
This study is about the Dutch Experiential Reformed and National Socialism in the period 1920-1950. The group of Experiential Reformed belonged to the Reformed or Calvinist branch of Protestantism. Based on confessional theology, their religious life focused on the inner experience of conversion and the outward practice of piety. This ‘old truth’ (oude waarheid), which could be found in the works of pastors dating back to the seventeenth and eighteenth century, was very vital in the era of the Interbellum. The Experiential Reformed belonged to several churches. A considerable number belonged to the former public church, the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk). Although they had objections against liberal tendencies, they remained true to the church of the past. Most of these ‘hervormd gereformeerden’ adhered to the Reformed Union (Gereformeerde Bond) within the Dutch Reformed Church, founded in 1906. Besides of the Dutch Reformed Church, the denomination of the Reformed Congregations (GG) was a stronghold of the Experiential Reformed group since 1907. Its leader was the very influential pastor G.H. Kersten, who tried to unite all Experiential Reformed people in several denominations as an Old Calvinist wing of Dutch Protestantism in the modern nation state. A smaller Experiential Reformed church were the Old Reformed Congregations (Oud Gereformeerde Gemeenten). Also a part of the Christian Reformed Churches (Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken) – approximately a third – belonged to the Experiential Reformed. The Experiential Reformed also included a lot of locally organized independent groups and congregations.

During the Interbellum the Experiential Reformed entered a process of emancipation. The Experiential Reformed attitude was very conservative or even reactionary. Many of the Experiential Reformed lived in isolated rural communities and belonged to the lower (middle) classes and were not very well educated. Reverend G.H. Kersten tried to organize all those who adhered to the old truth. He did this by establishing a political party, the Political Reformed Party (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij or SGP), founding a newspaper, The Banner (De Banier), and organizing education in accordance to the old truth. The SGP became the centre of Experiential Reformed activity in society and politics. The Interbellum was a period in which pillarization (partmentalization along social, political and denominational lines) characterized Dutch society. Although the Experiential Reformed started to organize themselves, they did not yet form a particular pillar and still participated in the broader protestant pillar.

The SGP focussed on fighting the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands, the perceived misinterpretation of reformed politics by the
two larger protestant parties (ARP and CHU) and socialism and communism. The SGP did not accept the idea of sovereignty by the people and was therefore critical about the Dutch parliamentary system. Kersten and his SGP wanted to reshape Dutch society and politics according to the Calvinist model in which God’s commandments would be decisive instead of the majority of the people. Representatives of the SGP summoned government and people to repent and live in accordance with the law of God. Kersten often spoke about God’s judgement which would be inevitable if government and people did not listen to God’s commandments. Especially the reformed ARP, which was almost always part of the government coalition, was very much irritated by this.

After 1930 a new threat emerged: fascism and National Socialism. The attitude of the Experiential Reformed towards this new threat was ambiguous. On the one hand they understood the attack on the parliamentary system by the fascists. Both Experiential Reformed and National Socialists wanted strong government. On the other hand they rejected the fascist ideology as a pagan and revolutionary doctrine. Initially the strong leaders of fascism, Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany, were also admired by Experiential Reformed because they were able to bring national unity and stopped the communist revolutionaries in their countries. In later years this admiration changed into criticism because of the dictatorial rule of these leaders. In The Banner and in the church magazines the fascist and National Socialist world views were described and criticized. The new order of National Socialism was seen as a religion of the blood and rejected for theological and scientific reasons. The strong fascist state was described as idolatry. Anti-Semitism was also rejected, although some articles in the church magazines were not very flattering for the Jews.

The new fascist threat was not a priority for the party’s policy. Kersten and the other representatives of the SGP still focussed on contesting Rome, ARP/CHU and socialism/communism. In his speeches, articles and sermons, Kersten also warned against the Dutch fascist party, the National Socialist Movement (NSB). Sometimes the NSB was an ally in parliament, because both the NSB and the SGP were opposition parties and were very critical about government policies. Because the SGP was also a Right-wing party there were some similarities in opinion and attitude. Antipathy towards Roman Catholicism and socialism/communism was far greater than antipathy towards fascist politics. In the Mid-thirties a few adherents of the SGP defected to the NSB. In 1935 the NSB caused a political landslide by winning almost 8% of the votes, which was unprecedented in the pillarized Dutch political system. As the NSB changed from a fascist into a National Socialist party which focussed on Germany, its electorate decreased by half. In their propaganda the NSB tried specifically to persuade Protestants to back the NSB. In the case of the SGP this did not work. Analysis of the election results shows that there is no significant correlation between the electorate of both parties.

The churches understood that National Socialism was going to stay and some of their members were influenced by this prospect. The Christian Reformed Churches and the Reformed Congregations decided not to accept either membership of
or public adherence to the NSB. Believers which openly supported the NSB were not allowed to baptize their children or to attend the Lord’s Supper. Eventually even excommunication could be the result of supporting National Socialism. The Dutch Reformed Church did not condemn National Socialism and membership of the NSB, because the established church was pluralistic and applied the policy of non-interference in political matters. The Reformed Union within the established church, however, was very clear in rejecting National Socialist sympathies. In the locally organized independent churches and congregations this issue was not really discussed, because their members did hardly participate in politics.

