

## Summary The Silent Evolution

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De stille evolutie. Individualisering in de Gereformeerde Bond

PhD Thesis Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

ISBN 978-90-8788-207-5

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Entitled 'The silent evolution', this book describes the extent to which the process of individualization is effective within the movement of the *Gereformeerde Bond* (Reformed League). This movement operates within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and is generally expected to be an association that is weakly receptive to influences of processes like modernization and secularization. I question whether this expectation holds and how leaders in the movement have handled the various challenges posed by modernization and secularization. From a perspective of the sociology of religion, I survey the process of individualization in the Netherlands that roundabout 2000 was typified as the most important social change occurring in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and study its effect on the *Gereformeerde Bond*.

Operating across the Netherlands, the *Gereformeerde Bond* is an association on national scale that was instituted in 1906 with the purpose '... to work for the propagation and the defense of the Reformed truth" in the Protestant Church of the Netherlands—formerly named *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* (The Dutch Reformed Church). Since the 19th century, this largest protestant church of the Netherlands harbored a considerable diversity of theological views and practices, which led many adherents of Reformed Confessions- to secede—as took place with the *Doleantie* (Dissention, 1886) by Abraham Kuyper. For those remaining, the *Gereformeerde Bond* became a means whereby ordained ministers, consistories and church members could aim for an inner reformation of the church. In the period 1970-2000, the number of supporting congregations of the *Gereformeerde Bond* grew considerably. Because the *Gereformeerde Bond* has consolidated around joint ideals, it is possible to see it as an ecclesial movement. In 2010, more than 300 congregations with a Reformed (orthodox Protestant) signature have a informal connection with the *Gereformeerde Bond*, thereby representing approximately 290.000 church members.

The *Gereformeerde Bond* has a Steering Committee with a General Secretary exercising influence on the movement. Flanking the *Gereformeerde*

*Bond* we find theologically allied organizations in the fields of mission, evangelization, youth movements, Sunday school work, movements for men and women. Yet, the *Gereformeerde Bond* exercises little authority regarding these associations, as these are known to follow their own strategies.

The present study has a concentrated focus on how the process of individualization influences the movement of the *Gereformeerde Bond*, in terms of the League itself, as well as those congregations and its members belonging to the sphere of influence of the *Gereformeerde Bond*. That phenomenon concerns the exercise of personal empowerment by individuals who present themselves independently regarding traditions of family and church from which they originate. We may expect that church members in modern Dutch society will be influenced by the most important values making up individualization, such as freedom, self-determination, and equality. The scope of this study of reaction to individualization makes it relevant for other ecclesial traditions and spiritual movements in modern society.

The research question is: To what extent are processes of individualization observable in operation of the movement of the *Gereformeerde Bond* within the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk / The Protestant Church of the Netherlands* in the period of 2000-2012 and how did its leaders deal with that?

Circumscribing the research of the operation of the *Gereformeerde Bond* from the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is partially a symbolic and partially a practical necessity. Because individualization is a long-term process, choosing a proper demarcation of the period is crucial for reliably observing it. Previously, the operation of the *Gereformeerde Bond* over the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century was treated in a dissertation study by J.E. Post (1998). Hence, the year 2000 marks the start of the new millennium and also coincides with a new generation of leadership in the Steering Committee of the *Gereformeerde Bond*.

Initial focus in my study is how on macro level the Steering Committee of the *Gereformeerde Bond* as well theologians from beyond the movement contributed to deliberation concerning individualization. For a proper analysis of this development we cannot limit the analysis to what transpired on the macro or national level. Secondly a case study was done on the manner in which individualization became visible in local congregations and with individual members of the congregation (meso- and micro levels). An unambiguous operationalization of the concept of individualization is done with five themes (as described in detail below).

