

A Great Multitude One Can Count

A Statistical Study on the Spatio-Temporal Development of the Reformed
Denominations in the Netherlands Between 1892 and 2015

Merijn Wijma

THEOLOGISCHE UNIVERSITEIT VAN DE GEREFORMEERDE KERKEN
IN NEDERLAND TE KAMPEN

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A Statistical Study on the Spatio-Temporal Development of the Reformed
Denominations in the Netherlands Between 1892 and 2015

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Preface

The past four years in which I wrote this dissertation have been very eventful. I moved twice, from Zwolle to Kampen and then to Zaandam. I started two new jobs; first working at the Praktijkcentrum (which later became Kerkpunt), but then found a job as the national archivist of the Archive and Documentation Centre (ADC) of the *Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt* in Kampen, and later started as an editor at the publishing company Buijten & Schipperheijn in Amsterdam. But most importantly: I met a fantastic man in this period and we are now happily married.

In this period, my dissertation has been a very constant factor. Digging into the dataset, analysing data, solving puzzles to nicely sort the data, and of course writing and rewriting the text. I have not been bored for one moment. I was asked to write this dissertation by Mees te Velde. He had been working on a dataset containing membership numbers of Reformed denominations since the seventies, now kept by the ADC, and had been looking for somebody to describe and use them for multiple years. He then asked me. This book is the result of my exploration of this dataset: a description and analysis of all the numbers that have been made available in the yearbooks that have been published throughout the years by multiple denominations. This was not without its challenges: moral objections, paper shortages and war have caused multiple years of missing data. Still this book has become a nice whole. A valuable book that may be of help to theologians, church leaders and other interested people and parties. I hope this research can help to test the stories about church growth and decrease that we know from anecdotes, gut feelings and the like. The interdisciplinary and empirical approach of this book may inspire many other (practical) theologians and scientists of religion.

In my research, I have been helped by many people. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisors George Harinck and Jan Rouwendal for their insight, knowledge and skilled guidance. I am not myself a theologian, historian or statistician, but they gave me the exact help I needed, while respecting me as an independent academic. I also want to thank co-supervisor Mees te Velde, who invited me to do this research and who has helped me with his meticulous and precise feedback on my text. In the beginning stages of this research, I was also given a lot of guidance by Peter Mulder, then spatial economist at the Vrije Universiteit, who helped me to order the data and to learn how to use Stata (statistical software). Floris Wagenaar has been of great assistance in checking and re-checking the data on the Gereformeerde Bond. In the writing process, I received a lot of aid from Chris Janse, who with his enormous knowledge of the Reformed world has made my text more accurate and who has done some very good detective work to give more clarity to some aspects of the research. Similarly, Frans Rozemond and Pieter van den Boogaard have helped me out in answering some of the questions that arose during my work with the dataset.

Finally, I want to thank my family. My husband, Marten Wybe van der Veen, who is always there for me and has supported me emotionally and academically throughout the process, my parents Ada de Meij and Hayo Wijma, who have always motivated me to try the things I did not know I could do, and my sister and brother-in-law Hilde Wijma and Arjan Engbers who are always there for me and have a very matter of fact view on stressful situations.

After all this, I hope you enjoy reading this book.

Merijn Wijma

Zaandam, 11 november 2021

Part I Introduction

1. Introduction

The Protestant denominations in the Netherlands have a long and rich tradition and history. They are a result of the Reformation and have been founded, grown, shrunk, split, merged, and survived time. As an unmistakable part of Dutch society, their formerly incontestable position has changed in recent years, but they nevertheless remain a notable presence. Of particular interest here is a specific branch of the broad group of Protestant churches, namely those that call themselves *Gereformeerd*. Twelve denominations of this type are currently in existence. What sets them apart is that they all adhere to three confessional forms: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt. The content of these symbols define *Gereformeerde* faith, which is why they are often referred to as the “Three Forms of Unity,” distinguishing *Gereformeerde* faith from other religions. Based on the teachings of Calvin, their founding father, the members of these denominations try to live responsible lives, towards both God and society.

