Prophets of the Round Table: The Protestant Church in the Netherlands and the Public Domain*

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Abstract
In the current Dutch public debate on the public role of religion, three political options are defended: secularism, pacified pluralism and social cohesionism. They correspond to three types of ecclesiology: the church as witness, the church as a platform of moral deliberation and the church as a community of moral formation. In the document ‘The Church and the Democratic Constitutional State’ (2009) the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN) set out its vision on its own public role. The church is presented as ‘prophet at the round table’; a combination of the first two types of ecclesiology. It results in a ‘polder-ecclesiology’, fully understandable within the Dutch context of a radically secularized, democratic constitutional state, but probably inadequate as a response to its reigning political, ethnic and social instability.

Keywords
secularization, ecclesiology, multiculturalism, social cohesion

This article deals with the public role of churches, but I will narrow down its focus: first, by dealing with the public role of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands in the Dutch public domain; secondly, by taking as a point of reference the recent vision document of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN in Dutch, hereafter referred to as PCN); the mainstream Dutch protestant church in which Lutherans and the two main Reformed churches were united in 2004. The document is called ‘The Church and the Democratic

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Constitutional State’ (hereafter referred to as CS), and was adopted by the Synod in November 2009. The subtitle of CS is ‘Assistance for the Discussion in Congregation and Church’; ‘assistance’ is what the Netherlands strongly needs now. Dutch society seems to have totally lost its sense of orientation. It is seized by bewilderment or, rather, by ‘be-Wilders-ment’: Geert Wilders, the extreme right-wing politician who compares the Qur’an to Hitler’s Mein Kampf. In 2010 sitting at the negotiation table for the formation of a new government, after his Party for Freedom (PVV) became the third party in the Netherlands following the 2010 elections, Wilders pleads for a halt to the immigration of Muslims and a tax on hijab, which he calls ‘head rags’.

We have to wonder what has happened to the Netherlands; a country well-known for its tolerance, characterized by political stability and pragmatism. Further, we have to ask how the churches understand their role and the place of the Christian faith in the debate on the politics of religion. By concentrating on the position of the PCN as an institution in Dutch society, my conclusion will be rather ambivalent. In my opinion, the PCN is too confused about its ecclesiology and too divided on the issue of its public theology to play a constructive role in the political turmoil of the moment. However, I hope that my analysis of the church’s vision on its public responsibility, and the reconstruction of the main positions taken in the political debate, will be of some help in clarifying other contexts beyond the Dutch one.

First, I will offer a short sketch of the developments in the public domain and the role of religion therein, and the three political options that are presented in Dutch public debate: secularism, pacified pluralism and what I call social cohesionism. In my opinion, these three political positions correspond to three types of ecclesiology: the church as witness, the church as a platform of moral deliberation and the church as a moral community. Secondly, I will take a closer look at the document (CS) in which the PCN sets out its vision of its public role. Though the three different ecclesiological models that I refer to are historically rooted in the traditions of the PCN, the PCN presents a church that behaves like a ‘prophet at the round table’; that is, it contains an uneasy mixture of two models. The church seeks to be an uncompromised witness of the reign of Christ and, at the same time, a trustworthy dialogue

1) Available at <http://www.protestantchurch.nl/site/uploadedDocs/20100303Thechurchandeconomicconstitutionalstaterevised.pdf>.
2) We already coined the expression a decade ago, evaluating an empirical research among PCN ministers and church members; see Frits de Lange, R. Ruard Ganzevoort, Jan B. G. Jonkers, Lieke A. Werkman, Profeten van de ronde tafel: Een onderzoek naar de kerk als morele gemeenschap (Kampen: Kok, 2002).
partner in the public domain. In effect, this results in what I call a ‘polder-ecclesiology’; fully understandable from within the specific Dutch context of a democratic constitutional state, but probably inadequate as an adequate response to the Dutch ‘be-Wilders-ment’.