This study comprises eight chapters. An introduction to the setup of research question, sub-questions and research design are provided in chapter 1, which is followed by description of the background and operation of the *Gereformeerde Bond* and treatment of the concept of individualization in chapters 2 and 3. The research findings are presented in chapters 4-7. Chapter 4 contains an extensive report of perspectives found on the national level. Chapter 5 presents the characteristics of two Reformed congregations located in wards of the city Ede where cases studies were done. Chapter 6 describes the extent of individualization on meso level as found in the decision-making by the churches of the two wards. Chapter 7 treats the developments of individualization on micro level on the basis of interviews with 42 members of the congregations in both wards. Chapter 8 finalizes the study by answering the research question and by providing an analysis of the situation for leadership on various levels.

Chapter 2 treats the issue that since its founding, the *Gereformeerde Bond* harbored internal disagreement. These can be traced to two issues, the differences in matters that the League experienced with the national church, the *Nederlands Hervormde Kerk*, and the differing theological stands and spiritual practices. Concerning the nature of the bond with the national church, one part of the movement experienced a strong solidarity with the national church, called "helers" (healers); whereas a second category emerged that was much more oriented on the local congregation and its autonomy, called "delers" (separators). Tensions between the factors of solidarity and autonomy ('helen' and 'delen') continued as a distinct feature of movement of the *Gereformeerde Bond* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This tension manifested itself clearly during the period of research in regard to the merger of the *Nederlands Hervormde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church) with the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands) and with the *Evangelisch-Lutherse Kerk* (Evangelical-Lutheran Church). The merger was named the *Samen-op-Weg-proces* (Process of Travelling-Together, 1961-2004). Because it highlighted the differing perspectives, a deep internal crisis within the *Gereformeerde Bond* came about. The Steering Committee experienced troubled circumstances resulting in a loss of authority with a number of its supporters. A sizable segment of supporters (15%) did not accept the merger in 2004 and left to establish the *Hersteld Hervormde Kerk* (Reconstructed Reformed Church). The *Gereformeerde Bond* itself continued to operate only within the *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* (Protestant Church of the Netherlands or PKN). The manner in which the Steering Committee attempted

to provide leadership in the merger is described in this study as an example of a failed management of internal tensions.

The second major issue of differing theological stands and spiritual practices is treated in this study by applying the metaphor of a major movement with flanks. The Steering Committee and a sizeable portion of the supporters comprise the major movement; while the flanks constitute the so-called '*open bonders*' (open-minded members) and *bevindelijke bonders* (experiential reformed members). The so-called *open bonders* emphasize covenant theology, are more interested in renewal, and want to exercise accommodation in a changing culture in an 'open-minded' way. Their stands and practices are strongly represented in the executive strategies of the sister organizations *Hervormd-Gereformeerde Jeugd Bond* (Reformed Youth Movement League) and the *Inwendige Zendingsbond* (Evangelization League in the Netherlands). The number of followers in the flank of this movement has increased and is now estimated at 20% of the supporters of the Reformed League. The so-called *bevindelijke bonders* are experience-oriented in their theology, place more emphasis on personal conversion and election, are more focused on being separate from the world. Their stands and practices comply regularly with an emphasis on the autonomy of their local congregation. Because of the *Samen-op-Wegproces* and merger in 2004, the supporters comprising this flank dropped from 10% to 4% of the total of the Reformed League.

The theology adhered to in the *Gereformeerde Bond* can be typified on the basis of its sources in terms of three foci:

- Confessional focus: departing from the authority of the Bible and the faith documents of the Church, preaching serves as central feature in congregational faith practice. In sermons, ministers place Christ foremost, while they also fully aim to be Trinitarian. The doctrine of the 'covenant' is also of importance.
- Spiritual focus: soberness in lifestyle, also in liturgy, an emphasis on the value of a personal faith commitment and the experience of that (being experiential or pietistic), the necessity of conversion and spiritual rebirth.
- Ecclesial focus: strong attachment to the institution of the national church, the societal calling of the church in the Netherlands, and a high view of offices in the church (ecclesiastical authority.)

The *Gereformeerde Bond* never aimed at developing its own theology. Nor did it provide much reflection on theological shifts, such as a decrease in emphasis on election and more on Christ-centered preaching, as well as the values of baptism and covenant.