The aim of the present study is to describe this group – not their history in particular, nor their theological background, but a more prosaic aspect of their existence: their statistical development. Recently, a dataset has become available containing statistical information from several *Gereformeerde* denominations for each local church, for each year. The source of these data are the annual yearbooks published by the different denominations containing contact information, reports on the past year’s events, and, more importantly for this study, statistical information on the local congregations. In my study, the membership numbers, demographic statistics, border traffic, and geographical distribution of eight different denominations or groups will be described and analysed for the years 1892-2015. After they have been described, an attempt will be made to explain the trends.

The occasion for this research project is the general consensus that churches in the Netherlands are changing; descriptions of and explanations for these changes have been treated, but to date they had not been connected to the statistical evidence in a systematic and comprehensive manner. The changes have rather been generally ascribed to the secularisation of modern society, that is, the disappearance of religion from all terrains of public life and a weakening of the church’s position. The current standard in society is non-religiosity; to be religious is an exception and a way of life that demands explanation or defence. The largest part of modern society, then, at least in the western world, is entirely secular. A small group, however, still persists and maintains its belief in God and its specific way of life. The *Gereformeerde* denominations whose statistical development is the focus of this study all emphasise continuity between their current position and the Reformation, albeit in different ways.

An important difference from the past, however, is the fragmentation among believers. Having started out as a single denomination (i.e., the Catholic church),

the church in the Netherlands now numbers, depending on how one counts, roughly sixty different Christian denominations. There is thus some disunity in the Dutch church, to say the least. Of course, sixty denominations is too large a number to study within the scope of this project. Instead, the choice was made to study the twelve *Gereformeerde* denominations, which have all sprung from the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* (NHK), the church with a dominating position in the Netherlands from the seventeenth century onwards. The twelve current *Gereformeerde* denominations all issue from schisms and secessions starting in the nineteenth century. The large number of secessions and conflicts may give rise to worry. Are all Protestant denominations destined to split at some point in time? Is it impossible for churches to maintain unity? Janse (1985) seems to think that the larger a denomination is, the greater the room for heterogeneity, differing opinions, and, possibly, schisms (p. 47). Despite the disharmony within denominations and the large number of separations and schisms, Dutch Reformed denominations still persist. None of them have truly disappeared. If there are denominations that no longer exist as independent institutions anymore, this is because they have joined or merged with another denomination. This is in itself a remarkable aspect of the group of churches that will be studied.

1.1. Research questions

Based on available data and literature that I have consulted in the course of this research, I have developed the following main research question:

What does the spatio-temporal development of the Reformed denominations in the Netherlands between 1892 and 2015 look like, and how can it be explained?

This question is quite broad. The reason for this broad formulation is the plethora of information available to me, as well as my intention to give as exhaustive a description as possible, together with an analysis of the conclusions that will be drawn from those descriptions. For this reason, I will also use the following sub-questions:

1. What does the temporal development of the Reformed denominations in the Netherlands between 1892 and 2015 look like?
2. What does the spatial development of the Reformed denominations in the Netherlands between 1892 and 2015 look like?
3. How can the spatio-temporal development of the Reformed denominations in the Netherlands between 1892 and 2015 be explained?

At the very outset, it should be noted that in 1892, only two – and the precursors of a third – of the twelve denominations to be studied here were in existence, and that published statistical information is available for only one of them. In

the course of time, more denominations followed suit and started publishing information on their membership.

1.2. Structure of this research

To answer the questions formulated in the previous section, this study will be divided into parts, most of which in turn consist of several chapters.

Part I, as the opening of this study, will introduce the research and explain its background. This first chapter introduces the topic and will furthermore present a brief overview of the later parts. Chapter 2 describes the historical framework which will be used as a background to the analyses in the later parts. Chapter 3 offers a summary of the dataset and describes how the data were collected and organised. Finally, chapter 4 will explain the methods used to obtain the descriptions and analyses made in the rest of the work.

