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Umbrellas of Conservative Belief: Explaining the Success of Evangelical Congregations in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Dutch society is characterized by a high degree of religious dis-affiliation and non-affiliation and most religious communities are facing hard times in the Netherlands. But there are also exceptions. Against the contemporary current of ongoing secularization, some religious communities seem to thrive like never before and even attract new members. But why is that? Why do some religious communities succeed in retaining and also attracting new members while others fail? This article focuses on successful evangelical congregations in the Netherlands and tries to account for their relative success. On the basis of a subcultural identity theory, it is argued that the success of evangelical congregations is largely due to the fact that they offer protective umbrellas of conservative belief in an otherwise very secular context. This line of thought is substantiated with empirical findings from a current research project into thriving evangelical congregations in the Netherlands. The article closes with some theoretical reflections on the future of evangelicalism in contemporary Dutch society.

Keywords

evangelicalism – subcultural identity theory – secularization – the Netherlands

1 Introduction

Is there still a future for institutional religion in the Netherlands? This question is likely to emerge if one looks at the longitudinal developments regarding

the various Christian denominations in the Netherlands. Once an undeniably Christian nation, today the Netherlands rank among the most secular countries in the world (Reitsma et al. 2012). That is not to say, that religious communities are no longer present in Dutch society. Approximately 25 to 35 percent of the Dutch are still affiliated with a Christian denomination, while the Netherlands also harbor a fairly large Muslim minority of nearly 5 percent of the Dutch population as well as smaller proportions of Jews, Hindus and Buddhists.¹ Nonetheless, at least as far as Christianity is concerned, the overall trend is decline. Very recent figures of the fifth 2015 wave of the *God in Nederland* (God in the Netherlands) research perfectly illustrate this downward trend (Bernts & Berghuijs 2016, 23, 25). With previous waves in 1966, 1979, 1996 and 2006, this longitudinal research offers a detailed picture of the over time developments regarding the adherence to Christianity among the Dutch population. As far as religious affiliation is concerned, in 1966 35 percent of the Dutch identified as Roman Catholic, 25 percent as a member of one of the many Protestant denominations and 33 percent claimed no religious affiliation, but by 2015 these figures had respectively changed to 11.7 percent, 12.8 percent and 67.8 percent. Hence, although in 2015 still one out of four Dutch claims to be affiliated to a Christian denomination, the decline has nevertheless been dramatic. The proportion of church members more than halved, while the proportion of non-affiliates has doubled. Even more dramatic is the drop in religious participation, which is a more robust indicator of religious commitment. While in 1966 some 50 percent of the Dutch attended church at least once per week, this figure had dropped to 12 percent in 2015. Thus, in the Netherlands commitment to church, as measured by weekly church attendance, dropped by 76 percent over the last fifty years!

Christian denominations in the Netherlands face hard times and their future looks far from certain. But there are also exceptions. For instance, several very orthodox Re-Reformed churches, located in the Dutch bible-belt, seem

1 The percentages we report here are lower than the percentages reported by Statistics Netherlands (cf. Schmeets & Van Mensvoort 2015). This has to do with the fact, that Statistics Netherlands uses only one question to measure religious affiliation. Respondents are offered a list of various religious communities and are asked to indicate of which community they are a member. Within other research, like the *God in Nederland* research we are referring to here, two questions are used. First, respondents are asked if they consider themselves to be a member of a religious community. Secondly, a list of various religious communities is offered only to those respondents who answered the first question in the affirmative. The use of two questions results in significantly lower percentages of religious affiliates, because especially nominal members are inclined to state that they are not affiliated to a religious community when the two question procedure is used (Becker & De Hart 2006, 38).

to remain immune to the secularizing forces in Dutch society and continue to thrive as they have done for decades.² Next to that, there is also a small but increasing number of thriving, independent evangelical congregations. Some of which have recently experienced such a spectacular growth, that they may be called megachurches according to the criteria mentioned in scholarly literature; like welcoming more than two thousand attendees per weekend (Thumma & Travis 2007, xviii).³ Against the background of the aforementioned religious development in the Netherlands, the emergence of such thriving evangelical congregations is a very interesting phenomenon, which deserves scholarly attention. While it is plausible to assume that orthodox Re-Reformed churches continue to thrive mainly because of their specific geographical location in the Netherlands, which enables them to form close-knit, religiously homogeneous communities, this seems less the case for most thriving evangelical congregations which are far more spread across the Netherlands. So, what is the secret of their success? Why are these evangelical congregations immune to secularization and even attract vast numbers of visitors to their worship services; and what distinguishes these congregations from the mainline Protestant and Catholic denominations, which suffer such a considerable loss of membership?

A few years ago, in 2014 to be precise, these questions triggered us to start a research project among thriving, evangelical congregations in the Netherlands. While this project is still on its way, in this contribution we will now offer some preliminary explanations for the success of these congregations based on our findings thus far. These findings especially relate to the following two research questions out of the total number of five research questions we will eventually address in our project: *What are the most typical organizational characteristics of the participating evangelical congregations?* and *What is the social profile of the members of these evangelical congregations in terms of their value*

2 The label 'Re-Reformed' refers to various religious denominations that separated from the Dutch Reformed Church in the nineteenth century; back then the unofficial 'state church' of the Netherlands. In 2004 one Re-Reformed denomination, the Re-Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, merged with the Dutch Reformed Church and the Lutheran Church to become the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. The more strict Re-Reformed denominations stayed independent and until today are mainly located in the Dutch bible-belt.

