TWO ALIENATION SCENARIOS: EXPLAINING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN CATHOLICS AND THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE NETHERLANDS

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Since the nineteen-sixties, the distance between Catholics and the Roman Catholic Church has grown. Recently, scholarly literature has focussed on the role of church leaders in explaining this process. I distinguish two scenarios. One scenario holds restorative ecclesial policy after the Second Vatican Council responsible: church leaders alienated ordinary Catholics by resisting church renewal. The second scenario claims that, on the contrary, it is this very church renewal that has alienated the flock. This scenario uses data from the European Values study. Both scenarios tend to blame the pastor. My suggestion is to link explanations on the level of organizational behaviour with explanations on the level of national culture.

1. The Role of Church Leaders

Since the international recognition of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands as an independent state in 1648 (Peace of Westphalia), the (Calvinist) Dutch Reformed religious identity has been a contested part of the national heritage. Despite ideals of religious pluralism, the Reformed Church was the 'ruling church'; other Protestants, Catholics and Jews were only tolerated in the private sphere. After the separation of the Catholic South (Belgium) in 1830, the – by then: – Kingdom of the Netherlands transformed into a constitutional monarchy (1848). Its constitution proclaimed religious tolerance, which provided an impetus to the emancipation of the large Catholic minority. Shortly before, a first secession of Reformed Christians took place. Half a century later, a second schism took place, as well as the beginning of a gradually growing minority of the unchurched, both attacking the dominance of the former 'ruling church'. The growth of the Catholic population, however, comes to a halt in the 1960s (Knippenberg 1992, 163–174; Sengers 2003, 13). Since then, the Dutch national identity is more and more dominated by secularity, more specifically: secularized Christianity.

Nowadays, for many people the Roman Catholic Church only becomes visible through the media: globally (a Pope's visit, action, statement or silence), nationally (a bishop's ordination, performance or resignation), regionally (preferably concerning a scandal or a conflict) and locally (for example, the juridical struggle over the noise of church bells in my hometown, Tilburg). Usually, the Roman Catholic Church appears in the media as deviating from the norm, because of its views on sexuality, the ordination of women, abortion, and euthanasia, and because of its practices and malpractices in present and past. As a general rule, the church is portrayed as *unzeitgemäß*.

While the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands has become a strange phenomenon, Catholics themselves have, in fact, become 'normal'. What, after all, does it mean to be a Catholic in this country today? Usually, this is someone who was baptised, and goes to church for Christmas, weddings and funerals, but who is not all that different from unbelievers in matters of belief, ethics and behaviour (Dekker/De Hart/Peters 1996, 45–87). Depending on the formulation of the question, a large minority of all 4.406.000, baptised Catholics (Bernts/ De Jong/Yar 2006, 92) are not very willing to call themselves Catholic. It is only when they are confronted with the answer options to questions about religion such as the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics puts to them, that they will identify themselves as Catholics. 27 percent of all Catholics – who in that case reckon to be Catholics – deny nevertheless that they regard themselves as belonging to a denomination, when asked in the same survey (Becker 2003, 14). The Catholic population does no longer present a religious identity with clear boundaries.

Still, Roman Catholics make up the largest religious category in the country, and have a corresponding political presence: half of the Catholics vote for the Dutch Christian Democrats (CBS 2009, 93), the current president of the Dutch Labour Party is a practicing Catholic, the (evangelical and modern–orthodox Reformed) ChristenUnie makes eyes at the conservative Catholics, and the Socialist Party flirts with the progressive Catholics. This 'strange' Catholic Church is associated with a broad and relevant section of the population.

It seems there is a gap between the many that only occasionally attend a church service and those who are leading the church. However, this gap between mass Catholicism and Roman Catholic Church has not always been the case (Hellemans 2009). In the nineteenth century, a long period of discrimination came to an end. Until the 1960s a vibrant, emancipating and

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well-organised Catholic religious minority was partly responsible for defining the face of Dutch culture. Catholic schools, hospitals, welfare organizations and other communal services were established ('pillarization'). Catholics were successfully mobilized by their elite. But with the processes of Dutch nation building and the appropriation of the pillarized organizations by the State, these organizations and services lost their religious basis ('depillarization'). The participating role of atholicism changed into a subordinate – though not insignificant – one.