Part II will attempt to address the first sub-question on the temporal development of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. Each denomination will have its own chapter. These chapters will start with a description of membership numbers, and any changes that occur through the years will be accounted for and related to the history of the church in question. Next, all available demographic information relating to age, birth rates, and death rates will be presented, followed by a description of border traffic with other denominations, and the numbers of local churches and their average size.

Part III will address the spatial development of each denomination. Here I will present maps of where the members of each denomination live at different points in time, how this distribution has changed, where the denominations are the biggest, and where they are absent. The segregation and urbanisation of each denomination will also be examined and described.

Part IV will test and elaborate hypotheses based on the conclusions of parts II and III.

Part V is the concluding part. It will offer a summary of the findings, together with an evaluation of the research and recommendations for further research.

The appendices will include additional information and statistics that were used for the descriptions and analyses.

1.3. The place of this research in the academic field

The main research question as formulated above is wide and difficult to answer. In order to address it, we will need to approach it from different angles and multiple disciplines. My research finds itself at the crossroads of religiography, sociology, economics, history, geography, and statistics. It is therefore necessary to explain why all these fields are involved, and why the six need to be combined here.

First of all, this work can be placed in the tradition of religiography, a discipline that was for some time practised in the Netherlands but has never really gained academic ground. Religiography is the geographical study of religion, and uses empirical methods to give a factual overview of the distribution and numbers of churches and their memberships. This field was pioneered by J.P. Kruijt, who in his 1933 work *De onkerkelijkheid in Nederland* gave a comprehensive overview of the numbers of people who were not members of any church and analysed possible causes of this secularisation. Following his work, the next comparable publication did not appear until 1953-1962, when the seven-volume *Handboek pastorale sociologie*, edited by W. Banning, appeared. These volumes examined the history, and socio-economic, political, and ecclesial relations in the country. Since then, however, publications relating to religiography or religious geography have been few and far between, and Knippenberg (1992) was the last to place himself firmly in this tradition. In his *De religieuze kaart van Nederland*, he offered a full overview of the geographic distribution of different groups of religious people in the Netherlands throughout Dutch history, along with analyses of possible reasons for the observed patterns and an overview of the history of these groups in order to contextualise the changes that occurred. I would like to follow in the line of Knippenberg, and use statistical data to present an overview of the developments in membership numbers for different churches as well as maps with the distribution of these groups, along with a discussion of possible causes and notable phenomena.

Secondly, my research will be firmly entrenched in sociology, the study of the functioning and behaviour of society, and in particular the sociology of religion, which focuses on the place of religion within that society. The sources I will be using here focus on secularisation and on the sociological development of different denominations. One example is Dobbelaere (1981) and his seminal work in which he defines and explores the concept of secularisation. Taylor's (2007) work has also proved instrumental. Sociology is also the focal point of Dekker (1992, 2013), who places the historical development of Reformed churches within a national context, albeit with special attention to the interaction between church and society. Accordingly, he does not discuss larger developments like schisms and mergers, but restricts himself mostly to a description of the social and societal background to the changes happening within the churches.

Another work of interest is that by Janse (1985), who gives an elaborate account of secularisation and of how the church can respond to this phenomenon. He focuses on the stricter, experientialist churches in the Netherlands, and describes how they attempt to maintain their particular identity and their membership numbers by avoiding society. His discussion of persistence and assimilation is very interesting and proved useful for explaining some of the changes that occurred in the churches within the present dataset. Finally, also De Hart

authored several publications for the *Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau* (SCP), describing the developments within churches in relation to the history of and sociological changes in Dutch society (SCP, 2004; De Hart, 2013).