3 In order to avoid all misunderstanding, it is certainly not the case that all evangelical congregations are thriving in the Netherlands. It seems that the peak of the evangelical movement in the Netherlands is over and several evangelical congregations nowadays also face decline and a loss of membership. Evangelicalism thus is not synonymous with church growth and success (Boersema 2005; Stoffels 1990). Still, most Christian congregations that thrive in the Netherlands, with the exception of the aforementioned Re-Reformed churches, fit into the evangelical stream.

*orientations, their religious orientations and their religious beliefs?*⁴ We discuss our findings in the following order. To begin with, we first consider the supply-side and on the basis of a qualitative analysis of sermons sketch what successful evangelical congregations have on offer. Secondly, we consider the demand-side and present a picture of the religious background and beliefs of the people who actually visit these successful evangelical congregations. This picture is based on the analysis of survey data we gathered among the membership of thriving evangelical congregations. As a third step, we relate the supply and demand-side to one another and show to what extent these congregations actually meet consumer demand. Following this third step we offer a preliminary explanation for the relative success of evangelical congregations on the basis of a so-called subcultural identity theory. To end this article, we offer some thoughts on the future of evangelicalism in a modern society like the Netherlands.

Our contribution thus clearly focuses on contemporary developments in the Dutch religious landscape, but the phenomenon we address is far from typically Dutch. Also in the US, for example, mainline Christian denominations face decline, while more strict denominations as well as several evangelical congregations have grown or their religious constituency at least has remained stable (cf. for instance Miller 1999, 2-6; Perrin et al. 1997; Putnam and Campbell 2010, 100-108; Roberts and Yamane 2012, 141-145). Consequently, the applicability of our reflections regarding the success of evangelical congregations is likely to go beyond the Dutch case and is also of interest to readers outside the Netherlands.

2 The Supply-side: The Message Conveyed

Before discussing the supply-side, we first explain what is meant by 'evangelical' congregations. Evangelicalism is actually a trans-denominational, religious revival movement within the broad stream of Protestantism and is itself not a denomination. There is no overarching national leadership or organizational body. Rather the locus of authority lies in the local congregation. As a result, evangelical congregations can, for instance, differ in religious atmosphere and worship style (Boersema 2005; Klaver 2010). Still, it is possible to refer to a set of six fundamental convictions, which give the evangelical movement a kind of shared identity. According to McGrath (1995, 55-56), the evangelical movement

4 Full documentation of our research project is available at: <https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-xdh-6gb3>.

is characterized by the following convictions: ascribing absolute authority to Scripture, affirming the majesty of Jesus Christ, recognizing the work of the Holy Spirit, stressing the need for personal conversion, giving priority to evangelism and being committed to the Christian community. Some of these fundamental convictions of evangelicalism are also mentioned by Boersema, while defining the evangelical movement in the Netherlands. As he puts it: "As a working definition of the Evangelical Movement I therefore propose the following: a movement in Protestant circles where people feel drawn to testify in word and deed about a personal conversion, in which Jesus occupies a central place, for whom the Bible is the most important guidebook for their life, and for whom the work of the Holy Spirit is indispensable" (Boersema 2005, 163).

Now, by studying the supply-side, we do not intend to fully adopt a rational choice, theoretical framework (cf. for instance Stark & Bainbridge 1996), but we do propose that evangelical congregations have some very distinctive features, which are meant to address the religious demands of a specific group of people. One such feature is the lengthy sermon delivered by the pastor during religious services. Services in evangelical congregations typically have the following order. The service starts with the whole congregation singing several songs of praise accompanied by a live pop/rock band, after which the service continues with prayer and a lengthy sermon. After this sermon, which can last up to one hour, the service closes by singing songs of praise again. Apart from the use of pop/rock music instead of the use of traditional church music and hymns, a lengthy sermon thus is a typical feature of what evangelical congregations are offering. Analyzing the content of sermons, therefore, is a valid way of studying the supply side. In order to do this, one of us carefully selected three very large congregations, which all display the aforementioned characteristics of the evangelical movement, and downloaded a random selection of sermons delivered in 2013 from the congregations' websites. Subsequently, these sermons were analyzed with the help of an analytical framework based on two theoretical perspectives: a cultural market perspective and a church-sect theory perspective (Vermeer 2015).⁵

In a review article on research into successful megachurches in the United States by Ellingson (2010), both perspectives are mentioned as helpful explanations for the success of American megachurches. A cultural-market

5 The sermons were delivered in a Nazarene Church located in the West of the Netherlands in the city of Vlaardingen, in the free Baptist church 'Bethel' located in the northern town Drachten and in a newly established congregation called 'Doorbrekers' located in the middle of the Netherlands. More detailed information regarding the analysis of the sermons delivered in 'Doorbrekers' can be found in Vermeer (2015).

explanation basically states, that there is actually a mismatch between the religious products offered by traditional, i.e. mostly mainline, congregations and the demands of present-day religious consumers. Hence, from a cultural-market perspective, successful religious congregations are those, which are better able to carefully align their messages with the religious interests of religious consumers. As regards the sermons delivered, one important aspect is that the preaching is practical. It must have high 'user value' (Sargeant 2000, 82). Instead of being judgmental, successful pastors need to be able to address the daily (individual) problems and worries of people regarding family matters, the education of children or people's career. Or, as Thumma and Travis put it: "Relating the Christian message through personal stories, everyday experiences, and in response to contemporary cultural situations brings the "old, old story" to life in the modern age" (Thumma & Travis 2007, 66).