In my concluding remarks I suggest that the PCN underestimates the political relevance and depth of the need of recognition and the longing for identity and community, present in globalized society. An acknowledgment and critical retrieval of the church’s strong tradition in identity formation and community-building—a constant element in the history of Dutch Protestant ecclesiology since the seventeenth century—might contribute to the development of an alternative to xenophobic nationalism.

Religion in the Public Domain

Though secularization theory is no longer an appropriate paradigm to understand the global transformation processes of religion, it still seems to make good sense in the Dutch case. In a few post-war decades, organized Christianity in the Netherlands has undergone a radical decline. Within half a century, Protestantism has turned from a mass characteristic into the private option of a marginal minority.3 Once one of the most religious countries in Europe; the Netherlands became one of the most secularized. This ongoing experience of rapid decline marks the churches self-understanding. Protestants experience themselves as marginal, not only in number but also in influence. Since 1983, the separation of church and state has been interpreted strictly; Protestant churches are not, as in Germany, the UK or Scandinavia, consulted by government as respected dialogue partners because of their moral authority.

3) See Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007), who refutes the ‘secularization theory’ as a story of the linear decline of religion in modernity, but acknowledges secularization as a process in which religion becomes one option among others. See also Jos Becker, Joep de Hart, Godsdienstige veranderingen in Nederland. Verschuivingen in de binding met de kerken en de christelijke traditie, Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau, werkdocument 128 (Den Haag: SCP, 2006). In 1980 the RC Church and Protestant churches together counted about ten million members. Though the Dutch population has increased since then by more than two million, church membership has decreased to less than six million. In 1970 the three Protestant churches that merged in the PCN (the Dutch Reformed Church, the Reformed churches in the Netherlands and the Evangelical Lutheran Church) counted together 3.9 million members, in 2007 this had reduced to 1.8 million, about eleven per cent of the population; a decrease in membership of fifty per cent within thirty years. Yearly, the PCN lose an average ‘province town’ of 65,000 inhabitants.
Since the 1960s, in addition to the withdrawal of Christianity into the private sphere, the immigration of about one million Muslims mostly from Morocco and Turkey, into a country with a total population of sixteen million, turned Islam into a visible reality in the public domain.

While the suicide flights of 9/11 may have marked a global shift in religious geopolitics, in the Netherlands it was the assassination of cineaste and journalist Theo van Gogh, on the streets of Amsterdam on 2 November 2004, by Muslim extremist Mohammed Boyeri, that made the extent to which the secularization paradigm fails to understand global religious transformation shockingly clear. The knife that stabbed van Gogh also symbolized the deficit of the model of pacified pluralism; the Dutch way of dealing publicly and politically with religious diversity in the twentieth century.

From 1910 onwards Dutch society has been organized on the basis of group identities, differing religiously or in worldview. Protestants, Roman-Catholics, liberals and socialists lived their communal life separately in their own vertically structured ‘pillars’, not just religiously, but also economically, culturally and politically. The political elite guaranteed stability and prosperity by forging coalitions and making compromises. Pragmatic tolerance, neutrality understood as even-handedness, and the depoliticization of conflicts, ruled the political game.⁴ Even though after the Second World War Dutch society rapidly individualized and secularized, the pacification strategy of the pillarization model still seemed a workable instrument for integration politics until the 1980s. For two decades ‘integration by preserving the religious and cultural identity of minorities’,⁵ a more or less moderate version of multiculturalism, was the leading government policy. Although this strategy shifted in the early 1990s, to a more republican inspired citizenship approach,⁶ the murder of van Gogh sealed the final fate of radical multiculturalism.

Since the new millennium, politics and public debate have been the theatre of conflict and confusion, asking whether we should adopt French republicanism, go on believing in peaceful pluralism or perhaps foster the Dutch national identity. The confusion resulted in the election victory on 9 June 2010 (twenty-


⁵ The debate started a few months earlier, around the paper by Paul Scheffers, ‘Het Multiculturele Drama’, NRC Handelsblad, 29 January 2000.

four seats in parliament) of the extremist MP Geert Wilders, defending the unlimited freedom of expression and pleading for a prohibition of the Qur’an. Hence, we are forced to consider what ought to be the place of religion in the public domain and, further, how the Dutch churches should seek to have a stake in this debate.