With respect to the recent past collective Dutch Catholic identity is often characterized as 'broken': the official Roman Catholic Church has become alienated from those who were baptised Catholics or, depending on the frame of reference, Catholics have become alienated from the Church (Bernts/Peters 1999; Jansen/Zuidberg 2008). This interpretation is based on facts that are generally known: a decline in identification with the Church, a decline in participation, and a decline in support for the Church's teachings (Bernts/Dekker/De Hart 2007). These figures indicate an important change in the Catholic's everyday life. The plausibility structure that legitimizes the distance between people and their leaders has become fragmented (Winkeler/Simons 1987). The pastor is no longer a familiar figure, except to the believers who participate in the social activities of the parish. There are fewer opportunities for contact, because people no longer visit the clergy on a regular basis, for example for confession. The clergy, in turn, less often show themselves in the world of the believers, that is, at the Catholic youth associations' meetings, in school, hospital and at social activities taking place outside the parish. Believer and pastor do not meet as often as they used to do, and the gap created by this lack of contact has not been filled by the lay ecclesial minister ('pastoral worker'). This has resulted in a physical and spiritual distance. Generally, the growing distance between Catholics and Roman Catholic Church has prompted the question: how did things ever get to this stage?

Recently, several authors have suggested paying attention to the supply side of this parting of the ways, focussing on the role of church leaders. My question is: which patterns can be distinguished among these explanations? First, I will treat these explanations as narratives about the recent history of Dutch Catholicism. Therefore, I will use the term 'scenarios' These are expressed by both scholars and actors in the field of church policy. Secondly, I will discuss the plausibility of these scenarios. In the last section I will suggest an alternative.

2. Scenario 1: Conservatism and Restoration

The first scenario claims that the leaders of the Catholic Church at long last opened the windows to various achievements of the modern age – or at least set them ajar – (*aggiornamento*) and that, together with the people, they started to move towards a promising future (e.g., Coleman 1978). However, when the windows threatened to open too far, the rapprochement with the secular world was called to a halt by order of the superiors (e.g., Nissen, 2008). The church failed to live up to expectations and ended up shutting itself off again from what was going on in the secular world. The fortress was rebuilt and closed up. One was either 'in' or 'out,' and many decided to stay 'out.' This was the beginning of the exodus of believers from the Church.

This scenario is not new. In fact, it has become the standard narrative, even of secular authors (Knippenberg 1992, 172–174). An early exponent of this scenario is the Franciscan priest and sociologist Walter Goddijn (1921–2007), who was the secretary of Cardinal Bernardus Alfrink and of the Dutch Pastoral Council (1969–1970) (Goddijn 1983). Long before the depillarization of Catholicism in the Netherlands, he had already predicted that the Catholic house of cards would collapse once the emancipation of the Roman Catholics was completed (Goddijn 1957). However, in addition to this macro-sociological vision he also paid considerable attention to the importance of the role of Church leaders. In 1988 he gave his farewell lecture as a professor in sociology of religion under the title 'Variations in church leadership' (Goddijn 1989, 89–114). In it he recommended that the Catholic Church in Western culture exercise restraint in its leadership if it wanted its mission to succeed. In practice, however, he observed a bureaucratic centralism in which conformism was rewarded. Just as in trade and industry, 'professional conservatives' 'go out of their way to adapt themselves to the bureaucratic organization. They make sure that they are in contact with the top decision makers and play up to them, they have few principles and try to advance their career in this way.' In the current system, priests and bishops are 'married' to the institution of the Church. Believers, on the other hand, use the Church as long as it meets their needs (Goddijn 1989, 90–93). This may create a huge gap between the more liberal churchgoers on the one hand, and the church leaders who support an orthodoxy enforced by the organizational culture on the other.

At that time, Goddijn's vision of the future was far from naïve. Because he had participated in the renewal movement in the Catholic Church and watched it closely, he had personally experienced the failure of the

democratization movement and was well aware of the strong position of the ecclesiologically legitimate, centralist administrative policy. He quoted the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, who as Professor Ratzinger already in 1975 objected to the renewal movement after the Second Vatican Council (1963–1965), which in his opinion was taken to extremes, naming the Netherlands and Latin America as the frontrunners of this movement (Goddijn 1989, 107). Thus, expectations could not have been very high for a church that wanted to keep its flock together in the face of secularism and restoration.