Chapter 3 covers the thinking on individualization in academic literature in terms of three viewpoints. The first viewpoint flows from a description of the actual social developments leading to more autonomy and self-determination as observable in many areas (by SCP reports). The second viewpoint is the stand that individualization concerns a social ideal of freedom, which has been strongly influenced by ideology and traceable since the Enlightenment (by Lukes, Schnabel). The third viewpoint places the emphasis on the imperative of making own choices in the form of an own reflexive 'life project,' thus as attitude (by Giddens, Bauman and Beck). The coherence in the three perspectives is located in an emphasis on the individual making own choices, whereby the immediate environment loses its capacity to govern these choices. For purposes of this study the concept of individualization is defined as follows:

Individualization is defined as the process whereby individuals increasingly want to, are able to, and feel compelled to realize conditions of life for themselves, without the self-evident adoption of beliefs and habits that are common to the social associations to which they belong.

The three viewpoints provide indications for further research in the ecclesial-religious domain. By drawing upon description of actual practices, indicators are generated regarding empowerment and authority relationships, informalization, needs for autonomy and development, the emancipation of women, and freedom of choice regarding participation in the church. This can lead to forms of deinstitutionalization (decreasing attachment to institutions), detraditionalization (decreasing support for traditional beliefs and values), privatization (decreasing influence of collectives on their members), fragmentation (reduction of cohesion with collectives, reduction of its significance for daily life) and heterogenization (increasing differentiation within/inside collectives). On the whole, an assessment of Dutch developments with these indicators reveals a slow and gradual process of change, which transpires in differing paces for different areas of life. The domain of church and religion already had undergone before 2000 a strong influence of individualization on micro-, meso-, and macro levels. This increases the urgency of a more precise study of how a traditional ecclesial movement responded. Particular attention must be given to the possible shift towards adopting the social ideals of freedom such as equality, autonomy, privacy and self-development that represent the ideological aspect of individualization. Additionally, the focus is on the extent to which people give shape to this in a reflexive manner, such as by personal projects and choice for a certain identity (the aspect of attitude development).

Five research areas were chosen that comprise differing aspects of individualization for analysis of the possible changes within the movement of the *Gereformeerde Bond*.

Research areas	Connection points for study of individualization
Reduced authority of offices	Empowerment, autonomy, weakening of authority
Liturgical changes	Development, reflexive capabilities
Attachment to one's congregation	Freedom, self-determination, weaker attachment, selective participation
Support for traditional religious practices	Seekers-spirituality, authenticity, alternative spirituality (more charismatic / more modern)
Women's position in family and church	Emancipation in private life, equality

Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the movement of the *Gereformeerde Bond* on the national level according to the five themes presented above. Fundamental for this broad survey are publications arising from the entire spectrum belonging to the *Gereformeerde Bond*, including those of the Steering Committee as well as coming from its flanks. A sizeable segment of sources concerns publications by the weekly periodical of the *Bond*, *De Waarheidsvriend* (The Friend of the Truth). An assessment of the developments in the five themes between 2000 and 2012 are compared with what transpired in earlier periods for the purpose of gaining a baseline assessment. This results in a sharper focus on how individualization was dealt with in the period researched.

Regarding the issue of authority of the ecclesial offices, no changes on macro level in the *Gereformeerde Bond* were noted. An officeholder is expected to maintain a 'contrary position' vis-à-vis the congregation. Spiritual leadership is their primary calling. Low-church views accentuating the universal priesthood are not lacking, but do not become prominent stands. Regarding liturgy, the *Gereformeerde Bond* is faced with a greater variety of views and needs, but endeavors to counter the effect of these.

