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) laid down 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 paper 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, further: 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 constitutional state, and is adopted by the synod in November 2009 (further: CS). Subtitle is: ‘assistance for the discussion in congregation and church’. Well, ‘assistance’ is what the Netherlands strongly need now. Dutch society seems to have totally lost its sense of orientation. It is seized by bewilderment, one might say, or rather: by ‘be-Wilders-ment’: Geert Wilders, the extreme right wing politician who compares the Koran to Hitler’s Mein Kampf, Geert Wilders who pleads for an immigration stop for Muslims and a tax for what he calls ‘head rags’ (headscarves), in 2010 sitting at the negotiation table for the formation of a new government, after his Party for the Freedom (PVV) turned into the third party in the country at the 2010 elections.

What has happened to the Netherlands, the country of tolerance, characterized by its political stability and pragmatism? And how do the churches understand their role and the place of Christian faith in the debate on the politics of religion?

Concentrating myself on the position of the Protestant Church as an institution in Dutch society, my conclusion will be rather ambivalent: I think that the Protestant Church in the Netherlands is too confused about its own ecclesiology and too divided about its public theology, to play a constructive role in the political turmoil of the moment.

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1 Paper presented at the 2nd Triennial Consultation of the Global Network for Public Theology, Canberra-Sydney, September 1-5, 2010

2 Online: http://www.protestantchurch.nl/site/uploadedDocs/20100303Thechurchandthedemocraticconstitutionalstate.pdf
However, I hope that my analysis of the Church’ vision on its public responsibility, and the reconstruction of the main positions taken in the political debate, will be of some help clarifying other contexts than only the Dutch one.

Subsequently, I will

1. 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 – as I call it - social cohesionism. As I see it, they might 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.

2. Then I shall take a closer look at the document, *The church and the democratic constitutional state*, and (further: CS), in which the PCN laid down its vision on its own public role. Though the three different ecclesiological models that I refer to are historically well rooted within the traditions of the PCN, the PCN presents a church that behaves like a ‘prophet at the round table’. An uneasy mixture of two models. As an uncompromised witness of the Reign of Christ, at the same time the church wants to be a trustworthy dialogue partner in the public domain. It results in a ‘polder-ecclesiology’, as I would call it – fully understandable from within the specific Dutch context of a democratic constitutional state. But probably inadequate as an response to the Dutch ‘be-Wilders-ment’.

3. 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 its own strong tradition in identity formation and community building, a constant element in the history of Dutch protestant ecclesiology since the 17th century, might contribute to the development of an alternative to xenophobic nationalism.

I. 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. Once one of the most religious countries in Europe it became one of the most secularized.


4 Cf. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge (Mass.) - London 2007, who refutes ‘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. Cf. also Jos Becker, Joep de Hart, *Godsdienstige veranderingen in Nederland. Verschuingen in de binding met de kerken en de christelijke traditie*, Sozial Cultured Planbureau, werkdocument 128. SCP: Den Haag 2006. In 1980 the RC-Church and protestant churches together counted about 10 million members. Though the Dutch population increased since with more than 2 million, Church membership decreased to less than 6 million. In 1970 the three Protestant Churches that merged in the PCN (de Dutch Reformed Church, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and the Evangelical Lutheran Church) counted together 3,9 million members, in 2007 reduced to 1,8 million, about 11 percent of the
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 is strictly interpreted; Protestant churches are not, as in Germany, the UK or Scandinavia, consulted by government as respected dialogue partners because of their moral authority.

Since the 1960s, simultaneously with the withdrawal of Christianity into the private sphere, the immigration of about one million Muslims (on a total population of 16 million), mostly from Morocco and Turkey, turned Islam into a visible reality in the public domain.

‘9/11’ may have been marked globally the 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 shockingly clear how the secularization paradigm fails to understand global religious transformation. The knife that stabbed Van Gogh also symbolized the deficit of the model of pacified pluralism, the Dutch way of dealing publicly and politically in the 20th century with religious diversity.

From 1910 onwards Dutch society has been organized on the basis of group identities, differing religiously or in world view. 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 evenhandedness, and the depoliticisation of conflicts ruled the political game. 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’, a more or less moderate version of multiculturalism, was the leading government policy.

Though this strategy shifted already in the early 1990s to a more republican inspired citizenship approach, the murder on Van Gogh sealed the final fiasco of radical multiculturalism.

Since the new millennium, politics and public debate have been the theatre of conflict and confusion. Should one adopt French republicanism? Go on believing in peaceful pluralism? Or, perhaps foster the Dutch national identity? The confusion resulted in the election victory on June 9, 2010 (24 seats in parliament, on June 9) of the extremist MP Geert Wilders, defending the unlimited freedom of expression and pleading for a prohibition of the Koran.