The Dutch Political Debate: Three Possible Church Models

Within the debate about religion in the public domain three options can be distinguished; they are well known within current political philosophy and not typically Dutch, but they reign in the Dutch public debate. Those options, I maintain, correspond to three different types of ecclesiology, or, rather, three styles of doing public theology. The three resulting church models all find support in the traditions on which the PCN draws, but, as I will demonstrate, only one or two of them are broadly acknowledged and supported in the CS vision document.

Secularism

The first model for determining the place of religion in the public sphere is that of secularism. The laïcité of French republicanism, stressing the neutrality of the state, can serve as the embodiment of secularism, but so can a liberalism inspired by John Rawls, which defends the rationality of the political domain and the autonomy of individual life plans. In this model, religion is a private matter, and the government incorporates an exclusive neutrality, such that any religious sign or symbol is prohibited in the public space. French laïcité, though historically hardly rooted in the Dutch political tradition (since Dutch schools and organizations receive government funding on the basis of evenhandedness) is growing in popularity under left- and right-wing liberals.

Now that Dutch churches have become a minority and the majority has become secular, the radical interpretation of the church-state separation found in secularism—part of the Dutch constitution since 1798, revised in 1848—may invite the church to position itself definitively in the post-Constantine era, letting go of any theocratic ambition. The lines between ‘world’ and ‘church’ can be drawn clearly. The church can understand itself as a witnessing church, in the tradition of Barmen 1934. The frontiers between ‘church’ and ‘world’, the sacred and the seculum are sharpened again, as in pre-Constantine times. The church can take from the well-known typology of H. Richard
Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* either a ‘Christ against culture’ position, and develop a Stanley Hauerwasian ecclesiology in line with the radical Reformation, or it can opt for a ‘Christ and culture in paradox’ model, in the tradition of the Reformed ‘two kingdoms’ theory found in the ecclesiology of Barth and Bonhoeffer.

As a mainstream church with strong ties to the political and societal establishment, the idea of the church as an eschatological contrast community, embodying an alternative society within a pagan, post-Christian world, has found only reluctant acceptance within the PCN, until now. The ‘church as witness’ of the reign of Christ, however, as expressed in the Barmen Confession of 1934, has been firmly rooted in the history of Dutch Protestantism since the Second World War. In the new church order of the PCN there is evidence of decisive elements of this witnessing tradition. For example, article 1 item 5 of CS explicitly refers to Barmen’s importance for today’s confession. Further, item 6 states that the church professes Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour of the world, and perceives this profession—which finds expression in the church’s celebration, speaking and acting—as a calling to renewal of life in culture, society and state. In addition, it states: ‘The church bears witness before people, powers and authorities of God’s promises and commandments and looks for dialogue with other churches for that’. This sketch is elaborated in ordinances 1–3 on the ‘speaking of the church’; the CS document asserts that there is a vast instrument ready for fulfilling this witnessing role, stating: ‘The church promotes the forming of opinion in the congregations on social questions, in the private environment and worldwide. She can give her opinion on social questions, and she can—preferably with other churches, give testimony regarding social questions’.8

The following statement of the general secretary of the PCN, Arjan Plaisier, after the extreme right-wing election victory, on 9 June 2010, might be interpreted as an expression of laconic Dutch pragmatism, but can perhaps better be understood as a firm defence of this model of the church as witness of the reign of Christ: ‘We live in a democratic constitutional state which moves either in this or that direction. The church does not collapse by a government, nor is build by it. So we move on freely and cheerfully doing our core business:

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8) CS, p. 18 para. 42. It is common parlance in the Netherlands to refer to the church as ‘she’, so this has not been altered in quotations, despite its sexist connotations.
being witness of Christ’.

