

## “ALTHOUGH WE ARE CATHOLIC, WE ARE DUTCH”

### *RISE AND FALL OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE NETHERLANDS SINCE 1795 FROM RATIONAL CHOICE PERSPECTIVE*

This thesis gives an account of the trends in the commitment to the Dutch Catholic Church. We can distinguish four phases of development. From 1795 till 1870, the range and the intensity of the commitments slowly increased. The number of Catholics increased only several tens of thousands every decade, while their per capita number declined. As specific data is lacking, we can also infer slow growth from the low numbers of new parishes and ordinations occurring during this period. In contrast, the Catholic Church grew rapidly between 1870 and 1960. Catholic membership increased by several hundred thousand every decade and after 1910, the per capita number increased. The number of ordinations increased more rapidly and more parishes were founded, compared to the previous phase. In 1960, the Dutch Catholic Church witnessed high levels of commitment. There is evidence, however, that the commitment started to decline after 1920: despite the growth, the Church lost many members and after the Second World War, the absolute and per capita number of Catholics increased only slightly. For the period after World War I, the evidence is clear that attendance declined, especially in the big cities. Finally, the number of seminarians and novices declined as well. After 1960, commitment to the church declined severely. The number of Catholics rose slightly until 1983, and then declined. Surveys show even lower Catholic membership rates than official Church counts. A variety of key indicators of attachment have also declined dramatically: participation in the sacraments, consent with the official doctrines of the faith, and identification with the Church's institutions. The revenues have stabilized, even declined in some years and remained behind inflation since 1980. Also, a (declining) minority paid its yearly contribution. Finally, the number of volunteers declined again after a short rise; only about 4-6% of the Catholics are engaged as volunteers.

How can we explain these developments? Since 1945, nineteen explanations were given for the rise and fall of the Dutch Catholic Church. The problem with these explanations is that they don't consent or portray a certain scientific progress. For example, the rise and fall of Catholicism is often explained by the development of the Catholic social organizations, but from that it becomes not clear, how *the church* has developed. Also, there is disagreement about how to distinguish the phases of development. Scholars have not paid sufficient attention to the decline between 1920 and 1960. Finally there are a lot of theories to explain this

development, but there has been no attempt at a synthetic, unified explanation. In short, scholars have made relatively little progress explaining the development in the commitment to the Dutch Catholic Church. In an attempt to fill this gap, this thesis applies rational choice theory to the history of the Dutch Catholic Church. Since the 1980's, American scholars have applied this theory to religion and religious institutions, and the results of this work are promising. But European scholars of religion have not paid much attention to rational choice theory, especially to the sub-theory on the development of religious organizations (that has been used in this thesis). Is rational choice theory able to explain the development of the Dutch Catholic Church, and what is the contribution of this theory to the scholarly discussion on the development of Dutch Catholicism? These are the central questions of this thesis.

Rational choice theory starts with the premise that people act rationally, which means that they try to attain rewards and to avoid costs, and moreover as much rewards as possible for the lowest possible cost. Stark, Bainbridge, Iannaccone and Finke have applied this assumption to religion and religious organizations. How can a religious organization, by varying costs and rewards, commit people? First, a religious organization can offer rewards: social rewards, like attachments, functional roles and pleasures, but especially religious rewards. Religious rewards are defined as "very abstract rewards, supported by supernatural explanations". Because of their supernatural character, religious rewards are very risky. Therefore, the value of religious rewards is increased when a religious organization declines their risk. It can do this by offering rituals, prayers, wonders, mysticism, convincing clerics and discussion groups. When social and religious rewards can get lost when one doesn't conform to the rules specified by the organization, the relative value of the rewards even increases. On the other hand, paradoxically, religious organizations that are very costly generate a high level of commitment. These organizations demand a lot (time, money) from their members. Thus, these members become intimately bound to each other and to the religious organization, which makes the social and religious rewards even more valuable. 'Expensive' organizations are called deviant or sectarian: organizations that are separate, different and antagonistic from their surroundings. In short: by offering valuable social and religious rewards, and by a certain level of deviance, members of a religious organization become stakes in their membership, and so a religious organization can generate commitment. Moreover, the history of religious organizations follows a certain course under the precepts of rational choice theory. Religious organizations originate as deviant organizations (sects) with high levels of commitment from their members. But their success eventually leads to a decline in tension. 'Success' means that larger numbers are member in the organization, these give the organization a lot of means at its disposal, the organization becomes buildings and other societal interests and therefore it needs a stable (bureaucratic) organization. Tension between the religious organization and the outer society thus declines. On the other hand, members of a

