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## **De moeite waard om door te geven : de remonstrantse traditie aan het begin van de 21e eeuw**

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# Summary of Worth passing on: The Remonstrant tradition at the beginning of the 21st Century by M.F.C. Junte

## Introduction

The Remonstrant Brotherhood (RB) is a Dutch Church of approximately 5000 members and friends. Most of them are members of one of the 42 municipalities in the Netherlands. The RB was founded in 1619 in Antwerp. This was a response to the condemnation of this religious conviction by the Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619). Until the eighteenth century, it was a moderately orthodox, multiconfessional religious association that viewed the break as a historical misunderstanding. In the mid-nineteenth century, the RB changed under the influence of theological modernism into a confident, monoconfessional Church. This reversal was initially accompanied by a revival in membership rates and intensive theological activity.

However, since the late 1960s, this development has stagnated. Similar to other churches, the RB is in decline. At the same time, the Remonstrant tradition remains worthwhile for a number of people. This research focuses on that group. It is performed in the Remonstrant community of The Hague (RGDH). The RGDH is one of the oldest Remonstrant communities. It is also one of the larger Remonstrant communities with 350 members and friends. Until the 1960s, the community had two church buildings: a large church in the centre of The Hague and a chapel in Kijkduin built in the 1950s. After the large church was closed in 1971, the chapel became the main building of the RGDH. Church services are held weekly and meetings and conversation groups take place. The Remonstrantica Library is located there. Also, most of the activities of the Centre for Religion and culture Uytenbogaert (UC), take place at the chapel.

The main research methods are: participatory observation at the UC, interviews with participants of UC activities, an analysis of the process that led to the acceptance of a new Remonstrant confessional statement in 2006 and the interpretation of texts of personal declarations of faith. Thus, it was researched how the Remonstrant tradition is passed under distinctly changed, and still changing, circumstances.

The research aims to answer four questions. They are dealt with subsequently in sections A to D.

- A. With what concept of tradition can the Remonstrant tradition be described?
- B. To what extent can the UC be seen as an innovative RGDH initiative?
- C. What are the effects of personalisation on the faith of Remonstrants?
- D. What is the meaning of confessions of faith in the Remonstrant tradition?

### **A. About tradition**

Tradition is a concept dating back to Roman succession law that received the connotations old fashioned and conservative during modernity. Sociology as a modernist scientific discipline hardly differentiates at this point and lacks an independent, critical concept of tradition. Tradition usually means a negative benchmark for modernity and consequently the mutual relationship is presented in terms of a rift. Where tradition is a social structure in which *agency* is hardly available, modernity is seen as the opposite. Only in modern societies man can develop into a free and reasonable being. Modernity thus is perceived as a social structure that fosters and promotes the development of this freedom and reason.

This 'detraditionalisation thesis' has a hard and soft variant. According to the hard variant, tradition eventually disappears. This statement is a consequence of an incorrect perception of tradition. Modern societies are characterised by strong anti-traditionalism, which is advanced by emancipation, rationalisation and scientification. However, traditions do not disappear, but bring about an oppositional dynamism in which the function and meaning of traditions change.

Typical for the rise of the high modern society is the process of personalisation. Personalisation means that individuals use their increased freedom of action and decision-making authority to recognise or discover a personal tradition in a broad field of traditions and consequently shape them. The traditions of high modernity thus discovered and shaped are not solid structures, but differentiated structures that function at different levels of meaning.

A major aspect of this development is the demise of the classical function of the guardians of tradition. In classical modern societies they have a monopoly on the design of traditions and a significant role in passing it on. High modernity means that people take the liberty to embrace traditions at their own discretion and reject and combine them with their own traditions. These are not isolated, but

function in broader fields of traditions. In this context, experts will play a decisive role.

In the Remonstrant tradition, the transition from classically modern (anti) traditionalism to the high modernist personalised tradition is apparently very difficult. This is representative of Dutch institutionalised religious liberalism. The value attributed to personalisation by liberals, clashes with the strong traditionalism at the level of the religious community. The shared attitude towards the different traditions that are of importance to the liberal identity and to forms expressing this identity is perceived as unwaveringly self-evident.