This toning down of the discussion is reminiscent of an opinion attributed to the Dutch resistance fighter H. M. van Randwijk, just after the Second World War; he supposedly argued that although democracy is far more preferable than fascism, we might suppose that democracy would be as far from the kingdom of God as fascism.

Social Cohesionism

A second option in the public debate is what I call ‘social cohesionism’: this model strives for the ideal of the national society as a moral community. In the political debate in the last decade, the importance of the definition and construction of a national identity has been stressed, following the breakdown of radical multiculturalism as an instrument of integration policy. Although it is hard to define of what this identity consists, it is clear that nation-building should guarantee social stability and cohesion through a shared sense of belonging. Hence, Christianity, in particular Protestantism, may play an important role in defining and constructing a common Dutch identity, since it can be seen as part of Dutch civil religion. Thus, the church is a source and guardian of the moral virtues that are necessary for good citizenship.

Despite different vocabularies and political outlooks, the ideals of nation-building, moral formation, community and good citizenship can count on substantial support in current public debate, from both the right- and left-side of the political spectrum. Conservatives, liberals and extreme anti-Islamists plead for these ideals, but so do Christian-democrats and socialists; most of the latter considering Christian religion in churches to be a reservoir of shared values and norms. Religion helps to ‘keep things together’, as Job Cohen, the former mayor of Amsterdam and now political leader of the Social-Democratic Part (PvdA), puts it.

One of the early proponents of this sort of social cohesionism was Jan-Peter Balkenende, Dutch Prime Minister from 2002 until 2010 and leader of the Christian Democratic Party. Inspired by the work of communitarian Amitai Etzioni, Balkenende stressed the importance of shared values and norms. In fact, decency and shared responsibility have been presented as essentially Dutch or even as typically Christian or Protestant.

9) ‘We leven in een democratische rechtstaat die dan weer deze, dan weer die kant uit beweegt. De kerk valt niet om door een regering en wordt er evenmin mee gebouwd. We gaan dus vrij en vrolijk door met onze core business, getuige zijn van Christus’ (Dagblad Trouw, 11 June 2010).
Despite today’s diminished church membership, the Dutch Christian tradition is valued for political reasons; indeed, the liberal MP and former Euro-commissioner Frits Bolkestein has, since the 1990s, regarded Christianity as a defence against the moral relativism of radical multiculturalism. As a non-believer, he considers the Christian heritage as a distinctive characteristic of the Netherlands and Europe. In 2009, referring to the Preamble of the Lisbon Treaty in the European Union, which mentions the inspiring role of ‘cultural, religious and humanistic traditions of Europe’, he states: ‘We seem to have forgotten that Europe is strongly marked by Christianity and therefore fundamentally differs from civilizations that have their origin in Islam’.10

Bolkestein’s view has been adopted and turned in a nationalistic direction by Geert Wilders, leader of the anti-Islamic Party for Freedom. In an interview on 24 March 2010 recorded for church trustees, Wilders states: ‘Christianity, together with Judaism and humanism, is part of Dutch culture. We, and also the church, should be proud of that’. Then, he explains that he would like to see the church asserting its own identity by expressing more firm ‘opposition against this intruder, Islam’, because he believes, ‘there is nothing wrong with Muslims, but with Islam, yes there is’.

In their effort to define a Dutch majority culture, Bolkestein and Wilders follow a dominant trend in public debate. Wilders is extreme in his anti-Islamism, but he is not alone in pleading for a more outspoken national identity. One of the reasons for his electoral success might be that he explicitly appeals to a lost sense of belonging among many of his voters, promising a simple solution to the feelings of insecurity in a globalized world.