Some sources from economics will also be used for the theoretical framework. These works mostly fall within the specific field of spatial economics and provided me with methodological support. Bisin and Verdier (2000), for instance, develop a framework for measuring the way religious values are transmitted between generations in relation to the influence of peers and role models on this process. Their model also serves to explain what happens to the socialisation process if the world in which the new generation grows up is more secular than their parents' world. Iannacone (1992; 1994) has likewise conducted very useful research on the reasons for the growth of strict churches, in departure from the more liberal churches. A very different group of studies in economics on which this study will draw are sources on segregation. I suspect that some churches are more segregated than others, and the sources from this field have offered me the necessary tools to investigate this assumption (Waldorf, 1993; Dawkins, 2004).

History is the next field of interest, especially since the developments within the church can hardly be explained without knowledge of the history of Dutch society and of the denominations studied. These two historical facets will be taken into consideration when the research questions are addressed. Apart from general history, there will also be a strong focus on church history. The relevant sources include works by Endedijk (1990), who offers a description of different periods in the development of GKN history. He compares these to the history of Dutch society as a whole and places church history in the wider context of the Netherlands. Selderhuis's (2006) handbook is another source that describes church history within a national context. Van Middelkoop (2009) focuses solely on church history, and does not do so in pure chronological terms, but by telling the story of each separate denomination. These historical works show how Reformed people have developed, and will function as a basis for the descriptions of the churches in the later parts of this study.

My research will also have a strong geographical component to it. In part III, I will give an extensive spatial description of the distribution and segregation of the denominations under study, as well as an analysis of the way they relate to urbanisation. The reason for this is that there are strong indications suggesting that churches in the Netherlands are highly location-specific. There are typical places where specific denominations are largest, as well as places where they are generally absent (Knippenberg, 1992). A famous example of this is the Dutch Bible belt, a patch of land running from Zeeland all the way up to the north-western parts of Overijssel. Members of experientialist churches are found almost exclusively in these parts of the country. The relationship between secularisation and urbanisation is another one that has been pointed to on many occasions. Cities, with their fast, future-oriented network structures,

are no place for religion to flourish. That happens more in calm, stable rural areas. In the footsteps of Knippenberg (1992), I will present maps of where the various churches are present and of how the geographical distribution has developed over time.

Finally, my study carries a strong emphasis on statistics. It is based on a dataset containing information on annual membership figures for every local church in each of eight denominations. With this information, I can offer an overview of the development of membership numbers, together with the proportion of confessing members to baptised members, giving us some indication of the age range of the churches. Next to this information, there are also demographic statistics available; deaths, births, confessions, and incoming and outgoing traffic. Together, these data should offer a good overview of the statistical history of each church. Interestingly, to date no real statistical analysis of church membership has been published. One possible explanation for this failure is that statistical descriptions of a given sub-population are usually the field of sociologists, historians, and geographers, whereas theology is firmly grounded in the humanities, a field of academia that has typically not shown itself most interested in numbers and statistics. However, my sense is that the combination of approaches is warranted, since a sound statistical, descriptive work can represent exactly the kind of basis historical, sociological, and geographical works can use.

Another possible reason why nothing like my study has appeared to date is that the data are only now available in their current form. Formerly, the only available information came from Statistics Netherlands (CBS), an organisation that provides statistical information on the Netherlands and held censuses roughly every ten years from 1795 to 1971, after which it stopped. The CBS data are also subjective; participants were asked for their religion and church membership. As it turns out (Advokaat, Prak, & Te Velde, 2007), people were often not entirely sure of the name of their denomination, leading to certain statistical errors. The CBS still publishes information on degree of religiosity, but the interval between measurements has increased and become less consistent than used to be the case when it still held censuses. Moreover, apart from non-religious, the CBS distinguishes only five religious groups: Catholic, Protestant, *Hervormd*, *Gereformeerd*, and Other. As the group of *Gereformeerden*, who used to constitute 10% of the total Dutch population until 1975, now only makes up 3% (CBS, 2018a), the lack of detail is unsurprising. However, for a long time the CBS data represented the only data available, and they gave rise to very useful publications such as that of Knippenberg (1992) and the publications *God in Nederland*, which appear every ten years and discuss the spiritual state of the Netherlands (Bernts & Berghuis, 2016). Kaski, a research institution affiliated with the Radboud University in Nijmegen, focuses on religion and society in particular, but also collects data on denominations. These collections, however,

are aimed mostly at the Roman Catholic Church and the PKN, and they do not specify any *Gereformeerde* denominations.