A church-sect theory explanation, in addition, claims, that successful religious congregations are better able to mix theological conservatism and popular culture. Here, the basic idea is that successful congregations are firmly rooted in Christian orthodoxy. Thus, the message pastors convey in their sermons is also strict and uncompromising; i.e. the redemptive work of Jesus Christ is unique and offers the only way to God. In this way, pastors of successful American congregations distance themselves from secular culture with its emphasis on tolerance and the rejection of absolute truth claims, which gives these congregations a sect-like character and well-defined identity (Miller 1999, 154). At the same time, however, as the church-sect theory explanation states, this tension with secular culture is again reduced by a strong emphasis on the democratic principle. There is little hierarchy within most megachurches and people are addressed as self-conscious individuals who are called to make a personal choice for Jesus Christ. This latter aspect puts the personal appropriation of the Christian faith on the basis of an authentic conversion experience at the center of the relationship between congregation and individual believer. In this latter respect, successful congregations clearly fit the individualism of modern culture (Sargeant 2000, 31).

So, as a way of studying the supply side, sermons delivered in three thriving evangelical congregations were analyzed in view of the question if elements of both the cultural-market and church-sect theory perspective are present in these sermons. The analysis showed that this is indeed partly the case.

To begin with, the pastors in all three congregations strongly emphasize the *relevance* of the Christian faith. In their sermons, all three pastors use the Christian faith as a means to encourage and to empower people in their daily lives. Although the Bible is presented as the word of God, the pastors also stress that the Bible contains stories of ordinary people and relates to the lives of or-

dinary people. At the same time, however, the social and political consequences of the Gospel are ignored. None of the pastors in the three congregations comments on contemporary social or political issues. So, relevance is clearly personal relevance. Or to put this otherwise, the high 'user value' of the preaching relates to individual, personal user value.

This emphasis on the personal relevance of the Christian faith is accompanied by an emphasis on *authentic faith*. What matters most is entering into a sincere and authentic relationship with Jesus Christ without accepting dogmas or conforming to church rules. This element especially comes forward in the sermons of the Baptist pastor and the pastor of 'Doorbrekers' who strongly reject any form of moralism or judgmentalism. For example, the Baptist pastor urges his audience to become a 'reproduction' of Jesus Christ, which, in his view, is very much at odds with being legalistic or fanatic.

Still, notwithstanding the fact that two out of three pastors reject doctrine and moralism, they all put Jesus Christ at the center of their messages although not always explicitly in *exclusivist* terms. All pastors consider having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as the core of faith. For example, the 'Doorbrekers' pastor calls Jesus Christ the savior of the world whose death and resurrection enables man to live in a state of grace. Likewise, the Nazarene pastor argues that only through faith in the power of Jesus Christ can people change their lives and escape the evil power of the devil, while the Baptist pastor argues that people are born again through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In this way, the necessity of having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is continuously stressed in most sermons. In addition, in the first 'Doorbrekers' sermon this necessity is also stated in clear exclusivist terms when the pastor tells his audience that people are only blessed by God through Jesus Christ.

This strong emphasis on the centrality of Jesus Christ gives these congregations a very specific identity in opposition to the surrounding secular culture: it is this opposition or tension that the pastors may reduce by carefully *avoiding controversial moral issues* like abortion, euthanasia or homosexuality. In most sermons these aspects are indeed not addressed, but there are a few exceptions. In one of his sermons the 'Doorbrekers' pastor tells his audience that living with God is at odds with having premarital sex and cohabitating, while the Baptist pastor argues that homosexuals should be treated as fellow men although homosexuality is against God's order of creation; views which are not in line with the views of the majority of the Dutch population (Van de Meerendonk & Scheepers 2004).

So, what kind of messages do these pastors of thriving evangelical congregations in the Netherlands convey? As already argued elsewhere (Vermeer 2015),

the messages conveyed in these congregations seem to represent a kind of *privatized* and *strict* Protestantism. In line with a cultural-market perspective, there is a strong emphasis on the individual. The preaching is practical and oriented towards the subjective well-being of the individual, while the social and political implications of the Gospel are being downplayed. In line with a church-sect theory perspective, there is also a strong emphasis on the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, albeit not in overt exclusivist terms, while the distance with secular culture again is not overstretched as the pastors largely ignore controversial moral issues. Hence, messages are privatized in their emphasis on the individual self and strict in their emphasis on the centrality of Jesus Christ.

3 The Demand Side: Religious Background and Beliefs and Values of the Audience

The analysis of sermons delivered in three thriving evangelical congregations in the Netherlands thus basically reveals, that successful pastors seem to promote a privatized and strict form of Protestantism. But is this also the kind of Protestantism their audiences look for? Or to put this otherwise, are these pastors successful because their messages meet consumer demand? In order to address questions like these, we conducted a large-scale quantitative research among the members of six thriving evangelical congregations in the Netherlands. For that matter, during the winter of 2014-2015 an online questionnaire was administered to the visitors of these evangelical congregations as well as to a representative sample of the Dutch population, which served as a comparison group. This resulted in a total sample of 920 respondents of 18 years or older including 584 respondents visiting these evangelical congregations.⁶

These thriving evangelical congregations were carefully selected on the basis of an extensive web-search, according to the following criteria:

- Having experienced sometimes spectacular growth during the last decade currently resulting in 1000 attendees or more in an average weekend;

6 In our quantitative study, the label 'evangelical' refers to those respondents who visit an evangelical congregation, who consider themselves to be a full member of this congregation and who at the same time are not affiliated to another religious congregation or denomination (N=531).

- No traditional church building, no traditional liturgy and services consisting mainly of singing songs of praise and a lengthy sermon, the use of pop/rock music and modern media during services; and
- Having a mission statement in line with the aforementioned six characteristics of the evangelical movement listed by McGrath (1995).