In my opinion, the church should be aware of the longing for community (including amongst the many Wilders voters who are church members) and should respond to that in a Christian way, offering and building an alternative to extreme nationalism and xenophobia. The church needs to ask itself whether it really wants to understand what’s going on in the hearts and minds of Wilders voters, whether it is really empathically present in their midst, sharing their anxiety. I doubt that the Dutch church is really seeking this understanding and empathy. Yet, as Robert N. Bellah argues the church should not only speak prophetically, but also act in a priestly manner.11

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document does not take up this responsibility adequately, when it only implicitly associates the Wilders movement with the ‘danger of populism’, that ‘nourishes the distrust of the ‘established order’ and systematically undermines the trust in political institutions’.12

It is disappointing that the CS vision document does not value more highly the church’s own sources for identity formation and moral community-building. There is a long and vital tradition within the PCN, going back to the seventeenth century, that depicts the role of the church as that of being a genuine ‘public church’, contributing to the development of citizenship and nation-building. The church is a religious source of moral virtues and practices, of justice, solidarity, freedom and non-exclusive love for neighbours. As a community of moral formation, the church contributes to a sense of a shared ‘we’ as the backbone of a strong political community.

This line of thinking is deeply rooted in Dutch Protestantism. For example, in seventeenth and eighteenth century Netherlands, full citizenship and membership of the public church coincided. As the ‘public church’, the Reformed Church provided the Republic with a shared identity. After the legal separation of church and state in 1796, the Reformed Church, in 1816 renamed the Dutch Reformed Church, continued to be an important unifying and nation-building symbol. Religion was considered to be a civilizing power and an instrument of moral education. The Netherlands was presented as a moral community, where a common bond of religious piety united all citizens.13

In the nineteenth century Abraham Kuyper, leader of the neo-Calvinists dissenters, was led by a vision of the re-Christianization of Dutch society; not through the church as an institutional structure, but through Christian organizations (‘the church as organism’) within the civil society that would permeate the whole society with a distinctive Christian lifestyle. Christ was seen, in Niebuhrian terms, as the ‘transformer of culture’; that is, Christianity was seen as a civilizing power.

After the Second World War, despite secularization, the idea of a fatherland church, a Christ-confessing national church, was revitalized within the Dutch Reformed Church; it entered prominently in the 1951 church order.14

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The CS, however, neglects the actual relevance of this tradition, apparently underestimating the possibilities of its reinvention. It considers this tradition as history, although it is still supported by a tiny part of the PCN’s orthodoxy. The CS document states that ‘Church and government have mutual interests when it is about preservation of cultural and religious heritage’, but this remark only occurs within a paragraph about the pragmatic collaboration of church and government, as if referring to old church buildings rather than living communities.

Inevitably the reality of the Netherlands as a principally Protestant-Christian nation is a historical fact; yet, the CS insufficiently acknowledges the extent to which it is still a fact and its potential for being reinvented in a non-conservative, anti-xenophobic way.

The model of the church as a community of moral formation could be worked out in several directions, and on different levels. Nevertheless, they should all confess the openness of personal and social identities, and be critical to the risk of the church closing down. According to the Protestant theologian Mechteld Jansen, at the heart of the church is not the quest for truth but the longing for *communitas*. *Communitas* refers to the space where ‘we’ includes all people. It is in a genuine religious community, Jansen argues, that people learn and are stimulated to live together and to be open towards others, without excluding anyone. Such communities cultivate ‘networks of connectedness’ in society, which, when introduced into public square dialogues, can contribute to the building of a strong, non-exclusive ‘we’.

Jansen’s position is strongly reminiscent of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Sanctorum Communio*, which was written in a chaotic German Weimar Republic where the early German democracy was threatened; a context in some respect similar to the present Dutch one. Bonhoeffer pleads for the church to be a

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15) ‘From the second part of the nineteenth century in Netherlands Reformed circles, in continuation of G. Groen van Prinsterer and Ph. Hoedemaker, the idea continues of the Netherlands as a principally Protestant-Christian nation. This colours the vision of the task of the church as well as of the government as God’s servant. It also involves church and government closely with each other. Later the term ‘theocracy’ becomes vogue for this approach. This way many cling to the idea of a special relationship between the Netherlands as a ‘Christian nation’ and the Netherlands Reformed Church. In the twentieth century theologians like T. L. Haitjema and A. A. van Ruler further extend this range of ideas. It is politically shaped in the political programmes of the Christelijk Historische Unie [CHU Christian Historical Union] and the Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij [SGP Political Reformed Party]’ (CS, para. 29).