Regarding factors such as attachment to the congregation, church attendance and perforation (members choose a congregation for worship without changing church membership), on macro level no changes in views held by the *Gereformeerde Bond* are noted. Unabated, the original ideals are held high, even though the factor of perforation is less frequently stated as unacceptable. Changes in the practice of religious experience continue to be rejected. A small group of ministers actively may come to espouse evangelical

(charismatic) views, but the Steering Committee keeps their distance. Without recourse to polarization, the preference for the own Reformed tradition is emphasized. Tendencies towards modernization are not encountered. Regarding the position of women, little change comes about; the participation of women in church life is promoted, but the move towards women in office is systematically rejected.

The flanks of the *Gereformeerde Bond* are seen on macro level to incidentally bring forward dissenting views. The *open bonders* hold deviating positions in two main areas: they are more open to changes in liturgy, and occasionally also regarding the issue of women in office. The *bevindelijke bonders* have a deviating view in one main area: together with a segment of the mainstream of the movement, they have recently put forward objections against developments they see as promoted by the official youth movement (*Hervormd Gereformeerd Jeugd Bond*); primarily so because they consider the Reformed doctrine too weakly represented by these, secondarily for what they perceive as too great an effort in accommodating modern Dutch culture. The Steering Committee of the HGJB actively seeks to reduce the strains, but without success.

Chapter 5 introduces the case study as this was carried out in two ward congregations of the Reformed Church (PKN) Ede. The ecclesial location chosen represents the diversity in the *Gereformeerde Bond* and displays the necessary liturgical and theological differences within the movement. The two ward congregations studied were the ward of the *Oude Kerk* (Old Church) representing the main stream of the movement, and that of the *Bethelkerk* (Bethel Church) representing the flank of the *open bonders*. The two groups (*Oude Kerk* and *Bethelkerk*) researched have considerable registered membership (approximately 1500 each), of which a segment attends worship services on Sunday (close to 500 attendees in a service).

Already for some time in Ede, the ward congregations gained their own ecclesial profiles, as a result of the process of perforation, with the resulting weakening of ties of many members to the congregation meeting in the geographical ward they live in. In the end of the period researched, 25% of the total members of the church in Ede perforated to a ward congregation more in line with their preferences. Hence, both ward congregations studied are seen to struggle with their identity in respect to perforation. The believers worshipping in the *Old Church* are led by two consistories, serving two sub-wards, each with their own profiles. One sub-ward is known to be conservative, yet sensitive to the preferences of its members, whereas the second sub-ward attempts to

remain attractive for the *bevindelijke bonders*, of which many of its attending members live in the agrarian countryside of Ede. The other ward studied, the *Bethelkerk* is located in newer suburban section of Ede that includes a segment of an older working class neighborhood. The believers meeting in the *Bethelkerk* are led by a consistory known to struggle with the profile of being *open bonders*, which in the research period led to considerable difficulties in their consistorial decision making. In terms of church policy, both congregations connect to the movement of the *Gereformeerde Bond*, promoting their profile regarding the flank they identify with. The consistories are actively involved in managing faith practices through decision making and implementing policies.

Chapter 6 treats the changes occurring on meso level regarding the link between individualization and the congregational faith practices and policies. The most important sources for this study were the policy documents and minutes of meetings of the consistories; these were buttressed with a limited number of interviews held with ministers and several consistory members. Findings of the study reveal the carry-over effect of individualization, even though there is much continuity in church policy where no individualization is found.

My findings are that the consistories themselves adopt the high-office view (having inherent authority) and are focused on achieving consensus. The practice in congregations is that individual members generally will comply with majority decisions by their consistories. As far as pastoral practices go, the office holders mostly aim for empathy and service to members. Regarding liturgical changes, the consistories will with trepidation comply with demands for renewal by members. Each ward congregation does this differently, given their initial situation differs. Also regarding changing stands on faith, the consistories will monitor these at a distance and demonstrate reluctance in adopting more evangelical elements. The congregation harboring *open bonders* is more tolerant of input by its more progressive members than the other congregation studied. By not 'reporting' policy stands too quickly, room is created to accommodate individualization somewhat, particularly when dealing with individual members. Regarding a loosening of ties, the choice where to worship (perforation)—or not—is becoming increasingly important. The attendance of the second (afternoon) service on Sunday shows a slight decline for the *Old Church* congregation and has strongly declined during the research period in the *Bethelkerk* congregation. In both ward congregations, women are actively involved in church practices, but not as office-bearers.