This web-search resulted in the identification of twelve congregations including the three thriving congregations involved in the qualitative analysis of sermons. Unfortunately, six congregations refused to participate including two congregations that were part of the qualitative study into sermons. The remaining six congregations that did participate were located across the Netherlands except for the southern provinces, which are predominantly Catholic.⁷

Below, we will offer a general picture of the audiences of the six participating congregations. First, we offer some demographics, after which we discuss the religious background of these audiences, the way they are committed to their congregation and their conservative stance on pro-life issues.

3.1 *Demographic Background*

When it comes to such general background characteristics as gender, age, marital status, education and income, the following picture comes forward. Of the evangelicals participating in our quantitative study 56.5 percent is female, 76.7 has children and their average age is 47.6 years. As regards their marital status, 77.4 percent is married, 13 percent is single, 4 percent is divorced, 2.1 percent is a widow/widower and only 1.1 percent is cohabitating. Finally, the socio-economic status of these evangelicals is fairly high, since 53.5 percent has a college or university degree and 40.3 percent has a net family income per month of 2.500 euro or more. In view of these characteristics, the evangelicals in our sample do not differ much from the non-evangelicals in our sample. There are only noticeable differences with regard to age, marriage, cohabitating and education. Compared to the non-evangelicals in our sample, the evangelicals are somewhat younger, an average age of 47.6 years versus 52.9 years for the non-evangelicals, more often married, 77.4 percent versus the 66.7 percent of the non-evangelicals that are married, far less cohabitating, 1.1 percent versus the 8.5 percent of the non-evangelicals that are cohabitating, and relatively

⁷ The following congregations participated in this study: Maranatha Ministries in Amsterdam, Baptist Church 'De Rank' in Utrecht, Free Baptist Community in Groningen, Free Evangelization in Zwolle, Evangelical Church 'De Pijler' in Lelystad and Church of the Nazarene in Vlaardingen. This latter Nazarene church was also part of the qualitative study into sermons.

more evangelicals have a college or university degree, 53.5 percent versus 37.1 percent for the non-evangelicals. Thus, the evangelicals participating in our study do not reveal a very distinctive demographic profile except for their marital status and their level of education.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to tell to what extent this overall picture is representative for the membership of the participating evangelical congregations, let alone for Dutch evangelicals in general. Because the participating evangelical congregations did not have exact membership lists, it was not possible to draw a random sample among the members of these congregations. However, comparisons with the studies of Stoffels (1990) and Vellenga (1991), the only available quantitative studies among evangelicals conducted in the Netherlands, confirm the relatively high socio-economic status of evangelicals in terms of education and to a lesser extent of income.

3.2 *Religious Background*

As mentioned already, the evangelical congregations participating in our study all experienced growth during the past decade. But where does this growth come from? What is the religious background of the members of these thriving evangelical congregations? Are they converts, switchers or have they been evangelicals all of their lives? Table 1 provides an answer to these questions.

As these figures show, more than 50 percent of the evangelicals participating in our study are orthodox and mainline protestant switchers, while almost a quarter, i.e. 24.6 percent, are converts with no prior religious affiliation. Thus, contrary to the findings reported by Bibby and Brinkerhoff (1973) in their famous study into conservative church growth in Canada, these Dutch evangelical congregations not only appeal to orthodox Protestants or to people already familiar with orthodox culture, but to mainline Protestants and to former non-members as well. However, these congregations hardly appeal to Catholics, a finding which is in line with the research of Sherkat and Wilson (1995), which shows that people tend to switch to culturally and theologically similar churches. Apparently, the cultural and theological distance between Catholicism and evangelicalism is such, that a switch to evangelicalism is not a serious option for many Catholics.⁸

But what made these people switch or convert to a thriving evangelical congregation? Additional multivariate analyses show, that several religious factors are of modest importance here, like: being raised in a family in which prayer and Bible reading were regular practices or having an intrinsic religious

8 The earlier studies of Stoffels (1990, 94) and Vellenga (1991, 106) also showed that evangelicalism is basically a Protestant movement with hardly any appeal to Catholics.

TABLE 1 *Juvenile religious affiliation of evangelicals (%)*

Current membership	Catholic	Juvenile church membership			None	Total (N)
		Mainline Protestant	Orthodox Protestant	Evangelical		
Evangelical	2.6	27.3	24.8	20.8	24.6	100 (501)

orientation as well as having had a born again experience.⁹ However, far more important is a social factor relating to marriage, i.e. being married to a partner who switched to an evangelical congregation. Mainline Protestant, orthodox Protestant and non-church members who married a partner who switched to an evangelical congregation respectively are 18, 25 and 15 times more likely to join an evangelical congregation than mainline Protestants, orthodox Protestants and non-church members whose partners did not switch to an evangelical congregation. Thus religious exogamy is a key factor here, a finding which is also in line with the research of Need and De Graaf (2005) into general switching patterns between denominations in the Netherlands.

3.3 *Religious Commitment*

In many evangelical congregations 'being church' involves much more than Sunday worship attendance. For this reason, evangelical congregations offer their membership plenty of opportunities to gather in small groups during the week. Small groups serve as important religious reference groups that render faith plausible and help to construct and sustain a religious identity (Thumma & Travis 2007, 111-113; cf. also Smith 1998, 104-107). Consequently, to the extent church members participate more in these groups, they do not only develop close affective bonds with their fellow congregants, but they are also more likely to endorse the core beliefs of the congregation. Hours spent per week on church groups and orthodoxy thus can be considered important indicators of religious commitment among evangelicals. Against this background, Table 2 clearly shows that the evangelicals involved in our study are indeed more committed to their congregations than Catholics and non-evangelical, i.e. orthodox and mainline, Protestants. Not only do they spend far more hours per week

⁹ These multivariate analyses are presented in detail in Vermeer and Scheepers (2017).