Resistance to innovation and change are thus typical of the Remonstrant tradition. Innovation and change are only appreciated and accepted when linked to individuals, especially to the ministers. The RB is a ministerial Church in which the minister is expected to be a guardian and expert at the same time. The sole person who can manage such expectations becomes an icon of tradition and could almost be regarded as the personalisation of a turning point or period. For the transition from classical-modern to high modern there are no such characters. In the Remonstrant tradition, this is conveniently attributed to a lack of qualities in ministers. However, it would be fair to say that the structures in which people traditionally could develop, no longer exist.

## **B. Faith Communities**

The faith community is one of those structures. For Remonstrants, it is an important benchmark that knows a layered meaning. It refers to the rural RB and to local communities. During the research, however, it turned out that people often refer to a conversation group as their faith community. Within the RGDH research has been done into the significance of such informal groups for the classical congregation and for the UC.

The driving force behind the UC was Johan Goud, the minister of the community. He initiated and organised a program of activities at the interface of religion and culture. Culture and religion are the spearheads in the centre's programming: the secular culture that lost the feeling with ecclesiastical Christianity and the research into contemporary community opportunities. The centre operates largely independently, but there are all kinds of interconnections with the community.

Undoubtedly, this centre made an innovative effort. Since the establishment of the UC in 1995, numerous speakers came to speak and debate about religion and culture from their expertise and personal experience. This was unusual at a time when religion and spirituality were not a topic of significance in the public debate. However, at the time of the fieldwork period, that situation had changed

dramatically. Shortly after September 11 in 2001, religion made a comeback in the public debate. That debate turned out to be not very subtle or developed. This contrasted with the UC's nuanced and thoughtful way of reflecting. Moreover, the programming in the period of fieldwork was significantly less consistent than during other years. Consequently, little new information was discovered pertaining the content.

This was not the case for the form however. The importance of conversation groups for the members of the RGDH and the courses for the participants in the UC became part of a development with a greater societal significance. American sociologist Robert Wuthnow called this a silent revolution in American society in the mid 1990's: the rise of the 'small group movement'. In the Netherlands, the Social Cultural Planning Agency (SCP) followed the trend for many years in the framework of their research on voluntary work and civil society. According to the SCP, it is not the size of the group that is the determining factor, as Wuthnow suggested, but rather the changing way in which social cohesion is shaped in these groups.

Three characteristics of informal groups can be distinguished. Informal groups do not replace traditional organisations, but are often part of the changes within these organisations. At the organisational level, the paradox of structured informality exists: well organised but with little formal roles. Finally, informal groups are characterised by a tendency to homogeneity and internal focus.

Within the RGDH there are a large number of active conversation groups. They have all kinds of features in common with reading groups in which readers meet to share their reading experiences. In addition to these conversation groups, there are UC courses. These differ with the conversation groups on the aspects of sociability, accessibility and duration. However, both informal groups facilitate the personal tradition that characterises the Remonstrant personal way of believing. This emerged from the meaning the interviewees attributed to the various informal groups in which they had participated. These were not only Remonstrant groups, but also other churches and ideological or civic organisations.

### **C. Individual belief styles**

In liberal traditions, it is everyone's authority to decide what to believe and how to shape this belief. Liberals accept that this means that people can take leave from different religious perceptions. However, even if there is little left to believe in quantitative terms, the remaining belief fully counts as believing from a qualitative perspective. Moreover, it is not a one-way relationship. Believing is a process in which several aspects are accepted as true, while others are rejected at a certain point in time and vice versa. The phases of this process appears to be

closely intertwined with someone's personal history. Religious experiences and personal conversions often mark a transition in a life story.

This appreciation of the personal is not the same as personalisation. Many people are liberal in the same way as others are orthodox: the content and shape of their faith are part of a lifestyle that is closely interwoven with the community of faith they are part of. That interconnectedness, as stated by one of the respondents, is not so much a thoughtful, personal choice, but the result of a number of 'involuntary choices and decisions'. The personalisation of the liberality implies that the element of the choice to believe clearly emerges and that there is a well-considered own design of this belief. 'True Belief', 'rediscovering faith', 'an agnostic faith' and 'minimal Christianity' were some expressions people used for their conviction. In addition, some joined the RB shortly before the interview as a member based on a personal confession of faith. This was an expression of their personal conviction (partly) in terms of the Remonstrant tradition.