Five years later, his colleague sociologist L. Laeyendecker (1920) estimated that the gap between believers and church leaders had become so great that little official authority could remain. Against the background of two thousand years of church history, he outlined the erosion of charisma of office in the Roman Catholic Church during modernity and post-modernity. According to Laeyendecker, in the second half of the twentieth century the authority of priests and bishops was undermined by cultural changes (autonomy of the individual, positive recognition of plurality), structural changes (emergence of the modern media, institutional differentiation, emancipation of academic theology), and changes in the religious organization itself. Laeyendecker showed how the Second Vatican Council's initiative to bridge the gap between the Church and modern world invoked a counter-reaction. The encyclical letter Humanae Vitae (1968) which, against all expectations (at least in the Netherlands), contained a continued and more stringent prohibition of artificial birth control, has become a symbol of this new trend. Developments in the Netherlands were heading another direction, as was witnessed by the Dutch Pastoral Council (1969–1970). Its suggestions, however, such as the abolition of mandatory celibacy, were denied by Pope Paul VI. The succeeding appointment of two conservative bishops underlined this policy. A Special Synod of Bishops (1980) marked a new era of a more stringent church policy. The restoration loosened the bonds between believers and the Church, which resulted in both an exodus from the Church and a more independent attitude on the part of the few believers that remained within the Church (Laeyendecker, 1993, 123).

Indeed, as the history of Dutch Catholicism shows, brewing resistance against the Church's sexual ethics, closed mentality and clericalism was already widespread in the 1950s (De Groot 1996, 109–112). Giving in to the widespread dissatisfaction and responding to the equally widespread enthusiasm for a new Catholicism seemed inevitable, especially from the Dutch elite's usual point of view that 'one has to keep up with the times'

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(Kennedy 1995). The revolution of the sixties was a continuation of a longer term development.

But is it true that the advance of this critically engaged Catholicism was arrested with brute force? The problem with this view is that it is not easy to prove that the continuation of the progressive church policy could have prevented the erosion process. Communities and parishes that went their own progressive way, more or less separate from the official church, and the unofficial Lay Movement that advocated 'an alternative portrait of the Church' both failed to transfer their faith to the next generations. This fact is not supportive of the above theory. In my opinion, the uncomfortable relationship with popular Catholicism, Mariolatry, and other not-so-progressive practices, as well as the low investment in the religious education of children, should be taken into account when explaining the failed mission of progressive Catholicism. The assumption that the progressive trend promised to turn out a success has not been made plausible.

3. Scenario 2: Destruction by Adaptation

Goddijn's successor, the sociologist and pastoral worker Theo Schepens (2007) and sociologist Erik Sengers (2004) have argued that progressive Catholicism's lack of success is due to a church-sociological pattern. 'Open churches', they claim, referring to rational choice theory (Stark/Finke 2000) are unsuccessful in preserving an ongoing, organized religious tradition. Stricter churches generally do better in retaining their believers. This perspective results in a different picture of the events in the past few decades. Interestingly, this picture seems to conform with the perspective church leaders are taking.

The central thesis of Rodney Stark's theory of religious markets is that religious pluralism increases religious commitment; when people are offered a choice, suppliers will have to work harder. And in the long term these suppliers will be effective if they make exacting demands upon their dearly beloved brethren. In this way, they only attract those who are really motivated and are willing to undertake a long-term commitment to the religious community. Free riders, that is to say, those only profiting from the services the church offers, are discouraged.