17) Ibid., p. 66.
**Gemeinschaft sui generis**: a community of grace, where identity is build not on excluding but on receiving the other. Jansen, like Bonhoeffer, depicts the church as a community of people of flesh and blood, with individuals in need of recognition but ready to accept each other because they experience themselves to be accepted in Christ. People therein do not have to build a fortified identity in order to be acknowledged, for true recognition is a gift. Jansen states: 'Identity is no property. I even think that personal identity should be rather uncertain and vulnerable'.

Koinonia, experienced in the church, does not oppose seeking of communitas outside the church; on the contrary: 'A strong identification with a church group where people are completely initiated and feel at home, does not block communitas with a wider circle, but rather stimulates it'. Jansen refers to Robert Putnam, whose research in forty-one US city neighbourhoods leads him, against his expectations, to the conclusion that a high level of mutual trust in we-groups eventually runs together with a high level of trust in they-groups. 'The best way to deal with cultural diversity', Jansen writes, 'is not by making a we-group out of a them-group, but by making the 'we' into a wider category'. Likewise, Jesus Christ widened his identity by identifying himself with people of 'them-groups'.

In the practical enactment of its distinctive Christian social anthropology, the church is primarily operating within its concrete, local context. Therefore, the recognition in the CS document of the 'the 'normal’ role of the congregation, as a learning community, in the spiritual education and the equipment of its members’ as 'the first responsibility of the church' should be underlined and elaborated in a more political sense. The era in which the church provided the entire Dutch society with a national-religious identity is gone; its current role in the making of identities is far more modest, but its contribution to the society’s social capital might be extremely valuable. The church is a community where the practice of not living in terms of us versus them is known and celebrated, and where the stranger in our midst is admitted.

**Pacifying Pluralism**

The CS document, regrettably, does not retrieve its own tradition along these lines, but opts primarily for a third church model; the church as a body of

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18) Ibid., p. 83.
19) Ibid., p. 73.
20) Ibid., p. 130.
21) Ibid., p. 133.
22) CS, para. 96.
deliberation and dialogue. Apparently, there is still some sense of the third option in the Dutch public debate on the politics of religion: a pacifying pluralism, which implies a moderated version of multiculturalism. Though the failure of the strong, relativistic version of multiculturalism has to be definitively admitted since the murder of van Gogh, a weak version, stripped from its ideological overtones—anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, incommensurability of ethnic and religious identities—still prevails. The CS document implicitly opts for the continuation of the pacification strategy that dominated Dutch politics for a century; seeking consensus on a pragmatic level, in order to live peacefully with differences, by respecting the autonomy of individuals and communities to choose their own way of life. Diversity can only be celebrated by stressing dialogue, since the more a strong majority ‘we’ is cried out, the more the voice of minorities is suppressed.

One might call this ‘old politics’, heavily criticized by the extreme right-wing who defend their ‘new politics’ of power play and exclusion, but it is a practice that draws on the vital tradition of so-called Dutch ‘polder’-politics. Group identities may radically differ, yet in order to survive on the same small spot close to the sea, a pragmatic consensus is needed. The pillarization model was built on this idea, and it might still work well in a globalized society with a plurality of ethnic and religious minorities. However, this only represents a watered-down version of multiculturalism suggesting that we should stand more firmly to the principles of a democratic constitution as we did before, defending pluralism and dialogue uncompromisingly. In this model, the recognition of group identity is not unlimited.