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1 A decrease in membership of 50% within 30 years. Yearly, the PCN lose a ‘province town’ of 65,000 inhabitants average.


3 The debate had already taken a start a few months earlier, around the talked essay of Paul Scheffers, ‘Het Multiculturele Drama’, NRC Handelsblad, January 29, 2000.

What should be the place of religion in the public domain? And how do Dutch churches seek position in this debate?

II. The Dutch political debate, church models - three options

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

1. The first model for arranging the place of religion in the public sphere is secularism. The laicism of French republicanism, stressing the neutrality of the state, can serve as its embodiment, but also a liberalism inspired by John Rawls, which defends the rationality of the political domain and the autonomy of individual life plans. Religion is a private matter, the government incorporates an exclusive neutrality: any religious sign of symbol is prohibited in public space. French laicism, though historically hardly rooted in the Dutch political tradition (Christian schools and organizations receive government funding on the basis of evenhandedness) is growing in popularity under left and right wing liberals (D66, VVD, Groen Links).

Now churches have become a minority and the majority has become secular, this radical interpretation of the Church-State separation – as such part of the Constitution since 1798, revised in 1848 – may invite the church to position itself definitively in the post-Constantine era, letting go any theocratic ambition. The lines between ‘world’ and ‘church’ can be drawn clear again. The Church can understand itself as a witnessing church, in the tradition of Barmen 1934. The Church can take either – in the well known typology of H. Richard Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture – a ‘Christ against Culture’ position and develop a Stanley Hauerwasian ecclesiology, in line with the radical Reformation. Or opt for a ‘Christ and Culture in Paradox’-model, in the tradition of the reformed Two Kingdom doctrine, taking the ecclesiology of Barth and Bonhoeffer as leading.

Being 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, only found reluctantly reception within the PCN, until now. The church as witness of the reign of Christ, however, as expressed in the Barmen Confession 1934, is firmly rooted in the history of Dutch Protestantism since the Second World War. In the new Church Order of the PCN there are decisive elements of this tradition taken up.

Article 1, item 5, explicitly refers Barmen’s importance for today’s confession. Item 6 states that the church professes Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour of the world, and perceives this profession – which finds expression in her celebration, speaking and acting – as a calling to renewal of life in culture, society and

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state. In addition to that it says: “The church bears witness before people, powers and authorities of God’s promises and commandments and looks for dialogue with other churches for that.” These outlines are especially elaborated in ordinance 1-3, about the ‘speaking of the church’. There is a vast instrumentation ready for fulfilling this witnessing role of the church, the church and State document rightly states. ‘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.’ (p. 18, par. 42)

The following statement of the general secretary of the PCN, Arjan Plaisier, after the extreme right wing election victory, on June 9, might be interpreted as an expression of laconic Dutch pragmatism, but can perhaps better be understood as a firm defense 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: being witness of Christ.’ This toning down of the discussion reminds a statement attributed to the Dutch resistance fighter H.M. van Randwijk, just after the Second World War, that, though democracy is far more preferable than fascism (he himself was ready to give his life for it), seen in an eschatological light, democracy would be at the same distance from the Kingdom of God as fascism.

2. A second option in the public debate is - as I coin it - social cohesionism. It 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 is stressed, after the breakdown of radical multiculturalism as an instrument of integration policy. Though it is hard to find out wherein this identity consists, nation-building should guarantee social stability and cohesion, a shared sense of belonging. Christianity, in particular Protestantism, may play an important role in defining and constructing a common Dutch identity. It can be seen as part of the Dutch civil religion. 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 specter. Conservatives, liberals and extreme anti-Islamists plea for it, but also Christian-democrats and socialists. Most of them consider Christian religion en 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), is used to say it.

One of the early proponents of this interpretation was Jan-Peter Balkenende, prime-minister from 2002 until 2010. Inspired by the work of communitarian Amitai Etzioni, the leader of the Christian Democratic Party stressed the importance of shared values and norms. Decency and

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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 gehouden. We gaan dus vrij en vrolijk door met onze core business, getuige zijn van Christus’. (Dagblad Trouw, June 11, 2010)
shared responsibility are presented as essentially Dutch or even as typical Christian or Protestant.

