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Religious Socialization among Dutch Orthodox Christians

A Pedagogical Tension Unfolds

Paul Vermeer / Peer Scheepers

In Western Europe, the majority of Christian churches are confronted with a declining number of members and attendees, which reflects what is often referred to as 'cohort replacement'; i.e. over time, older and more religious birth cohorts die out and are gradually replaced by younger and less religious birth cohorts. In the Netherlands, for example, research has convincingly shown that the chance of becoming a committed churchgoer decreases for each successive birth cohort. Each successive birth cohort consists of fewer religiously committed people than the previous birth cohort, which again underlines the importance of the intergenerational transmission of faith if Christian churches are to survive and thrive in the context of secular Europe. Still, within each successive birth cohort the intergenerational transmission of faith appears to be less successful.


But although the dominant trends in Western Europe are religious decline, except for former communist Europe, there are also notable exceptions, which not only concern the increasing presence of non-Christian religions like Islam, but Christianity as well. In the Netherlands, especially the more orthodox and conservative churches, like certain strict Reformed churches and various Pentecostal and evangelical churches seem immune to secularization and some of these churches even experienced growth instead of decline in recent years, a phenomenon which is not typically Dutch. Also in the United States or Canada, for instance, are conservative churches far less affected by religious disaffiliation and declining rates of church attendance.

This phenomenon may have different causes. As regards the success of several evangelical churches in the Netherlands, we already showed elsewhere that these churches in part thrive,


because they manage to attract both switchers from other Christian denominations as well as previously non-affiliated Dutch converts as a result of very typical religious and organizational characteristics. But in light of the aforementioned process of cohort replacement, it is equally interesting to explore to what extent the success of orthodox or conservative churches is also due to more successful processes of religious socialization in the family. Using recently gathered data among the membership of six thriving evangelical congregations in the Netherlands of near megachurch size, we will address the following, twofold research question: Do the children of Dutch evangelicals attend church more often than the offspring of mainline Christians and, if so, which decisive factors determine the church attendance of the children of these Dutch evangelicals? Addressing this question, first of all, adds to a better understanding of the importance of familial, religious socialization processes in explaining conservative church growth in a secular country like the Netherlands. However, as will become clear in the reflection on our most important research findings, studying the intergenerational transmission of faith in orthodox or conservative families in the end also confronts us with a profound pedagogical dilemma regarding religious education in school.

1. Theoretical framework

A main assumption underlying this article is, first of all, that evangelicals are more successful in transmitting their religious commitment to their children. One often heard argument for this assumption is, that orthodox and conservative Christians, like evangelicals, have bigger families which simply increases the odds that they are successful in passing their faith on to the next generation. Secondly, next to this 'demographic' factor, it is sometimes also stated that conservative Christians put more emphasis on a religious upbringing in the family, resulting in much higher retention rates among orthodox and conservative Christians than among mainline Protestants and Catholics. This latter argument rests on the broadly accepted notion, that being raised in a religious family by religious parents is almost a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for adult religious commitment. Since this notion goes for the process of religious socialization as such, evangelical Christians may not be very unique in this respect. Still, they may add something to this process, which could explain why they are more successful in transmitting their religious commitment to their children than mainline Christians. In this regard, three additional factors could be of importance.

To begin with, since orthodox or conservative Christians, like evangelicals, put more emphasis on the religious upbringing of their children, present-day evangelical parents presumably have themselves also enjoyed a far more intense religious socialization as youths than present-day mainline parents. This juvenile experience may urge evangelical parents to also take the religious upbringing of their own children more seriously. For, as research both in the United States and the Netherlands has shown, conservative Protestants value conformity in their children over autonomy and, therefore, are far more keen to transmit their religious commitment to their children. But evangelicals not only strive for conformity. They also maintain, what Smith calls, a 'subcultural identity', which distinguishes them from the surrounding culture and strengthens the internal cohesion of their congregations and results in close intra-group affective bonds. Consequently, children born in evangelical families are likely to be raised in an overt religious environment in which parents and other family members alike display high levels of religious commitment, which functions as a kind of supportive plausibility structure and important endorsement for the religious commitment of the child. Finally, evangelicals are also generally considered to be more strict religious believers who, for instance, put great emphasis on the authority of the Bible or emphasize that the redemptive work of Jesus Christ is unique. A kind of religious strictness, which at the same time instills a deep sense of responsibility to proselytize among non-Christians and to do all they can to socialize their own children into the faith.