TABLE 2 *Means of hours spent per week on church groups and orthodoxy for Catholics, Non-evangelical Protestants, evangelicals and nones (SD in parentheses)*

	Catholics	Non-evangelical Prot.	Evangelicals	Nones	Eta
Hours spent per week	.33 (1.12)	1.44 (2.74)	3.81 (5.62)	.04 (.37)	.36***
Orthodoxy (scale 1-5) ^a	2.86 (.73)	3.84 (.68)	4.58 (.39)		.88***

* $p < .050$; ** $p < .010$; *** $p < .001$.

a This is a five point Likert scale which runs from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

on church groups, but they also display higher levels of orthodoxy as measured by the doctrinal orthodoxy scale of Batson and Ventis (1982, 152-155).¹⁰

Still, the more important question again is: Which factors determine the commitment of these evangelicals to their religious communities? Additional multivariate analyses show that two factors really stand out here.¹¹ The participation in church groups is primarily explained by social factors, i.e. having colleagues attending the same congregation and having church group members as friends, while orthodoxy is primarily explained by religious factors, i.e. having an intrinsic religious orientation and having experienced the presence of God.

3.4 *Pro-life Stance*

Finally, we have a brief look at the values the members of these evangelical congregations deem important? More specifically, we consider their position on pro-life issues. Do they, as more committed religious believers, also hold more conservative views on pro-life issues? That is to say, do they find abortion, euthanasia or suicide unacceptable? Indeed they do, as the findings displayed in Table 3 show.

Although evangelicals certainly cannot be considered conservative in all respects, as Stoffels' (1990, 105) earlier study among Dutch evangelicals already

10 Additional post-hoc analyses (one-way ANOVA) reveal that in both instances the differences between evangelicals on the one hand and Catholics, non-evangelical Protestants and nones on the other are all statistically significant.

11 These multivariate analyses are presented in detail in an article still under review. The exact figures are available on request.

TABLE 3 *Means of conservatism on pro-life issues for Catholics, mainline Protestants, evangelicals and nones (SD in parentheses)*

	Catholics	Mainline Protestants	Evangelicals	Nones	Eta
Pro-life conservatism (scale 0-5) ^a	35 (.57)	1.10 (1.30)	2.11 (1.35)	.23 (.63)	.60***

* $p < .050$; ** $p < .010$; *** $p < .001$.

a Respondents were confronted with five pro-life issues and were asked if they find these issues acceptable or unacceptable. The scale indicates the number of times a respondent finds these issues unacceptable.

showed,¹² when it comes to pro-life issues these evangelicals clearly are far more conservative than Catholics, mainline Protestants and non-church members. This is what really distinguishes this specific group of Christians from other mainline Christians and non-church members in the Netherlands. A conservative position on pro-life issues, which for almost 50 percent can be explained in terms of the influence of two specific religious factors: orthodoxy and Biblical literalism (Vermeer et al. 2016). That is to say, the more orthodox these evangelicals are and the more they view the Bible as the literal word of God, the more they hold conservative views on pro-life issues.¹³

4 Do Evangelical Congregations Meet Consumer Demand?

On the basis of the aforementioned qualitative analysis of sermons, the conclusion was drawn that thriving evangelical congregations in the Netherlands

12 More recent US research shows that also American evangelicals cannot be considered conservative in all respects (Wald & Calhoun Brown 2007, 236-239). Nor is it the case that there is some kind of 'natural affinity' between evangelicalism and right wing politics or the Moral Majority in the US. The close relationship between evangelicalism and right wing politics actually goes back to the Reagan administration during the eighties, but during the sixties and seventies a substantial number of evangelicals supported the Democratic party and a more leftist political agenda (Swartz 2012).

13 Of the participating evangelicals 33 percent agrees with the statement that the Bible is God's literal and infallible word. In the study of Stoffels (1990, 107, 151), from which this item was taken, 37 percent agreed with this statement.

seem to represent a new form of privatized and strict Protestantism. But is this privatized and strict form of Protestantism also what attracts our respondents to evangelical congregations? In a general sense, our quantitative findings do indeed confirm our qualitative findings, but, in addition, we also believe that our quantitative findings especially confirm the importance of strictness.

No doubt, the evangelical congregations we studied are successful, because they succeed in relating to the daily worries and experiences of their audiences; as one might expect from a cultural-market perspective. For instance, when asked if they consider the sermons delivered relevant for their personal life, almost 61 percent of our evangelical respondents says the sermons are very relevant and another 23 percent considers these sermons somewhat relevant. In addition, 78.5 percent reports being satisfied with the sermons delivered, 77.2 percent with the music during worship and 78.7 percent is satisfied with the songs of praise being sung. Figures which are clearly in line with a cultural-market explanation for the success of evangelical congregations.

However, our quantitative findings also reveal that our evangelical respondents are both very religious as well as strict. They endorse most traditional Christian doctrines, take the Bible literally and hold conservative views in pro-life issues that are generally at odds with Dutch public opinion. In this latter respect, these evangelical congregations are in clear tension with secular Dutch culture. However, this tension is again reduced by the use of non-traditional worship services, the use of modern media and the like. In line with church-sect theory, then, these evangelical congregations can be rightfully called 'postmodern' sects, to borrow a term coined by Miller (1999, 154). When it comes to the beliefs they promote or to the values of their audiences, these congregations certainly have sectarian qualities. But contrary to the common understanding of sects, these congregations do not encourage their audiences to separate themselves completely from present-day culture.