An important distinction between respondents pertained the fact of whether they worked or not. The lives of people who work are highly segmented. In many areas in their lives, the face expectations: family, friendships, relationship, personal development, work, career and faith. Moreover, they concur with those expectations. Consequently, integrating these areas or experiencing cohesion becomes an important theme. In the survey, three respondents spoke about strategies to achieve this. These can be typified as passing on tradition, forming part of the faith community and mystical interaction with tradition.

Compared to the obvious cohesion experienced by non-employed people, the notion of religion appeared to be quite paradoxical for those who were employed. On the one hand, religious traditions claim to have meaning for all areas of life. From that perspective, they support the process of integration. On the other hand, the externally oriented normativity of religious traditions is contrary to the internal referential organisation of daily life. Modern societies are designed to keep the flow of everyday life going on. Threats are sequestered. Aspects like (mental) illness, aging and death receive a position in arenas of sequestration. These are primarily aimed at protecting the everyday existence and the experience associated with it. Furthermore, people are prepared, when possible, for a return to everyday life. The paradox of the high modern institutional religiosity is that it is such an arena of sequestration. That is contrary to the pretension and ambition to be meaningful for all areas of life. The processes of aging and initiation reinforce the encapsulation rather than they are a result from it.

## D. Confessions of Faith

Religious freedom applies in the Remonstrant tradition on the general level as well as on the personal level. Even though this freedom has substantively changed in the course of history, there are still constants regarding the form. The most eye-catching example is confessions of faith. Historically, in the conversation about the status of confessions, two hermeneutical boundaries were at stake: on the one hand, the belief that confessions do not go beyond personal freedom of religion. On the other hand, the conviction that this does not have to mean that confessions in the Remonstrant tradition do not play any meaningful role.

In the modern Remonstrant confessional tradition, this is expressed in a differentiated confession. Four dimensions can be distinguished here. In addition to three textual dimensions, there is the dimension of everyday practice. This is considered undisputed as the confessional context *par excellence* and is the substrate for the three texts. Ideally, they form an expression of the first dimensions and serve as a beacon.

As far as the textual dimensions are concerned, there is the personal dimension of the aforementioned confession of faith that many people write upon joining as a member. This forms an important *trait d'union* between the personal belief of Remonstrants and the substance of Remonstrant tradition.

That substance manifests itself in the tradition of confessions of faith in two texts representing the two other dimensions. The informal dimension is a collective confession of faith. The RB has known a confession of faith (1621) from the beginning. However, this was also subject of a discussion from the start. This anti-confessional underflow gets renewed weight in early Remonstrant modernism. The RB then left the confession of 1621. However, with the rise of a second generation of modern theologians, a new confession was accepted in 1941: the confession of 1940.

These texts were not binding for the personal faith of Remonstrants, nor did they form the basis for the religious community. This dual function is common in many Protestant Churches. Remonstrants have since 1861 had a separate text with this function: the statement of principle. That is the third, formal dimension. It is called 'non-creed'. This makes the status of this text rather paradoxical. In fact, the meaning is only to be understood in relation to both other confessional texts. Thus it becomes evident that the Remonstrant tradition, which has been called moderate (*rekkelijk*), is actually quite precise (*precies*) when it comes to confessions of faith.

Exactly how precise, became clear during the process that led to a new confession of faith. To begin with, the process had an extensive build up. Between 1989 and 2004, it was repeatedly spoken and published about. Consequently in 2004, a collection of these texts about the tenability of the 1940 confession of faith was



published. The subject of the publication was extensively discussed internally in 2004 and 2005. After this phase was completed, it was decided to continue the conversation about the 'test of confession', which was also included in the collection of texts: could this be a start for a new Remonstrant confession? In this test, there was a theological shift, but moreover it turned out to be a testament to the 1940 confession of faith.