On the basis of the above considerations, four hypotheses may be stated as to why the religious transmission among evangelicals is more successful resulting in higher levels of church attendance for their children: Evangelicals are more successful in this respect, because they have bigger families (H1); because they have been intensely socialized in the faith as youths (H2); because their children are raised in an overt religious family climate (H3); and because their religious orientation urges them to take the religious socialization of their children very seriously (H4). All four hypotheses will be tested below.

2. Data and measurements

2.1 Data

The data of this research were gathered in the winter of 2014–2015 when an online questionnaire was administered to the audiences of six thriving evangelical congregations in the Netherlands. These congregations self-identified as evangelical, evangelical-charismatic, as a Baptist church and one as a Nazarene church, but all had mission statements in line with the six fundamental convictions of evangelicalism listed by McGrath: 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. A total of 584 evangelicals of 18 years or older filled in the online questionnaire. For sake of comparison, the online questionnaire was also distributed among a representative sample of the Dutch population of 18 years or
older, which resulted in total of 325 completed questionnaires. Overall the entire sample thus contains 920 respondents; more information regarding the sampling can be found in Vermeer, Scheepers, Kregting and Vis.16

### 2.2 Dependent variable: church attendance of the respondent’s oldest child

The respondent was asked if his or her oldest child currently attends church. Response categories range from „almost never” to „about once a week.”

### 2.3 Independent variable: religious affiliation of the respondent

Respondents are labelled „evangelical”, „mainline Christian”, which comprises both Catholics as well as members of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, and „religious none” in case the respondent had stated not to have any religious affiliation. Furthermore, the religious affiliation of the respondent was combined with his or her level of church attendance. This is necessary, because the evangelicals were gathered through participating churches and thus are almost by definition core church members, while the non-evangelical mainline Christians, Catholics and Protestants, are part of an existing sample of the Dutch population and comprise both core church members as well as nominal members. In order to make more meaningful comparisons, we, therefore, divided the single category „mainline Christian” into the subcategories „core mainline” and „nominal mainline”. Core means that the respondent is a church member and also attends church at least once a month, while nominal means that the respondent is a church member who attends church less than once a month or never. Thus in this article we compare „core evangelicals” with „core mainline Christians”, „nominal mainline Christians” and „religious none”.17

### 2.4 Independent variables: religious socialization of the respondent

Respondents were socialized in the faith if they were raised in a religious way by their parents, if their parents considered a religious upbringing of importance and if Bible reading and prayer were regular activities in their homes. Furthermore, the respondent’s juvenile church attendance as well as him or her being deliberately sent to a religious school are also included as two additional aspects of the religious upbringing the respondent enjoyed.18

### 2.5 Independent variables: overt religious family climate

The respondent’s oldest child is raised in an overt religious family climate if the respondent’s father and mother, i.e. the grandparents of the oldest child, still attend church, if the respondent’s broader family still attends church, if the respondent himself- or herself reads the Bible and if the oldest child was deliberately sent to a religious school.

### 2.6 Independent variables: religious orientation of the respondent

The religious orientation of the respondent concerns his or her conviction that the Christian faith is the only true religion, a so-called mono-religious orientation, as well as a so-called intrinsic religious orientation, which means that the respondent’s religious behavior is really motivated by intrinsic religious concerns.19

### 2.7 Control variables

In the analysis we control for the age of the oldest child and for the respondent’s gender, age, level of education and family income.

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17 The Catholics and mainline Protestants were combined into one category, because separately these groups are too small to make meaningful comparisons. For the same reason, the orthodox Protestants (N = 10) were excluded from the analyses.