In May 1940 the German army occupied the Netherlands. This would be the second confrontation of the old truth with the new order. The Experiential Reformed saw the Dutch defeat as God’s judgement on the nation’s sins. The invasion was seen as a divine warning to the nation that repentance was needed. German authority was accepted on the basis of a particular exegesis of Romans chapter 13. This attitude, like the general attitude of the Dutch people, would gradually change and become more negative about German rule. During the first phase of the occupation Dutch public opinion was rather positive towards German authorities. The Germans tried to persuade the Dutch to support the new National Socialist order. The Experiential Reformed were no exception to this national pattern of accommodation. The acceptance of German authority was also combined quite easily with the traditional positive attitude towards Germany. This appreciation of Germany did not necessarily imply acceptance of National Socialism. Only very few resisted during the first phase of the occupation. A larger part of the Dutch population collaborated with the Germans. Especially the members of the NSB, who were regarded as outcasts in Dutch society before the German invasion, supported German rule.

After a while the Germans realized that their policy was not successful and their rule became more oppressive in this second phase of the occupation. Consequently the attitude of the Dutch towards the Germans became more negative. Also the Experiential Reformed followed this general pattern, although their contribution to the resistance movement was relatively small. Most Experiential Reformed just accommodated and where not involved in either collaboration or resistance. Those who actively opposed the occupying power, were mostly young, well-educated men or belonged to the Experiential Reformed establishment. Others, also pastors, opposed German rule by moral resistance. Moral resistance helped people to cope with the current situation. Especially the affection towards the royal family was a cause of moral resistance. This type of resistance was not without danger. The third phase of the war was a period in which the Germans adopted a policy of state terror. The Dutch reacted by becoming more and more anti-German and the resistance movement grew rapidly. The last phase of the war was so chaotic and destructive that almost everybody just tried to survive.

Also Experiential Reformed collaborated. Some of them were member of the NSB, others helped the German authorities or became SS-men and fought against Soviet-Russia. This kind of collaboration was not accepted by the church leaders.
and Experiential Reformed believers. It was seen as treason and unchristian behaviour. Nevertheless, even some pastors backed the German authorities, although they did not accept National Socialism as an ideology. This group of pastors was relatively small. Some Dutch Reformed pastors were influenced by the theologian H. Visscher who collaborated. He criticized the Dutch parliamentary system and supported German rule in several books and articles. Visscher eventually accepted National Socialism as a substitute for Christian politics. Although the ideas of Visscher were not widely accepted, a few pastors took his side. Some of them were admirers of German culture. Others accepted National Socialism as an opportunity to create national unity. They thought National Socialism could be a way to achieve unity in state and church. The pastors of the smaller Experiential Reformed churches did not support collaborative ideas. Some of them, however, preached subjection to the German authorities and were critical about the resistance movement. They accused the resistance movement of irresponsibility because they endangered the civilian population.

G.H. Kersten, first underlined that German occupation was a result of not obeying Gods commandments. The Germans were tools in the hand of God to punish the Dutch for their sins and idolatry. Kersten initially emphasized to accept German rule as inevitable and obey German orders. He believed that this was the logical corollary of accepting divine providence. He also was of the opinion that Romans 13 and the Belgic Confession (article 36) urged to submit to the German authorities. Kersten's opinion, as the leader of the SGP and editor of newspaper The Banner, was influential, even though some of the members of the SGP and readers of the newspaper did not agree with him. Also pastors in his own Reformed Congregations did not appreciate Kersten's attitude. There was some discontentment concerning Kersten's ideas about acceptance of German rule. Some pastors came to an open rebellion against the moral leadership of Kersten. As German rule became more oppressive Kersten changed his attitude. This change in attitude was not recorded in the newspaper because The Banner was forbidden by the authorities. Nevertheless we can reconstruct this change of attitude because Kersten helped his sons and others to go into hiding, against the orders of the Germans. Kersten was also in touch with the resistance movement and supported resistance work financially.

After the German capitulation Kersten was not accepted as a member of parliament by a commission which investigated the political correctness of MPs during the war. The commission failed to apply basic judicial rights. The way Kersten was treated was not a good example of the rule of law in a democracy. Kersten was also banned as a journalist because of his articles dating back to the first two years of the occupation. This investigation was far more professional, although the verdict was disappointing for Kersten. The reverend P. Zandt, who up till now had been second in command of the SGP, became the new political leader of the Experiential Reformed. His attitude during the war can be characterized as one of accommodation. In the years after the war there was some unrest in the SGP about the authoritarian way the party was led. This opposition against the
leaders of the party was also inspired by their attitude during the war. In 1948 G.H. Kersten died. The SGP did not really modernize and some disappointed members left the party.

Directly after the liberation the churches spoke out against arbitrariness in bringing collaborators to justice. They pleaded not only for justice but also for mercy. The churches told the people not to take revenge on those who had collaborated. The churches also criticized the horrible situation in the internment camps in which those who were under suspicion of collaboration were imprisoned. The churches took care of the wives and children of the collaborators. Spiritual help was given to the imprisoned by the pastors and elders. The churches urged the Dutch government to shorten the judicial procedure and to help the collaborators to rehabilitate. In the rehabilitation process the churches helped by supervising those who were convicted during their sentence and after their release. The churches hoped the Dutch population would show mercy to those who had made a wrong choice during the war. At the same time collaborators had to show regret and be thankful for the opportunity to be rehabilitated.

After the war the synod of the Dutch Reformed Church questioned pro-German pastors. The synod punished them not allowing them to preach for some time. After a while all these pastors were accepted again and were restored to their offices. The smaller churches demanded public confession of guilt of collaborators. They did not need to take steps against their pastors because they had not collaborated, neither had they been too German-friendly. The old truth survived while the new order had disappeared.