In apparent accordance with this theory the now dominant diocesan Church leaders tend to regard the renewal movement of the 1960s as a kind of derailment in which essential elements of the Catholic tradition

(in particular those related to the office and sacraments) were thrown overboard. The Roman Catholic theologian Henk Schoot (2008) recently voiced this sobering perspective in the context of a debate in an academic journal. In hindsight he found himself baffled by the extent to which Dutch theologians saw themselves in the vanguard of the World Church. Supported by Schepens' 'rational choice' interpretation of the data from the European Values Study he asked the leading question: was it not rather the radical ideas of renewal and the World Church leaders' logical reaction to these that were instrumental in promoting the alienation from the Church? (Schoot 2008, 21)

In the underlying sociological article, Theo Schepens (2007) observed that the data of the European Values Study (1999) (Halman 2001) presented Dutch Catholics with a particularly low commitment to church and faith within the European context. Their scores on trust in the Church (46%), belief in God (34%) and weekly participation (20%) were structurally among the lower scores. A computed average ranking position (Schepens 2009, 21) put the Netherlands in the lowest position among the Catholics in Europe, a position shared with the Catholics in the Czech Republic (20/21). In reaction he developed the hypothesis that this 'strange' phenomenon was due to the liberal attitude of the pastors in the past.

It is interesting that this scenario explicitly refers to empirical data. The first question is: how extraordinary is this low score of Dutch Catholics in the European context? The author himself argued that religious participation was the relevant explaining variable behind 'trust in church' and 'belief in God.' This allows us to avoid the semantically ambivalent and historically fluctuant questions on trust and belief, and focus on reported behaviour. The table presents the ranking of Dutch Catholics on this question (see table 1).

An important factor to consider when explaining national variations in church commitment in European perspective is the fact that the Netherlands is a religiously heterogeneous country, unlike for instance Ireland, Poland and Spain. Given this heterogeneity, Dutch Catholics perform more or less as one would expect within Europe. The countries in which Catholics show a higher score than average (=36) are homogeneous Catholic countries (with the exception of Northern Ireland). These days Dutch Catholics are in the lower echelons of the scores; Catholic church attendance in Belgium and Germany is a little higher, and in France it is even lower. The position of the Dutch Catholics is really not all that 'special.'

The next step would be to test the suggested hypothesis in a comparative study: are Catholics in otherwise comparable countries or dioceses more religious and more committed, the more traditional the message preached by pastors? This research question has not been answered. In contrast with rational choice theory in general, however, the over-all findings of the European Values study show that individuals in religiously homogeneous countries score higher on church and faith than individuals in religiously heterogeneous countries (Draulans/Halman 2005; Halman/Luijkx/Van Zundert, 2005). An explanation for this coherence may lie in the fact that religious pluralism here goes hand in hand with a tradition of religious tolerance. This promotes a low rather than a high commitment to the church (Halman/Draulans 2006, 285) Thus, to put it in robust language: exit Stark and long live habitual beliefs – they keep the flock faithful.

Table 1. Worship among Catholics

	Catholics in	Participation (reported weekly)
1	Malta	83
2	Northen Ireland	74
3	Ireland	65
4	Poland	62
5	Slovenia	57
6	Italy	48
7	Portugal	40
8	Croatia	35
9	Spain	30
10/11/	Luxembourg/Great Britain	29
12	Belgium	26
13/14/15	Germany/Austria/Slovenia	25
16	Lithuania	21
17/18	Netherlands/Czech Republic	20
19	Hungary	18
20	Latvia	15
21	France	12

Source: EVS 1999. Table based on Schepens (2007).

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Yet, from a strategic perspective it remains useful to examine the 'supply side' factor in the Dutch developments. If the Church had not changed so much, or if it had been able to maintain a deviant position, would that have stopped or reduced the decline in commitment? (Sengers 2003, 193) This is obviously a question of the 'What if..?' type – these cannot be answered on the basis of facts, but it is intriguing. Sengers argues, on theoretical grounds, that under these circumstances the church 'would have become smaller, but that commitment would have been higher.' Those who were dissatisfied with the strict teaching and ethics would have been encouraged to leave the Church, while committed members would have remained. The Catholic Church would probably have been smaller, but with higher participation. Indeed, commitment would have improved, but would have come from an (even) smaller number of Catholics.

According to this scenario, the new type of bishops (since the seventies), the new generation of priests, and the upholding of the traditional views on office, sexuality, and teaching authority, are signs that the Dutch Church Province is now back in line with the World Church. This scenario prefers the concept of adaptation (to what is customary) to the concept of restoration. Whatever the strategy is called, the outcome is uncertain.