In our opinion, especially this sect-like character is an important aspect of the success of the evangelical congregations participating in our research, which, in addition, also explains why these congregations hardly appeal to Catholics. At least in the Netherlands, Catholics are notorious for their moderate acceptance of core Christian beliefs (Bernts & Berghuijs 2016, 64-69), which makes it unlikely that more strict congregations, like the one's involved in our study, really appeal to Catholics. In view of strictness, there is a clear dissimilarity here between Catholic culture and evangelicalism. Strictness thus is of importance, but it is not the only factor as our results also point to the importance of two specifically social factors; i.e. a marriage factor and a social network factor.

As we have mentioned already, marriage is strongly related to joining an evangelical congregation. Although we cannot establish the exact causal order here on the basis of our cross-sectional data, our findings, nevertheless, suggest that switching to an evangelical congregation is in part a way of making a marriage more religiously homogeneous (Sandomirsky & Wilson 1990; Hadaway & Marler 1993). That is to say, non-evangelicals who marry someone who switched to an evangelical congregation, are in turn more likely to join an evangelical congregation too. Hence, the success of evangelical congregations is not only due to the fact that they offer strict believers an appealing environment, there is also a more straightforward social mechanism at work here.

Next to this marriage factor our results also point to the importance of social networks. Meeting familiar faces in one's religious congregation, like colleagues, and developing friendship ties with fellow congregants helps in strengthening the commitment of people to their religious community. Of course, this effect of social embeddedness on people's participation in all kinds of church activities is not typical for evangelical congregations (Stroope 2012). Still, what distinguishes evangelical congregations from most mainline Catholic and Protestant congregations, and this also goes for the congregations involved in our research, is that they deliberately develop programs to effectively incorporate people into the life of the congregation. Thus our findings also reveal an important organizational dynamic of successful congregations (Ellingson 2010, 257), i.e. creating possibilities for people to really become engaged in the congregation. For instance, by organizing a lot of small group activities during the week; such as: Bible study groups, prayer groups, welfare groups et cetera.

In sum, when it comes to the success of evangelical congregations in the Netherlands our findings thus far suggest that the following factors are of importance:

- *Strictness*: these congregations are bulwarks of orthodox Christianity, which no doubt meets the demands of a very specific group of intrinsically religious and orthodox believers.
- *Religious homogeneity*: the audiences of the participating evangelical congregations apparently strive for religious homogeneity in their marriages and relationships and are inclined to follow their partner's choice for evangelicalism.
- *Organizational characteristic*: evangelical congregations, more than Catholic and mainline Protestant congregations, offer plenty of opportunities to people to really become engaged in church life next to attending the weekend services.

Next to striving for religious homogeneity in marriage and relationships, evangelical church growth in the Netherlands thus especially seems to be a matter of offering the right product to the right group of religious consumers both in terms of the orthodox messages being conveyed as well as the possibilities being offered to become engaged in the religious community as such.

5 Theoretical Reflection: Maintaining a Distinctive Subcultural Religious Identity

Strictness, striving for religious homogeneity and offering people several opportunities to become involved in a congregation thus turn out to be key factors in the success of evangelical congregations. But why are these factors that important and what do these factors have in common? The answer to this question is actually pretty straightforward: together these three factors enable evangelical congregations to maintain a clear and distinctive religious identity.

The importance of having a clear and distinctive religious identity can be explained in more detail with the help of the subcultural identity theory elaborated by Smith (1998; cf. also Bean et al. 2008). This theory is actually a more sophisticated church-sect theory in which ‘distinctiveness’ is the keyword. Smith is very critical about secularization theory and especially about the idea that plurality, as a core characteristic of modern society, undermines the plausibility of belief systems and, therefore, causes religious decline. This idea, which was initially elaborated by Peter Berger (1973) in his early work on secularization, is more or less turned upside down by Smith. According to him, plurality does not offer a threat, but instead offers new opportunities to religious communities. For, plurality enables religious communities to distinguish themselves from the wider socio-cultural environment, which, in turn, gives them a much sharper profile and identity. Pluralism thus “(...) enhances the sociological capacity of religions to survive and thrive in the modern world — particularly those which are well-equipped culturally to construct distinctive subcultural identities”, as Smith (1998, 111) puts it. In a plural society religious groups are surrounded by plenty of positive and negative reference groups, which serve as valuable sources of comparison and which enable them to construct and express a distinctive identity. In this regard, Smith’s theory is clearly indebted to Tajfel’s (1981) social identity theory, developed to explain in-group distinctiveness joined by out-group derogation.

But although modernity potentially offers a cultural environment in which religious communities may thrive, not all religious groups are equally successful in this respect. Smith, therefore, mentions two necessary conditions for

religious groups to survive. As he puts it (Smith 1998, 118-119): “In a pluralistic society, those religious groups will be relatively stronger which better possess and employ cultural tools needed to create both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant subgroups, short of becoming genuinely countercultural.” The two key words here are *distinction* and *engagement*. Thus the first condition for religious groups to survive is having a distinctive and clear-cut socio-religious identity. The evangelical congregations involved in our study do indeed display such a distinctive identity. As our quantitative study showed, these congregations are Protestant communities with an emphasis on core Christian doctrines, biblical literalism and conservative pro-life stances, which appeal to a specific audience of intrinsically religious people. These characteristics do not only clearly distinguish these congregations from secular Dutch culture, but also from other Christian denominations as well. This distinction is also carefully constructed and endorsed by the evangelical pastors in their sermons; sometimes even with clear hints to derogate other religious groups. For instance, when the Baptist pastor and the pastor of ‘Doorbrekers’ reject moralism and judgmentalism, they at the same time overtly criticize other Christian churches for being too legalistic and fanatic (cf. section 2). Or, as the ‘Doorbrekers’ pastor puts it: “As long as the church judges the world around us, it will not be a blessing of our country” (Vermeer 2015, 15). Thus by emphasizing strictness while at the same time presenting themselves as representing the true Christian church, these congregations draw clear symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them”, between the in-group and out-groups, and articulate a clear and distinctive identity (Smith 1998, 124; cf. also Bean et al. 2008, 922).