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religious organization become less different and separate (and thus less deviant) from the environment through socialization and regression. In these ways (growth and socialization), the successful 'sect' becomes an accommodated, but less successful 'church'. Because of this accommodation, the stakes of the members in the organization decline and therefore it is difficult for the organization to maintain the high commitment of its members. The lower the deviance, the weaker the commitment to the organization, although the organization in fact has become 'cheaper'. According to rational choice theory, the only way to increase commitment again is to increase deviance from the mainstream culture. With increased deviance, members come to have greater stakes in the organization again, and their level of commitment will thus increase. This model is used to explain the changes in the level of commitment to the Dutch Catholic Church. It is expected that in times of growth the Church offered valuable religious and social rewards and maintained a high level of deviance; and conversely, that in times of decline the Church offered less valuable social and religious rewards and maintained a lower level of deviance. Also, the Catholic Church must have developed from a 'sect' to a 'church' since 1795, under influence of the factors specified by the theory.

Between 1795 and 1870, the commitment to the Dutch Catholic Church increased only marginally. In this period, the deviance of the church was rather low and didn't increase much. Especially in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Church adapted to conform to mainstream Dutch society that had become more favorable to the Catholics and Catholic Church since the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century despite official marginalization. Influenced by the Enlightenment, Catholics, like Protestants, attempted to use reason to ground and explain their faith. During the French occupation of the Netherlands (1795-1813), Catholics played a prominent role in the post-revolutionary government and society. In the Dutch Kingdom since 1815, Catholics supported the Liberals. The leaders of the Church attempted to benefit from the public sympathy: they supported the Ancien Regime and after its fall, they didn't increase the social and political demands of the Church immediately. In the Kingdom they cooperated with the government in an attempt to drive back confronting public behavior, e.g. at processions. After the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the deviance of the Church -never completely absent- increased rapidly. The more the Netherlands became a national state, the more Catholics were seen as alien. This became clear in 1853 when protesters rose up against the re-installation of the Catholic hierarchy. Also, the Catholic Church as a whole turned its back against modern society (*Mirari Vos, Syllabus Errorum*), adding to the tension between the Church and the outside society in the Netherlands. But Dutch Catholics themselves also became aware of their societal position and made claims on it. The Catholic press played an important role therein. The Church began rebuilding itself after 1840, and especially after 1853. And as the Church demanded their constitutional rights in the realm of schools and charity, their bond with the Liberals dissolved in 1870. Thus, the deviance of the Church slowly and only after

1850 increased; and new religious and social rewards were provided only after 1870. This kind of change can, according to the theory, not realize a big increase in the commitment of the Catholics to their Church.

Between 1870 and 1960, the commitment of the Catholics to their Church increased. In this period the Church occupied a highly deviant position in society and satisfied the needs of its members with valuable social and religious rewards. The bishops demanded time and again that Catholics should associate exclusively with other Catholics and participate exclusively in Catholic social organizations. All contact with non-Catholics was forbidden. Several apologetic societies defended Catholicism against the 'attacks' of modern society and educated the laity to this task. By controlling the Catholic media (press, radio, film), the Church sheltered the flock from heretical information. Bounds among Catholics were fostered: intermarriage was discouraged, new Dutch saints fostered the Dutch-Catholic identity, and there were national Catholic meetings and a distinct Catholic subculture. The growth of the Catholics was a concern for other Dutchmen. For this high 'price' of joining a sectarian group, Catholics reaped valuable rewards. Neo-scholastic theology promised perfection of earthly life after death for believers who obeyed the Church and took part in the sacraments. This theology was brought to the faithful by stimulation of piety, as well as through revivals. Also, high spiritual demands were made on the religious. Typical for Dutch Catholicism are its organizations, which fulfilled many of the worldly needs of the Catholics in charitable, educational, political, health, cultural, athletic and many other areas. In these organizations, Catholics could also ascend to leadership roles or become a job. The social and religious rewards attained a higher value through the social and religious control that was exercised. House-visits became systematized and were used as a means of control. In Catholic schools, the children were socialized in a Catholic way and in charity, only those that behaved as 'good' Catholics could be helped. Social relations were broken when a person or family member behaved in an 'un-Catholic' manner. Due to deviance and rewards, the stakes of being Catholic were thus high. This explains the high level of commitment during this period.