As I see it, it is not Habermasian theory, but an ideal society based on genuine Dutch history that makes the PCN opt for the practice of dialogue and deliberation. This ideal depicts the Netherlands as a country of minorities, seeking consensus, in which no self-declared majority that forces its will upon others should be accepted. In my opinion, the PCN document implicitly assumes this society model as prevailing in Dutch democracy. Therefore, the PCN might not be capable of integrating and supporting other ecclesiological models, corresponding to different societal outlooks. Though it pays explicit tribute to Barmen and its prophetic witness, the Dutch prophets are sitting at

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23) I owe this term to Dronkers, ‘The Netherlands’, in which he characterizes the consociational strategies that dominated the Dutch society of the 1950s. He convincingly argues that Dutch immigration policy in the 1980s, though in line with the pillarization tradition, never represented a full-blown multiculturalism. It always reckoned, for example, with a return of immigrants to their country of origin.
the round table, embroiled in a consensus seeking dialogue with other players in the public domain.

The CS document describes the church as a platform of deliberation within civil society. By endorsing the eschatological two kingdoms theory that characterizes the witnessing church, democracy is supported with reserve. According to the CS document:

The church asks herself how far she gradually learned to recognize something of God’s merciful intentions in the democratic constitutional state, as expressed in the gospel of God’s kingdom. The word ‘recognize’ wants to honor the value of the democratic constitutional state in full, but at the same time do justice to the fact that there always remains a great distance between the way of thinking of Christian tradition and the world of today.\(^{24}\)

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<td>a) ‘Christ and culture in paradox’ (Barth, Bonhoeffer)</td>
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<td>b) ‘Christ against culture’ (Hauerwas)</td>
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<td>Model 2</td>
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<td>Model 3</td>
<td>Community of grace</td>
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Figure 1

However, all the essential elements of the democratic constitutional state—human rights, including freedom of religion, the separation of church and state (understood not as secularism, but in an inclusive, Dutch manner as impartial neutrality) and democracy (its underlying condition defined as the ‘sovereign power of the people’)—are wholeheartedly acknowledged and accepted, though not unconditionally. The document states: ‘The church realizes that valid law is not perfect. Because it is determined by the actual balance of power, it can be necessary for the church to have serious criticism of valid

\(^{24}\) CS, para. 74.
law—in the name of righteousness as moral standard’.25 Here again the reference to the Theological Declaration of Barmen is apparent, but, I contend, the Dutch polder mentality wins, and it predetermines the spirit of the document. The church as witness (model 1) stays in the background, and it is clear that the church as a source of civil religion (model 3) only plays a minor role.

There are a number of passages from the CS document that lead me to read it as described above. First, the ambivalence in its church vision fully becomes manifest in this statement:

The Protestant Church in the Netherlands explicitly distances herself from any suggestion that precisely she in her organizational design in the light of Dutch history could claim any privilege or pretence with regard to the government. That does not alter the fact that she realizes to have the privilege to be in a tradition which played no minor role in the realization of the democratic constitutional state in the Netherlands and will continue to be of importance for its future.26

Yet neither the church’s national history (‘privilege’?), nor its witnessing character (‘pretence’?) can prevent the document from depicting the church as one dialogue partner in civil society among others.

Secondly, a prophetic position of the church over and against society is questioned repeatedly by the document. It states:

What is called ‘just’ should sometimes be exposed as unjust. The church does that where necessary, as part of civil society. It is not necessary, and too soon over pretentious, to call this ‘prophetical speaking’—what really is prophetic is not in advance, but afterwards (and sometimes much later) established.27

It continues:

The church is deliberately situated as an organization among others within, not outside or above civil society. There is no reason for the church to claim another position in relation to the government than precisely this, being part of civil society, [though the] church has her own place and own identity within civil society. Conscious citizenship is a divine calling.28

25) Ibid.
26) Ibid., para. 107 (my italics).
27) Ibid., para. 90.
28) Ibid., paras 93–4 (my italics).
Furthermore, it claims:

There is no theological motive to claim a private place for the church with regard to the government, outside of civil society. In public debate the suspicion is regularly ventilated that the church is really after that and that she wants to be a factor of influence—however this seems to be the case gradually less often. Images of the past, not always according to the facts and sometimes burdened with emotions, play a part here. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands can only show by the way she actually behaves and by the quality of her arguments that this fear is without cause.29

