Katholieken, kerk en wereld: Roermond en Helmond in de lange negentiende eeuw.
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Citation for published version (APA):

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Summary

Catholics, Church and the Secular World: Roermond and Helmond in the Long Nineteenth Century

The Dutch Roman Catholic zuil (pillar) during the first half of the twentieth century is usually seen as being monolithic. It is assumed that, under the strict guidance of the episcopate, the Catholic section of the population formed a religious, political and sociocultural unity. The present study focuses on the conflicts between the different types of Catholics that make up this ostensible unity. The relationship between Church and World will be the guiding perspective; how did the opinions, persons, institutions and symbols that were associated with the Catholic Church interrelate with the opinions, persons, institutions and symbols that featured in other fields of society?

In order to observe the different types of Catholics and the relationship between Church and World, research was conducted in two towns that, to all practical intents and purposes, were homogeneously Catholic: Roermond, in the Dutch province of Limburg, and Helmond, in the province of Noord-Brabant.

Both in Roermond and in Helmond, two urban municipalities in the south of the Netherlands, the Catholics constituted a large and stable segment of the population (around 95% between 1850 and 1930). In many other respects, the two towns display different patterns. Roermond was an ecclesiastical center, its economy built on trade and services. Helmond, on the other hand, had developed into an industrial town by the end of the nineteenth century. The dichotomy between rich people and poor people was extreme. The most important sectors of industry were the textile and metallurgical industries, branches that were primarily in need of a low-paid and low-educated workforce. In Roermond, the trading relations and the influence of migrants contributed to the rise of a dynamic and 'open' community with an intellectual elite. In contrast, Helmond remained culturally isolated for a long time, and corporate life here developed late. These differences between Roermond and Helmond affect this study, especially in its timeline. Chronologically, the two parts of this book overlap only partially.

In Roermond, the first half of the nineteenth century was characterised by political and administrative disorder, which was partly caused by the fact that the town was alternately a part of France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. The Catholic Church found itself in the position of being alternately privileged, banned, tolerated and reinstated. The early part of the first half of the century saw the emergence of a core group of enlightened citizens, who were mostly natives of Germany and of the Northern regions of the Netherlands and whose ideas added a touch of liberalism to the town. By 1850, liberalism had become the dominant ideology within the indigenous Catholic elite. Some argued vehemently for a separation of Church and State. This led to some anticlericalism, especially since the Catholic Church was hardly convinced during this period that its activities should be contained within the doors of the church building.
In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the Church in Roermond was still able to keep control of many aspects of the lives of the faithful. After the restoration of the episcopal hierarchy in 1853, Roermond was once again an episcopal town. J.A. Paredis, who had been active within the parish since 1830, occupied the episcopal see. On a cultural level, as well as in the press and on the educational front, the Church had to deal with local initiatives that were instigated by liberals. Although these initiatives could be seen as the first threats to its supremacy, the Church was initially able to parry them.

Bishop Paredis' strategy in addressing this situation was geared towards a reconciliation between the parties involved. In the field of education, he preferred public education to special religious schools. The bishop was also very actively involved in politics, preferring moderate liberals to the group of Catholics who remained very much attached to the Church and who wanted to put an end to the cooperation between liberals and Catholics.

Eventually, the bishop's strategy of keeping the several factions together was bound to fail. The papal struggle against the unification of Italy (the Roman issue) was an important factor in ending the cooperation between the Catholics and the liberals. Subsequently, the Church employed a new strategy. Roermond's bishop Paredis, who had always seen himself as representing the 'general aspect' of the town and as being uninvolved in party politics, adopted a more pronounced stance with regard to the liberal faction. Two distinct subcultures subsequently emerged in Roermond: one was denominational-Catholic, the other liberal-Catholic. Or, in other words: one consisted of Catholics who were associated with the Church, the other consisted of Catholics who were associated with the World. Each subculture had its own electoral association, its own local newspaper and its own secondary school.

The change in strategy by the Roermond clergy after 1870 led to a change in the character of the conflicts between Church and World. The conflicts that arose up until around 1870 can be categorised as 'integral conflicts', in which the Church strove to seek confirmation of its dominance in several fields of society. After 1870, the conflicts can be described as 'border conflicts', which centered around the question where exactly the (by now universally accepted) borderline between the two spheres of life should be drawn.

While the conflict between Church and State in Roermond went through its crucial stages in the years between 1870 and 1875, similar conflicts in Helmond did not occur until after the turn of the century. Therefore, the second part of this study focuses on a different period. As a result, the battles in Helmond were fought on different fields of society than those in Roermond had been. Whereas in Roermond religious, cultural and political issues led to conflicts, Helmond also saw socioeconomic tensions rise.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Helmond developed into an industrial town. This was initiated by a small group of industrial entrepreneurs. These were predominantly Protestants who had come to Helmond from Germany or from the north of the Netherlands. Liberalism got a foothold, both in a political and in an economic sense. This liberalism, however, was more conservative than progressive in character. The radical-progressive element and the anticlerical element (that had been active in Roermond) were negligible factors in Helmond. The elite consisted of the clergy and the Catholic entrepreneurs. Occasionally, a stray Protestant would be added to the town council, to cultural societies or to the organising committee of an upcoming party.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a new elite formed in Helmond. It consisted of workers, members of the social middle classes that had long been missing from the town due
to the extreme dichotomy between rich and poor. This movement of workers, in which the journalist and politician Jos van Wel played an important part, was primarily geared toward achieving better economic conditions for the working classes. Looking beyond that, it had also articulated some political goals. This movement met the conservative and isolationist philosophy of the clergy and the Catholic elite of industrial entrepreneurs with a much more open, socially oriented outlook, which was inspired by the encyclical letter ‘Rerum Novarum’ and by the principles of democracy. The movement also developed its own views on the relationship between Church and World. Although these views, which served as an alternative to the ideas of the old elite, were explicitly Catholic in nature, they broke with tradition by contesting the dominance of the clergy.

In the second and third decades of the twentieth century, these two different views clashed with each other. The new elite that evolved out of the movement of workers adopted the moniker ‘Roman Catholic Democracy’. Having won a majority in Helmond’s town council, it became increasingly successful in steering the town’s policies. In 1917/1918 a conflict arose when the council, led by alderman Van Wel and mayor Marinus van Hout, allowed the expansion of the neutral secondary school (the State-H.B.s.) in town. The clergy and the elite of Catholic entrepreneurs immediately endeavored to annul this council decision. After failing to do so, they started a secondary school with a Catholic foundation (the Roman Catholic H.B.S.). Simultaneously, a second electoral association was founded to compete with the one that was presided over by Jos van Wel.

Just like it had happened half a century earlier in Roermond, two distinct subcultures emerged in Helmond, each with its own electoral association, its own local newspaper and its own secondary school. Another similarity was that, just as in Roermond, a change in strategy by the local clergy had caused this development. In both cases, the old elite distanced itself from its claims to the ‘general interest’, defined its opponent as a ‘competitor’ and fought him measure for measure.

The aforementioned change in strategy by the Church can be seen as a necessary phase that enabled the later verzuing (pillarisation or denominational segregation). At a local level, it was necessary for all the parties involved to realise that there was indeed a separation between the territories of Church and World before a battle could be fought over the question where the line of demarcation between those two spheres should be drawn. The fact that, on a national level, the Catholic zuil turned out to be very successful in that struggle conceals the internal conflicts between the different types of Catholics that preceded that struggle locally.

(Translation: Robert Neugarten)