18 In the Netherlands almost 60 percent of all schools are state-funded, religiously affiliated schools. Due to this majority position, religiously affiliated schools in the Netherlands harbor a lot of pupils with no religious background and parents usually do not have a religious motivation for sending their children to a religiously affiliated school. In case of the Netherlands, it thus makes sense to explicitly ask if the respondents were sent to a religiously affiliated school for religious reasons as an indicator of their religious upbringing.


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### Table 1: Cross tabulation church membership respondent by church attendance respondent’s oldest child (% column)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church attendance</th>
<th>Church membership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Core evangelicals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almost never</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(249)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a month</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>68.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(251)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>(325)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eta = .69, p < .001.

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### 3. Results

To begin with, we compare the rates of church attendance of the children of evangelicals with the rates of church attendance of mainliners and religious none. The results are displayed in Table 1, which immediately show that evangelicals are indeed more successful in transmitting their religious commitment to their offspring. Core evangelicals have relatively more children who attend church on a weekly basis, i.e. 68.2 percent compared to 33.3 percent for core mainliners and 2.5 percent for nominal mainliners, and the rate of church attendance of these evangelical children is also significantly higher than the church attendance rates of the children of core and nominal mainliners and of religious none (F (3, 562) = 165.809, p ≤ .001).

Thus the first part of our research question has to be answered in the affirmative: The children of the evangelicals that participated in our research do indeed attend church more often than the children of mainline Christians.
But which, then, are the factors that determine the church attendance of these evangelical children? First, we consider the so-called 'demographic' argument and compare the number of children of evangelical Christians with the number of children of mainline Christians and religious nones (cf. Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core evangelicals</th>
<th>Core mainliners</th>
<th>Nominal mainliners</th>
<th>Religious nones</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>2.18 (1.57)</td>
<td>2.31 (1.39)</td>
<td>1.90 (1.08)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Mean number of children for core evangelicals, mainline core members, mainline nominal members and religious nones (SD in parentheses)

This comparison immediately shows that this argument does not hold for the Netherlands and that hypothesis 1 has to be rejected. That is to say, more orthodox and conservative Protestants, like evangelicals, do not have more children than mainline Christians. In this respect, only the difference between evangelicals and religious nones is significant ($F(3, 775) = 7.924, p < 0.001$), but not the difference between evangelicals and mainline core and nominal Christians.

In order to test the three remaining hypotheses, we conducted a stepwise linear regression analysis and estimated five models (Table 3). Model 1 (M1) largely confirms the results of Table 2. That is to say, the church attendance of children is very much dependent on the religious affiliation as well as on the church attendance of the parents. That is to say, evangelicals and mainline Christians who attend church at least once a month, the core members, 'produce' more religious, i.e. church attending, children than mainline Christians who attend church less frequently. Hence, a successful intergenerational transmission of faith is both a matter of religious identity and parental church attendance. However, previous religious socialization experiences of the parents have no effect here (M2). Whether or not a parent enjoyed a religious upbringing at home, attended church as a youth or was sent to a religious school has no effect on the church attendance of his or her children. This means that we also have to reject hypothesis 2. Also most aspects of the religious family climate the child finds itself in (M3) have no effect. Having grandparents or other relatives who regularly read the Bible as well as by the mono-religious level of church attendance and their practice of Bible reading as a youth or was sent to a religious school has no effect. Thus the second part of our research question has to be answered as follows: The church attendance of the children of the evangelicals that participated in our research is determined by the specific religious, evangelical identity of their parents, by their parents' level of church attendance and their practice of Bible reading as well as by the mono-religious orientation of their parents.

### 4. Pedagogical reflection

Since our research is based on a, though fairly large, convenience sample of specific orthodox Christians, the above results, of course, cannot be considered representative for the total population of conservative and orthodox Christians in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, we do think that these research results give rise to a fundamental pedagogical question. In large part, our findings are in line with the results of previous socialization research, which shows that especially religiously committed parents 'produce' religiously committed children.20 That is to say, only parents who attend church on a weekly basis, i.e. core evangelical and core mainline Christians, and who regularly read the Bible...
bring forth religious children. But in addition to this more common insight, our findings at the same time show that also more strict parents, who are convinced that their religion represents the unique truth, bring forth more religiously committed children. Especially this latter result confronts us with a fundamental pedagogical dilemma regarding religious education in school.