Although church membership is very low today, the Christian tradition is valued for political reasons. Also the liberal MP and former Euro-commissioner Frits Bolkestein supports this view since the 1990s, regarding Christianity as a defense 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. He can refer to the Preamble of the Lisbon Treaty in the European Union which mentions the inspiring role of ‘cultural, religious and humanistic traditions of Europe’. ‘We seem to have forgotten that Europe is strongly marked by Christianity and therefore fundamentally differs from civilizations that have their origin in Islam’, Bolkestein writes in 2009. Christianity is Europe’s Great Narrative.

Bolkestein’s plea has been adopted and turned in a nationalistic direction by Geert Wilders, leader of the anti-Islamic Party for Freedom. ‘Christianity, together with Judaism and humanism, is part of Dutch culture’, he expressed in a interview recorded for church trustees states. ‘We, and also the Church, should be proud of that.’ (March 24, 2010). He would rather see the church taking more firmly ‘opposition against this intruder, Islam’ and standing for its own identity. For: ‘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 no outsider in pleading for a more outspoken national identity. One of the reasons of 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 being lost and insecure in a globalized world.

I think the Church should be well aware of this longing for community –also in the many Wilders voters among her own members - and respond to that in her own Christian way, offering and building an alternative to extreme nationalism and xenophobia. Does she really wants to understand what’s going on in the hearts and minds of Wilders voters? Is she really empathically present in their midst, sharing their anxiety? I doubt. The church should not only speak prophetically, but also act priestly (Robert N. Bellah).

The CS vision 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.’ (p. 24, p. 59; par. 59, 132).

It is also disappointing that the CS vision document does not stronger value the Church’ own sources for identity formation and moral community building. There is a long and vital tradition within the PCN, going back to the 17th Century, that depicts the role of the Church as

to be 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 neighbor love. As a community of moral formation it contributes to a sense of a shared We, the backbone of strong political community.

This line of thinking has deep roots in Dutch Protestantism. Let me draw a few historical lines. In 17th and 18th 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 as 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.12

In 19th Century Abraham Kuyper, leader of the neo-Calvinists dissenters, was lead by a vision of re-Christianization of Dutch society. Not the church as an institutional structure as such, but Christian organizations (‘the church as organism’) within the civil society should permeate the whole society with a distinctive Christian life style. Christ was seen as the ‘Transformer of Culture’ (Niebuhr), Christianity as a civilizing power.

After the Second World War, despite secularization, the idea of a fatherlandish church, a Christ confessing national church was revitalized within the Dutch Reformed Church. It entered prominently in the 1951 Church order.13

The CS however, neglects the actual relevance of this tradition, apparently underestimating the possibilities of its reinvention. It considers this tradition as history, though still supported by a tiny part of the PCN’s orthodoxy.14 ‘Church and government have mutual interests when it is about preservation of cultural and religious heritage’, we read. The remark only occurs within a paragraph about the pragmatic collaboration of church and government. We’d rather think here of old church buildings than of living communities.

Of course, the idea of the Netherlands as a principally Protestant-Christian nation (Groen van Prinsterer, Ph. Hoedemaker, A.A. van Ruler) will probably stay history forever. But CS does


14 ‘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 on the task of both 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 the vogue for this approach. This way many cling to the idea of a special relationship between the Netherlands as ‘Christian nation’ and the Netherlands Reformed Church. In the twentieth century theologians like Th.L. Haitjema and A.A. van Ruler further extend this range of ideas. It is politically shaped in the political programs of the Christelijk Historische Unie (CHU = Christian Historical Union) and the Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP = Political Reformed Party).’ (Par. 29, CS)
insufficiently acknowledge its actuality, and its potentials of being reinvented in an 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. They all should have to confess one thing: the openness of
personal and social identities, and be critical to another: the danger of its closing down.
According to the protestant theologian Mechteld Jansen in a recent publication, central in the
church is not the quest for truth but the longing for communitas. Communitas refers to the
place where people can say ‘we’ without someone being excluded. It is in a genuine religious
community, Jansen argues, that people learn and are stimulated to live together and to be open
towards others. They cultivate ‘networks of connectedness’ in society, introducing them in
public square-dialogues. The church can contribute to the building of a strong, non-excluding
‘We’.

Jansen’s position strongly reminds Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Sanctorum Communio, written in a
chaotic German Weimar Republic where the early German democracy was threatened, a
context in some respect similar to ours. Bonhoeffer pleaded for the Church as a Gemeinschaft
sui generis, a community of grace, where identity is build not on excluding, but on receiving
the Other. Jansen, as 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. They don’t have to build a fortified identity in
order to be acknowledged. For true recognition is a gift. ‘Identity is no property. I even think
that personal identity should be rather uncertain and vulnerable.’ Koinonia, experienced in the
does not oppose seeking of communitas outside the church, on the contrary. ‘A strong
identification with a church group where people are completely initiated an feel home, does
not block communitas with a wider circle, but rather stimulates it.’ Jansen refers to Robert
Putnam, whose research in 41 US city neighbourhoods lead 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’. Just as Jesus Christ once did, widening 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 CS document’s
recognition of ‘the “normal” role of the congregation, as learning community, in the spiritual
education and the equipment of its members’ as ‘the first responsibility of the church’ (par. 96)
should be underlined and elaborated in a more political sense. The times that the church
provided the entire Dutch society with a national-religious identity are far over. Its role in the
making of identities is far more modest. Its contribution to the society’s social capital,
however, 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 ourselves is admitted.