In addition, and that is why we call this a *socio*-religious identity, these evangelical congregations also serve as an important social network for the people involved; i.e. their organizational structure is such that congregants meet familiar people in church or can make new friends in church. This latter social aspect we consider just as important as the aforementioned religious aspect of the identity of these evangelical congregations, because it helps people perceive themselves as part of a group of like-minded religious believers. A group which constantly confirms the beliefs of the individual and renders these beliefs plausible. In a plural, modern society there is no longer an overarching ‘sacred canopy’, which supports a unified belief system. Still, beliefs need social support. That is why social groups remain necessary to support the beliefs of people. Therefore, in a plural society where there is no longer a sacred canopy, social groups are important to function as ‘sacred umbrellas’ to support the religious beliefs of people. Or as Smith (1998, 106) puts it: “In the pluralistic, modern world, people don’t need macro-encompassing sacred cosmoses to

maintain their religious beliefs. They only need ‘sacred umbrellas’, small, portable, accessible relational worlds — religious reference groups — “under” which their beliefs can make complete sense.” This, we propose, is also a very important element of the success of the thriving, evangelical congregations involved in our research. Their social make-up is such that the beliefs of the individual believer are constantly being confirmed by fellow-congregants and by his or her partner as well, which simultaneously also confirms the distinctiveness with other out-group believers.

At the same time, however, these congregations are not countercultural. They do not fully separate themselves from the surrounding culture. For, this would result in a kind of fundamentalist isolationism, which would again go at the cost of their appeal to relative outsiders like mainline and orthodox Protestants. Instead, they engage with the surrounding culture, which, according to Smith, is the second condition for religious groups to survive in a pluralistic society. Already from the outside this becomes visible, for instance, in the way they make use of modern media and pop/rock music in their religious services; one of the features which urged Miller (1999, 154; cf. also section 4) to describe these thriving, Christian congregations as postmodern sects. But this also comes forward in the values the member of these evangelical congregations deem important. As we have seen, they clearly hold conservative views on pro-life issues, but this is only half the story. These evangelicals also hold rather leftist views when it comes to the economy, the political influence of trade unions or the role of the government in reducing income differences (Vermeer et al. 2016). Furthermore, more than half of the evangelicals we questioned, 53.1 percent, votes for the Christian Union (CU), which is a left of center Christian political party in the Netherlands, while 6.6 percent votes for the more right of center Christian Democratic Party (CDA) and only 2.6 percent for the right wing orthodox Re-Reformed Party (SGP).¹⁴ In addition, these

14 The earlier studies of Stoffels (1990, 156) and Vellenga (1991, 245) also showed that this right wing orthodox Re-Reformed party (SGP) hardly appeals to evangelicals. Instead, this party mainly appeals to members of the more strict Re-Reformed churches (Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland) who live together in closed geographical enclaves in the Dutch bible-belt. In our opinion, this difference in political orientation is also illustrative of the difference between the attitude of ‘engaged orthodoxy’, which according to Smith (1998, 149) is typical of evangelicals, and the attitude of distinction and separation which is more characteristic of strict Re-Reformed Christians in the Netherlands. Still, the huge support for the Christian Union (CU) in turn also distinguishes the evangelicals involved in our study from the non-evangelicals in our sample. Among the latter only 2.5 percent votes for this political party, which is in stark contrast with the 53.1 percent evangelical voters. Thus evangelicals are engaged, but in a distinctive way.

evangelicals are also active in civil society. More than one third, 35.8 percent, volunteers for a non-religious organization, while 23.8 percent offers informal help to people other than relatives or friends at least once a month. Members of these thriving evangelical congregations thus do not live in complete cultural separation or in some sort of religious enclave, but actively interact with the surrounding culture. Although they are relatively less involved in non-religious organizations than the non-evangelicals in our sample. Of this latter group more than half, i.e. 52.2 percent, volunteers for a non-religious organization.¹⁵ Still, it is fair to say, we believe, that the evangelicals in our study display, what Smith (1998, 149) calls, an attitude of ‘engaged orthodoxy’ and which he considers crucial for the success of evangelicalism in the United States. For, it is this active engagement with the surrounding secular culture, which constantly urges evangelicals to reaffirm their subcultural, religious identity and in this way generates religious vitality.

From the perspective of a subcultural identity theory, strictness, the striving for religious homogeneity and offering people several opportunities to become involved in a congregation thus appear to be important tools for constructing a distinctive religious identity. A distinctive religious identity we consider key to the success of the evangelical congregations we studied. Their strictness and emphasis on authentic faith clearly separates these evangelical congregations from other secular and religious out-groups and gives individual evangelicals a sense of distinctiveness. A sense of distinctiveness which is constantly being confirmed by their close relationship with fellow congregants and defended in view of the challenges evangelicals face as they interact with secular culture.