After 1920, the commitment of the Catholics started to decline. History shows that the deviance of the Church through socialization of the Catholics and a deliberate policy of the Church declined in this period. In the social organizations, Catholics were not only socialized in a Catholic way but they were also taught how to be honest Dutchmen and good parents. The youth, especially from the lower classes, attained advanced technical, religious and general education. The social position of the Catholics was bolstered by Catholic social work and health organizations. Also, the confessional schools contributed to the integration of Catholics in society. Since the schools were financed by the state (1917-1920), the educational level of the Catholics was enhanced and they entered better-paid jobs. Moreover, the Catholic university (Nijmegen) educated many Catholics, and in the process created a Catholic academic elite and thus to a greater acceptance of Catholics and the Catholic Church in general. But also through deliberate policy,

the Church lowered the tension with the outer society. The encyclical *Rerum Novarum* stimulated Catholics to engage in the world for the world, according to worldly, rather than religious principles. Dutch Catholics started to discover their national role: they took part in national festivities and supported the (Protestant) royal house. Paradoxically, as Catholic organizations tried to separate Catholics from society, they contributed to the national integration of the Catholics: the more the organizations were provided with public means, the more they also had to fulfill public demands. In the Second World War, Catholics showed in the resistance (Hl. Edith Stein, Bl. Titus Brandsma) their loyalty to the nation. The subvention of Catholic organizations, the financial support to the Church organization and the political importance of the Catholic's People's Party (one of the two biggest parties in parliament since the introduction of general suffrage 1917) lessened the problems of the Church with the state. The 'defense' of the Catholic Church against the modern world was given up and carefully, the first ecumenical contacts were established. Finally the Catholic elite introduced modern scientific insights to the Catholic youth, social and health care organizations. In this way, the deviance of the Catholic Church declined after 1920 through socialization and accommodation. This decreased the stakes of the Catholics in (active) membership, which is demonstrated in the decline of the commitment.

After 1960, the commitment to the Church decreased further. In this period, both the tension and the value of the rewards offered by the Church declined even more. According to a new theology, salvation offered by Jesus had to be realized in this world and not in the afterlife, and the Church was intended only as the collection of 'all people of good will' to whom it appealed. This inner-worldly faith was expressed in the liturgy, in moral theology and religious education, and was propagated through the (still popular) discussion groups. Priests and the religious no longer saw themselves as spiritual elite and began to dress more like the laity. This change also shows that the faith was seen more this-worldly. The faithful were more and more intensely involved with the policy-process at the local, regional and diocesan level and asked for their opinion, and theologically the laity became a more respected position. For the rest, the Church offered few rewards: the social organizations and associations became secularized or moved away from the Church in other ways; new ones were not founded. The means for conformity and control were given up: everyone could participate in the Catholic Church and use its social and religious supplies without feeling obliged or being addressed to. This loss of value in the rewards is intimately connected with the decline of deviance. In 1960 the bishops said they no longer wanted to force the unity of the Catholic organizations and they left the Catholics free in their choice of membership. After that, the whole organization structure broke down. The resistance against modern society was given up: human rights were accepted, the Church had to appeal to the needs of society and the apologetic initiatives were transformed ecumenically and merely had to offer the faith to society. Also, the professionalization of the Church and its centralization, the scientification of the education of the clerics and the

modernization of the pastoral profession led to more accommodation of the Church to its surroundings. Finally the Church strongly engaged in the ecumenical movement: other churches were seen as equal, intermarriage became easier and other churches participated in the Pastoral Council (1968-1970). Many other pastoral services in the army, prisons, and among students became ecumenically organized. Recently, the Church also has participated in interfaith dialogue. The stakes of the Catholics have lessened in accordance with these two developments: religious rewards have become less valuable (while more this-worldly) and social rewards have declined. Moreover, because of its decreased deviance the Church demanded less participation. Through this, the stakes of the Catholics declined, as did their commitment.