From Stark's point of view the Church is, in this scenario, following the 'church-to-sect' course. This could be an advantageous strategy from the Church's perspective, because of the benefits of sectarianism: a high level of commitment to the values and practices of the religious organization, although extreme tensions should be avoided. In practice, according to rational choice theoretist Laurence Iannocone (1994, 1204) the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II has combined 'the worst of both worlds': a loss of distinctiveness in liturgy, theology and lifestyle, while retaining unpopular demands such as celibacy and the prohibition of contraceptives. The sectarian strategy also drives people from the church, especially those who are inclined to link ethical and religious issues to uncertainty rather than assurance (Knibbe 2008).

In opposition to an ideological use of rational choice theory, it is interesting to note that, even within this economic approach, benefits can be drawn from a position which will allow for different degrees of rigour and commitment (Stark/Finke 2000, 215). For the period 1970–1995, analysis of church statistics gathered in the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Barrett/ Jurrian/ Johnson 2001) shows that—as far as nominal membership is concerned—the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands has been successful in providing services to different categories of believers, from liberal to strict.

Whereas the mostly liberal, mainline Protestant churches have lost members, partly to new stricter sects and churches, the one Roman Catholic Church has succeeded in providing services to liberal, moderate, conservative, and strict believers. Therefore, the Roman Catholic Church has not been diminished as much as the average Protestant denomination. Apparently, churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, which thus serve multiple market segments, perform quite well from an international perspective compared to a variety of separate Protestant denominations (Auping 2003).

The hermeneutical message of this scenario is conservative. Because of his view on recent church history, Schepens (2007, 343) rejects the idea that the message of the Church should be modernised. Still drawing on considerations derived from rational choice theory (Finke 2004), he claims that the key question is: 'how to deliver a traditional message, the Gospel, in a modern way?' It seems to me that this is a valid question for theology, but the way it is expressed only just begins to explain what this means. For what is the traditional message? One possible way of putting this traditional message into words is: 'The Church testifies that God loves the world, which in turn invites us to love God and each other.' Of course, there are numerous others, each reflecting another result of the process of interpretation. Part of the traditional message is the notion that the message is 'for our ears,' destined for our (late) modern world as well, and for the people who live in it. The verbal content of the message is not fixed. The continuity of the tradition lies in the impact of this message in different times and places, not in its verbatim repetition (Schillebeeckx 1989, 59–61). The content of the message has to be discovered, time and again.

If key Catholic doctrine is jettisoned by either 'liberal' or 'orthodox' Catholics, this goes against the principles of intelligent renewal as found in organizational science. In this much, Roger Finke is right. If, however, renewal aims at a continuation of the tradition, as was the case in the *nouvelle théologie* of the 1950s and in many other movements since then, there is no rupture intended. An ideological use of rational choice theory suggests that it would be clear what is a rupture and not what is not. In fact, a point of view that turns out to be an example of reactionary discontinuity may label itself as orthodox, whereas orthodoxy may be labelled as liberal renewal. Whether the renewal will count as 'rupture' is the result of a discussion about what ultimately should or should not be defined as 'continuation of the tradition' (Simons/Winkeler 1987, 331–332). And this discussion takes place in a context where other factors – political, economical, cultural – play their role as well. By pretending that it is clear what

belongs to traditional religious doctrine (e.g., 'belief in a personal God') and what does not, or to a lesser extent ('Jesus as an example and companion'), the theological debate about what message is traditional and which is not will be closed too soon.

4. Evaluation: Strangely Familiar

Even though these scenarios differ greatly in their appreciation of the developments over the past decades, they are remarkably unanimous as to what actually happened. In the 1950s and 1960s Dutch Catholicism went through a period of renewal, and the Netherlands quickly changed from a 'follower' country to a 'leader' country. Prior to this, Roman Catholicism was thriving; afterwards, the decline set in. Both explanations take into account the Church's own contribution to the process. The logic is the same in both cases, although the answers to the question of blame are slightly different. Did believers become alienated from the Church because the local pastors were reined in by their superiors? Or had they already become alienated from the church under the influence of these pastors? Both scenarios – 'progression stopped in its tracks' versus 'off the track and back in line' – are based on the 'pastor-believer' model, and both blame the pastor. The clergy – holy men, appointed to perform sacrifices – are indeed perfect candidates for the role of the scapegoat. However, attention to the role of the clergy must be put into a wider perspective. There is no guilty party, no '*Trahison des clercs*' (Julien Benda) (Simons/Winkeler 1987). Our duty as empirical theologians is not to commit patricide, but to use the various explanations to gain insight into the dynamism of pastors and believers and to enlarge our understanding of the wider context of nation and World Church to which they belong. The question remains in how far it was possible at all to move in another direction, both in the renewal years and during the restoration stage (Dobbelaere 2003, 26–29).