3. The CS document, regrettably, does not retrieve her own tradition along these lines, but opts primarily for a third Church model, the Church as a body of deliberation and dialogue. Apparently, it still seems to linger on the third option in the Dutch public debate on the politics of religion: a pacifying pluralism, implying a moderated version of multiculturalism.\(^{16}\)

Though the failure of the strong, relativistic version of multiculturalism has to be definitively admitted since the murder on Van Gogh, a weak version, stripped from its ideological overtones (anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, incommensurability of ethnic and religious identities) still prevails. The document implicitly seems to opt 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 one’s own way of life. Diversity can only be celebrated by stressing dialogue. 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 wingers, defending 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, in order to survive on the same small spot close to the sea a pragmatic consensus is needed. The pillarization model was build on this idea, and it might still work out well in a globalized society with a plurality of ethnic and religious minorities. However, this only represents a watered version of multiculturalism: we should stand more firmly to the principles of democratic constitution as we did before, defending pluralism and dialogue uncompromisingly. The recognition of group identity is not unlimited.

As I see it, it is not Habermasian theory, but a society ideal 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. No self-declared majority that forces its will upon others should be accepted. I think the PCN document still implicitly assumes this society model as prevailing in Dutch democracy. Therefore it might not be well capable of integrating and supporting other ecclesiological models, corresponding to different societal outlooks. Though it pays explicitly tribute to Barmen and its prophetic witness, the Dutch prophets are sitting at the round table, embroiled in a consensus seeking dialogue with other players in the public domain.

CS designs the church as a platform of deliberation within civil society. Endorsing the eschatological Two Kingdom motive that characterizes the Witness Church, democracy is supported with reserve. The church asks herself in how far she gradually learned to recognize

\(^{16}\) I own the term to Pieter Dronkers, o. c., in his characterization of 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 i.e. with a return of immigrants to their country of origin.
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’ (par. 74). 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 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 on valid law – in the name of righteousness
as moral standard!’ Here again the reference to the Theological Declaration of Barmen is made.
But, as it is my impression, the Dutch polder mentality wins, and it predominates the spirit of
the document. The church as witness (model 1) stays on the background, and even more
obvious, the church as a source of civil religion (model 3) only plays a minor role.

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Let me refer to some paragraphs of the document that pushed me to read it that way.

- The tensed ambivalence in its church vision fully becomes manifest in par. 107: ‘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.’

But neither her national history (‘privilege’?), nor its witness character (‘pretence’?) can withhold the document from depicting the Church as one dialogue partner in civil society among others.

- Again and again a prophetic position of the church over and against society is questioned by the document. ‘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.’ (90)

- 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 with the government that 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 (par. 93,94).

- ‘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 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.’ (par. 95)

‘The church has to accept that she is perceived by many as an association of 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.’ (par. 130)

- 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 last resort there will 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’. (par. 102)

- ‘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.’
Congregation-members, theologians, ministers and religious representatives and professionals therefore contribute, each from the own specific position, to public opinion forming.’

‘According to her ability the church as an institute 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 unheard 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.’ (par. 124-126) In the Dutch original it is also added 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 19th century heritage of Abraham Kuyper still 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 has 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.17 This so called ‘poldermodel’ is still a leading ideal in Dutch politics, notably in the arrangement of the labor market.18

III. In conclusion

The CS vision document defends a typical Dutch polder ecclesiology. By stressing pluralism, its preparedness to dialogue and deliberation it presents a modest, contextually well appropriated model for the Church’ public presence in the Netherlands. However, it has its limitations. Notably, it has difficulties to integrate 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 building, either in a conservative national, or in a more democratic communal version, seems to be given too little weight. A

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18 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, cf. Henk te Velde, Van regentenmentaliteit tot populisme. Politieke tradities in Nederland. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker 2010, chapter 7 (pp. 205-226).
politics that responds to the longing for recognition, identity and belonging cannot be reduced too easily, as the CS document seems to do, to an expression of ‘populism’. The 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.

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