6 Conclusion: The Future of Evangelicalism in the Netherlands

Developing a subcultural religious identity thus seems of vital importance if religious communities are to survive and thrive in modern society. In this respect, we agree with Smith’s (1998) contention that secular, plural society constitutes a challenging environment for religious groups to construct a distinctive identity, exactly because it offers them the possibility to distinguish themselves from other out-groups. However, we would like to add, this environment at the same time also limits the capacity of religious groups with a distinctive identity to survive and thrive. As to conclude this paper, let us point

15 When it comes to offering informal help to other people than relatives or friends, the evangelicals (23.8 percent offering help) and non-evangelicals (24.9 percent offering help) in our sample hardly differ.

at two wider cultural developments which show that the future of more strict and distinctive religious groups, like evangelical congregations, is not necessarily that bright.

To begin with, a subcultural religious identity is not an anything goes religious identity. On the contrary, a basic feature of a subcultural religious identity in modern society is strictness. Strictness is what is distinctive here, but at the same time the market for strict religious communities is decreasing; at least in a modern society like the Netherlands. That is to say, the proportion of the Dutch population which views God as a personal God, subscribes to such a basic Christian belief as the divinity of Christ or which acknowledges that the Bible is the word of God is clearly declining over the years. This especially goes for Catholics and to a lesser extent for mainline Protestants as well, while members of the smaller orthodox Protestant churches continue to endorse most traditional Christian beliefs (Bernts & Berghuijs 2016, 64-68; cf. also De Hart 2014, 69-88). Still, in the end this development also affects the future of distinctive religious groups, like evangelical congregations, because it simply limits the potential number of switchers and converts to these congregations. As we have seen, evangelical congregations, at least the ones that participated in our research, not only recruit members among orthodox Protestants, but among mainline Protestants and non-members as well (cf. Table 1). Hence, if these latter groups gradually become more liberal and secular in their views, the number of potential switchers and converts to more strict congregations within these groups also declines. Having a clear and distinctive subcultural religious identity, Smith (1998, 113-116) considers an instance of in-group religious strength, but in the context of the Netherlands such a subcultural identity thus at the same time also limits the capacity of evangelical congregations to grow. Given the religious developments in the Netherlands, then, it will already be a real challenge to evangelical congregations to consolidate their current position let alone to grow. A similar argument can be made with respect to their conservative stance on pro-life issues. Since the Dutch display lower levels of cultural conservatism over time and gradually have taken a more liberal stance on pro-life issues (cf. for instance Scheepers et al. 2000), congregations with a distinctive conservative outlook in these matters, like evangelical congregations, are also likely to lose public appeal.

In addition, evangelicalism also faces difficulties when it comes to engagement. As we have seen, another reason for the relative success of evangelicalism is its active engagement with secular culture, which challenges evangelicals to constantly reaffirm their distinctive religious identity. But such an engagement with secular culture also implies, that evangelicals at least to some extent have to conform to secular standards and norms and thus must partly downplay

certain aspect of their distinctive religious identity. This especially becomes clear at the meso level of evangelical institutions, but it affects the micro level of the individual evangelical as well. Several evangelical institutions, like the Dutch Evangelical Broadcasting Organization (EO) and theological institutions, are important in upholding a distinctive evangelical plausibility structure. But in their engagement with secular Dutch culture these institutions are in danger of gradually losing their specific evangelical character. The Dutch Evangelical Broadcasting Organization has been very successful and today is one of the biggest broadcasting companies in the Netherlands, but it has achieved this at the cost of downplaying its distinctive evangelical identity. As a result, a group of prominent members very recently expressed their worries that this evangelical broadcasting company has become too liberal and has turned into a main-line Christian broadcasting company.¹⁶ Similarly, as Klaver (2010) notes, the development of evangelical theology in the direction of an accepted academic discipline has gradually led to the introduction of hermeneutical principles and to a different view on the authority of the Bible; a development which is certainly not welcomed by all evangelicals. These are only two examples, but they show, we believe, that this active engagement of evangelicals with secular culture not necessarily results in an attitude of 'engaged orthodoxy'. Especially in the context of such a secular country as the Netherlands, this active engagement with the surrounding culture may in the end also result in an attitude of 'engaged heterodoxy'.¹⁷ At least what becomes clear from these examples, is that evangelical institutions today no longer automatically lend support to a distinctive evangelical plausibility structure. On the contrary, also in these institutions there is a tendency to become mainstream or, to put this in terms of Bruce (2002, 140-150), to regress to the mean.

Our research findings thus far clearly support the idea that evangelical congregations mainly thrive, because they are capable of constructing a distinctive subcultural identity. By way of the sermons being held and the social relationships that are fostered evangelical congregations offer umbrellas of conservative belief, which contribute to a sense of distinctiveness and religious strength. But evangelical congregations do not exist in a vacuum and are also affected by wider cultural developments, which, at least in the Netherlands,

16 See the article on the Dutch Evangelical Broadcasting Organization in the Dutch national newspaper *Trouw* on September 23, 2016.

17 In this respect, it would also be very interesting to study the drop-out rates among evangelicals and to explore if these and similar developments within evangelical institutions have recently led to an increase in the number of evangelicals leaving their congregations. Unfortunately, data regarding the drop-out rates among evangelicals are not available.

are not in all respects that favorable to evangelical congregations. Decreasing numbers of orthodox believers and evangelical institutions gradually becoming part of mainstream culture threatens the distinctiveness and, therefore, future of many evangelical congregations. No doubt, some of these congregations will continue to thrive, but for the evangelical movement as a whole the future, we think, is uncertain.

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