In Chapter 7, a portrayal is given of the extent to which individualization is found among the church members. This is done by having carried out 42 in-depth interviews with a-select chosen members. The interviews were limited to the category of 'professing members' as they already had made a committed choice to belong to this church.

Concerning the authority of office holders, we see clear evidence of members exercising a personal empowerment. Authority based on knowledge (for instance by ministers) is valued positively. Consistories appear to meet expectations of members and the demands for having a say in church matters and communication is rather limited. Yet, liturgical preferences by members are clearly proclaimed, which regularly leads to perforation. The preferences regarding hymnals (*Liedboek van de Kerken* and *Opwekkingsliederen*) are diverse, but traceable to differences between the older and the younger generations. Concerning the attachment to one's congregation, we see foremost that choosing where to worship (perforation) has increased and that a tendency exists among a portion of the respondents to not attend worship services regularly or their no longer attending church circles and study groups. On the whole, the respondents value positively the pattern of church attendance, the preaching and also liturgy of the services. Only a small minority among the respondents is open-minded about allowing an evangelical expression of faith. A significant portion of the respondents is not or not wholly averse to allowing women in office. A minority (40%) opposes women in office; while respondents from both categories (pro/con) weakly support their stands with the Bible.

Concerning the overall depiction of individualization, members of both congregations display a broad range of attitudes and behavior whereby the process of individualization becomes visible in small steps taken by certain members. On three themes (the authority of offices, the decrease in attachment, and the changing roles of women) changes are more traceable than on other themes.

In chapter 8, the conclusions formulated for each theme on the three levels researched are presented in a scheme. In this scheme the extent of influence of individualization is portrayed with a type of shading. This represents four qualifications ranging from invisible, slightly visible, tot strongly visible regarding the influence of individualization; whereby the designation 'somewhat' means: visible to some extent but certainly not strongly so or across the entire spectrum.

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Macro	meso	micro
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Legend

Reduced authority of offices				Invisible
Liturgical changes				Slightly visible
Decrease of attachment to congregation				Somewhat visible
Changes in religious beliefs				Strongly visible
Changes in the roles for women				

***Portrayal of main conclusions regarding the extent of influence of individualization***

The most important conclusion is that regarding the influence of individualization, significant differences are found between the micro-, meso-, and macro levels. On the macro level, we see that during the period of research the effect of individualization was entirely absent. On meso level it was rather limitedly visible. On micro level the operation of individualization is 'somewhat visible' on several areas, but in none of the areas researched do we see evidence of a strong influence of individualization.

Noticeable are changes progressing very gradually bottom-up. Actors on the meso level are aware and to some extent take these into account. On the national level, a rejection of these changes and developments dominates. Remarkably, the process of individualization itself progresses so gradually that it is barely noticeable and hence the changes relating to individualization as such are not discussed or themed for deliberation. The studied developments exhibit the image of a slow transformation that can be characterized as a quiet evolution.

Leaders of congregations and also members of the Steering Committee of the *Gereformeerde Bond* are faced with the choice whether they will or will not actively deal with the process of individualization. As social coalition the League cannot avoid the impact of such a social process of change, as well as taking advantage of the presented sociological insights for the maintenance of one's own identity. I submit several building-blocks for a further theological assessment of public position and ecclesial style, whereby individualization is not in advance considered unfavorably. These proposals are linked to Biblical notions such as responsibility and personal calling.

Regarding the future, this research spells out that leadership of the *Gereformeerde Bond* may choose from three probable scenarios: (1) Maintaining a balance between tradition and accommodation; (2) intentionally engaging in renewal of elements while taking into account individualization; (3) determinedly realizing realignment according to a more open and a more

pietistic movement. Leadership on local level and in other denominations will face similar choices. Students in theological education have to be prepared for the dynamics of leadership in changing situations.