It goes on to state: “The church has to accept that she is perceived by many as an association of the faithful, even if this does not do justice to her self-perception. Religiously inspired arguments have no surplus value in themselves, but neither less value than non-religious arguments”.30 Hence, it claims:

The first responsibility of the church is to support the congregation in its fulfilling of its calling. The church stimulates and contributes to the public debate. Only in the last resort will there be place for a special, ‘prophetic’ witness and testimony of God’s promises and commandments. As prophecy is an internal ecclesial affair, analogously ‘there can only be a status confessionis within the church’.31

In addition, it asserts:

Civil society does not only promote social cohesion, but it is an important platform for public forming of opinion as well. The church contributes here as well. Primarily because she herself is a platform for moral consideration. The faithful reflect on their social responsibility and make their private considerations on political participation and public action. The church supports her members in looking for connections between their own responsibility as Christian and as citizen.32

Furthermore, it insists that ‘Congregation-members, theologians, ministers and religious representatives and professionals therefore contribute, each from their own specific position, to public opinion forming’, because:

29) Ibid., para. 95 (my italics).
30) Ibid., para. 130.
31) Ibid., para. 102.
32) Ibid.
According to her ability the church as an institution wants to participate to the moral debate in civil society. With that she recognizes plural society and seeks discussion with all those who care about society. She will try to deepen the discussion and where necessary make un-heard voices sound. It is about opening issues for discussion and to facilitate the discussion. With this she sooner aims for underlying moral issues than for political realizations.33

In the Dutch original it also adds that ‘the church does not have aspirations to be involved all too directly in politics’.

In its choice for a polder-ecclesiology, I suppose the nineteenth century heritage of Abraham Kuyper still to be palpably present. After his efforts to turn the Netherlands into a Protestant nation had failed, the neo-Calvinist leader opted for a society based on pluralism. Although Kuyper strongly supported the conservative definition of the Netherlands as a Christian, more precisely, a Calvinist nation, he accepted the liberties and the state neutrality that were incorporated in the constitution of 1848. In his view, the government proportionally supports the contribution to the development and maintenance of a strong civil society by the variety of religions and ideologies. The church is not the basis for the social order, as it had been in the era of the public church, but operates as one actor in civil society, among others. By the 1950s, Kuyper’s strategy had resulted into the pillarized pacification strategy that has been famously described by Arend Lijphart.34 This so-called ‘polder model’ is still a leading ideal in Dutch politics, notably in the arrangement of the labour market.35

33) Ibid., paras 125–6 (my italics).
35) The term ‘polder model’ is used to describe the Dutch consensus policy in economics, specifically in the 1980s and 1990s. A popular explanation of the term refers to the unique situation that a large part of the country consists of polders below sea-level. Ever since the Middle Ages, competing or even warring cities in the same polder were forced to set aside their differences to maintain the polders, lest they both be flooded. For its doubtful historical evidence, see Henk te Velde, Van regentenmentaliteit tot populisme. Politiese tradities in Nederland (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2010), pp. 205–26.
Conclusion

The CS vision document defends a typical Dutch polder ecclesiology. By stressing pluralism, its preparedness to engage in dialogue and deliberation presents a modest, contextually well-appropriated model for the church’s public presence in the Netherlands. However, it has its limitations. Notably, it has difficulties integrating types of prophetic public theology, either going along with an ecclesiology in line with Barmen 1934, or supporting the vision of the church as a contrast society, corresponding to Hauerwas’ radical Reformation perspective.

There is also another style of public theology insufficiently acknowledged in its potential vitality. The vision of the church as a community of identity formation and social cohesion, either in a conservative national or in a more democratic communal version, seems to be given too little weight. A politics that responds to the longing for recognition, identity and belonging cannot be reduced as easily as the CS document seems to assume to an expression of ‘populism’. The human need for recognition has to be taken up theologically and practically also by a priestly church, in order to heal the Netherlands from its be-Wilders-ment.