Since 1970, a controversial reorganization of the Church has taken place. Although the theory expects commitment to increase in such a case, this has not taken place in the Dutch Catholic Church. Why not? Since the 1960's, the Vatican repeatedly intervened in the Dutch situation. The Vatican forced the withdrawal of two Dutch catechetical projects thought to be too liberal: the *New Catechism* and a curriculum for religious education. The liturgy had to become more 'Roman' or 'Catholic' again and the influence of the laity, e.g. expressed at the Pastoral Council, had to be limited. Finally in 1980, the bishops were called to Rome for an extraordinary Synod to foster greater unity among bishops and bring the Dutch Church province closer to Rome. In another move to squelch liberal dissent, Rome began installing new bishops unilaterally in 1970 who started to strengthen the unity of the Church. Persons or initiatives deemed too liberal were marginalized. The identity of the Church was also strengthened by an emphasis on its sacramental structure and there were attempts to give the Catholics a new (positive) group-identity. Catholic schools were more tightly bounded -ideologically and juridically- to the Church again. The religious identity of the schools and individual teachers was emphasized, while religious education was reintroduced to the curriculum. The Dutch bishops loudly protested against the norms and values in society, e.g. in the case of abortion, euthanasia and 'gay-marriage'. Aside from the official Church, conservative and progressive organizations and initiatives tried to realize their faith in society. On the surface, the Church appears to have increased deviance, but tension has not actually increased substantially since 1970. Many of these initiatives have never been realized. At the ground level, there was strong opposition to these decisions from leading laypersons, clerics, pastoral assistants, and members of Catholic associations. These groups maintained their vision of an 'open Catholicism'. In addition, the Church has not increased rewards much after 1970. Since rewards have remained stable, and deviance has increased only slightly, the Church has become somewhat more 'costly'. As such, the Church cannot be able to increase the stakes and thus the commitment of the Catholics.

In the last chapter, I evaluate the application of the rational choice theory on religion on Dutch Catholicism. In the language of rational choice theory, the Dutch

Catholic Church is characterized as a 'church movement': an organization directed at lower tension. This ambition of the Dutch Catholic Church to become an accommodated, accepted religious organization, initially increased tension and this led to its success. When the success however was reached and the Church had settled, this compulsively led to its decline. The contribution of rational choice theory is that it provides one single explanation for both the rise *and* the decline of the Church. Also, unlike previous theories, rational choice theory combines several existing theories, more than any one of the nineteen circulating theories does. Finally, with this theory the subject ('Church' and 'Development') can be better defined, and better described with new data, contrary to many of the nineteen theories that have used the rise of the Catholic *organizations* as a sign for the rise and fall of the *Church*. But rational choice theory cannot be applied to the Catholic Church without problems. The characteristics of the Catholic Church, the importance of the social organizations, its international character, its long-term existence and the great number of members challenges the framework of the theses formulated by rational choice theory. Examined closely, this theory is devised to explain commitment to small, evangelical, (American?) religious organizations. Moreover, the theory tends to assume that primarily local – as opposed to international- stimuli, influences religious organizations. Also, the hypotheses about sacrifice and stigma and about market regulation (both not worked out in this summary) should be used cautiously when applied to a concrete historical (European) case. Overall, I believe that rational choice theory enriches our understanding of Dutch Catholicism. I encourage other scholars to apply this theory, if with care, to explain religious phenomena in Europe. In the epilogue, I include some remarks about the practical use of rational choice theory in Church policy.

(corrected by Jake Felson)