence' and even similar robes of office — now they rather took example by doctors. Ministers enviously coveted too much the prestige, income, authority or autonomy physicians enjoyed, but rather their intimate, confidential relationships with patients. From the late nineteenth century onwards, establishing such a 'professional' bond with parishioners was the ideal of many clergymen.

In the Conclusion, the results of this investigation are summarized, and briefly compared with studies of clergy in Great-Britain, Germany and Scandinavian countries.