The religious socialization of children not only takes place in the family or the religious community, but in school as well. That is not to say, that schools are always that effective or influential in this respect. Table 3 shows, for instance, that being deliberately sent to a religious school has no effect on the church attendance of evangelical children nor on the church attendance of the children of mainline Christians. Still, in many European countries, religious education in school is originally organized to support the religious upbringing of children in a specific religious tradition. This is especially the case in countries where religious education in school is still officially confessionally organized along denominational lines; like in the Netherlands, Belgium and for the most part in Germany as well. Although this does not necessarily mean that the actual practice of religious education in these countries is also confessionally organized. Ongoing secularization has resulted in numerous classrooms populated by pupils without a religious affiliation and, consequentely, to a „modernization” of religious education towards approaches such as interreligious learning, worldview education or citizenship education; see Franken and Vermeer for recent developments in Belgium and the Netherlands and Knauth for similar developments in Germany.\(^{21}\)

But despite these „modernizing” developments, in several European countries religious education officially remains a confessional subject under the supervision of religious authorities. But what, then, should the policy of these religious authorities be in light of the above findings? In our opinion, the above findings confront religious authorities with a genuine dilemma. According to the Dutch pedagogue Meijer, in a democratic society education should transmit and endorse basic values like equality, mutual understanding and tolerance.\(^{22}\) In view of religious education, this means that pupils should become aware of the historicity, relativity and contextual nature of their own religious tradition in order to develop a reflexive attitude towards this tradition. An approach Meijer refers to as the „reflexive transmission of culture” and which she contrasts with the transmission of culture and religion as self-evident.\(^{23}\) The latter Meijer understands as the transmission of a religious tradition as absolute, immutable and true. However, the above findings suggest that such a reflexive transmission of religion and culture may not be a very favorable approach in view of the religious socialization of pupils. For, if the intergenerational religious transmission is indeed advanced by a mono-religious orientation of parents, as our findings point out, emphasizing the reflexive transmission of religion and culture may not be a very favorable approach in view of the religious socialization of pupils. For, if the intergenerational religious transmission is indeed advanced by a mono-religious orientation of parents, as our findings point out, emphasizing the reflexive transmission of religion and culture may not be a very favorable approach in view of the religious socialization of pupils. And this not only goes for the religious socialization of children of evangelical Christians but of mainline Christians as well. For, as we have seen, having parents with a mono-religious orientation even facilitates the intergenerational religious transmission among core mainline Christians! Hence, the approach towards religious education that seems desirable from a pedagogical perspective, may in the end prove to be counterproductive when it comes to the transmission and preservation of the Christian tradition.

Our research into the determinants of conservative church growth thus in the end also involves important educational questions concerning the challenges confessional religious education faces in the context of secular Europe. Or to be more precise, our research especially challenges the confessional nature of religious education. That is to say, if religious education in school is still seen or meant to (also) facilitate the religious socialization of youths, it is probably best to adopt a more straightforward mono-religious, „education into religion” approach. But the latter is no longer common practice. In the Netherlands, for example, especially in schools affiliated with the more mainline churches, religious education nowadays is for the most part being taught according to the principles of liberal education and aims to endorse religious literacy, critical thinking and autonomy. But no matter how justified this approach is from a pedagogical point of view, it will not serve the confessional purposes certain religious authorities may still attach to religious education in school.\(^{24}\) Thus in a context of an ongoing decline of mainline churches and the persistence of more orthodox and conservative churches, especially the leadership of the larger mainline churches face a pressing dilemma concerning religious education in school. Should it be more confessional in view of the religious socialization of youths or should it be more pedagogically oriented and aiming at the general formation of pupils? This is a genuine dilemma. For, as our findings suggest, you cannot have both at the same time.


\(^{23}\) Vgl. ebd., 225–228.