International comparative studies indicate that the circumstances in the Netherlands are not very conducive to a strong interest in the church: religious heterogeneity, a feminine culture (Hofstede 1980), a relatively strong welfare state (Verweij 1998; Halman/Petterson/Verweij 1999), and a high level of socioeconomic security (Norris/ Inglehart 2004). All these are factors that go hand in hand with a low commitment to the Church. Merely spreading the Gospel across broad sections of the population will not result in a high commitment to Church and faith. Unless the Catholic Church associates itself with a social issue which is widely supported, no

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substantial increase in its growth is to be expected. This fundamental sociological intuition conforms both with the secularization paradigm as an account of what has happened in particular, mostly Western European, countries (Bruce 2002, 60–74) and with the view that religion continues to play an important role in the public domain throughout the world (Casanova 2003).

Meanwhile, the tense relationship between church leaders and people constitutes an interesting starting point for the actions of the Roman Catholic Church in today's society, a society which, to borrow a term from Zygmunt Bauman (2000), I would characterize as 'liquid modern,' without any unequivocal limits. People have choices, but at the same time they are looking for a sense of security that will screen them off from the multitude of choices. The profile presented by the current generation of Church leaders (sharp edges included) helps to improve the Church's visibility within this context. At the same time, it is necessary to keep in touch with the wider community, to clearly express what the Church is about, and to be receptive to people's wishes in such a way that this is felt as a invitation to participate.

Extensive research into growth factors in religious communities in the United States shows that orthodoxy is not the main driving force here. Key growth elements are the contribution of volunteers, the availability of child and youth activities, and openness towards new members (Woolever/Bruce 2004, 114). In a European context, where churches are considered as institutions rather than congregations, openness would probably include the access to the delivery of services (De Groot 2006). Many people see the Church as a useful institution, particularly because it provides rituals for marriage, birth and death. A survey among Roman-Catholic parishes I carried out in collaboration with the Kaski institute (De Groot/Kregting/Borgman 2005) suggests that there might be opportunities for the Church when profile and accessibility go hand in hand. This approach does not herald a return to mass Catholicism, but provides opportunities to accommodate large groups of people and results in active participation on the part of a minority, perhaps during specific periods of their lives.

A certain distance between Church leaders and churchgoers will always be there. In the current context, in which several suppliers of meaning and ritual manifest themselves on the religious market, this distance may appear as follows: priests and other pastoral professionals operate as religious *virtuosi*, supported and surrounded by groups of persons with strong religious interest. These *virtuoso* leaders, these strange representatives of a familiar tradition from the past, are occasionally called upon by people who are further removed from the church.

5. Outlook

In the Netherlands, the advanced erosion of the plausibility structure of the Catholic, clerical church model has created a gap between a large part of the churchgoers and the church leaders. According to some, it is the central Church leadership that is partly responsible for this. The promising progressive development was called to a halt, and many left the Church in frustration, either physically or spiritually. For others, on the contrary, the liberal excesses of local pastors caused a decline in their commitment to the church and subsequently in their faith.

Both scenarios have something to recommend, but the relative importance of these factors should not be exaggerated. Within the context of the Netherlands in the 1960s it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which Church leaders would not have moved along with the changes in society as a whole. And given the low importance of the Dutch Church province within the Roman Catholic Church world-wide, it is not surprising either that its small influence has not led to a radical revision of the Church's teachings, ethics and organizational structure.

We are left with a Church which has difficulties remaining standing as an established institute, but which, compared to smaller churches, other religions and less well-defined suppliers of meaning and ritual, does reasonably well as a strange, familiar phenomenon. The strangeness of this Church is also what makes it recognizable. As a result, it always remains a viable option, while at the same time it retains a strong relationship with its history and with the world outside the Netherlands. The familiarity, however, with this strange Church and its pastors is not cherished very much by current Church leaders.

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