My research will combine factors of the works mentioned above. Its relevance is that methods and knowledge from all these fields of study will come together to create an analytical and explanatory whole; the statistical development of Reformed denominations will be embedded in their historical background, combined with data on the Dutch population.

My work represents a contribution to the literature describing religiosity in quantitative terms. Whereas the CBS, Kaski, Dekker, and Knippenberg base themselves on self-reported data on membership, my data come from the administrations of the churches themselves. These data were never available as a single integrated database that can be described and analysed in full. My study will become a kind of analytical atlas of the member distribution of different types of churches through the years, embedded in their respective histories.

My hope is that my work will also serve a more practical purpose. Reformed newspapers and magazines like the *Nederlands Dagblad*, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, *Woord & Weg*, etc., devote many articles to discussions on declining church membership and on ways to counteract this phenomenon. Often, however, these articles lack a strong empirical basis, simply because there are no reports available on the development of each denomination or on its current state compared to the rest of its history. Nevertheless, these publications are used to formulate advice and policies, even though the conclusions they present are not grounded in actual facts. My study aims to be of help in this respect, so that the conversation regarding Reformed people as a part of Dutch society may be held on the basis of precise statistics. The information that my research will make available may be used by anyone seeking data on the demographic and statistical context of the past and present. Therefore, upon completion the database will be made available for public use through the Data Archiving and Networked Services of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW).

1.4. Scope definition

In this section, we will define several terms that are used multiple times in this study and also set limitations on its scope.

In the first place, the present study deals with Protestant denominations of the *Gereformeerde (Reformed)* type. Even though this is a small group, making up at most 10% of the Dutch population between 1880 and 1975 and 3% in 2017 (CBS, 2018a), it is also a varied group and one deserving of attention. The church denominations that will be described in detail in this study are the following:

- *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (GKN) [Reformed Churches in the Netherlands]
- *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* (CGK) [Christian Reformed Churches]
- *Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt* (GKv) [Reformed Churches Liberated]
- *Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken* (NGK) [Netherlands Reformed Churches]
- *Gereformeerde Gemeenten* (GG) [Reformed Congregations]
- *Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland* (GGN) [Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands]
- *Hersteld Hervormde Kerk* (HHK) [Restored Reformed Church]
- *Gereformeerde Bond in de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* (GB) [Reformed Association in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands]

The Dutch abbreviations above will be used for these churches in the remainder of this study, since the names are too long to spell out in full each time and since the English abbreviations will be alien to many readers. A complete list of abbreviations is included in Appendix D.

The denominations listed here are all churches or groups that adhere to the three Forms of Unity already mentioned above for their organisation and teachings. Even though the HHK does not have the adjective *Gereformeerd* but *Hervormd* in its name, it meets the definition of a *Gereformeerde* church by its adherence to the three Forms of Unity.

More unusual in the above list is the GB, since it is not an actual denomination but an association within a denomination, namely the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (NHK), which after a merger in 2004 became the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (PKN). The NHK had been roughly divided into five “modalities”: liberal, middle orthodox, evangelical, confessional, and *Hervormd-Gereformeerd* (GB). In 2004, the former GKN united with the NHK. The liberal and evangelical wings of the resulting PKN would not consider themselves *Gereformeerd*, but things are less clear for the middle orthodox wing and even more so for the confessional wing, in that a part of these modalities may still adhere to the three Forms of Unity. Furthermore, identifying the membership of these middle orthodox and confessional groups is even more difficult than it is for the GB, let alone making an accurate estimate of their size. In 2011, De Jong and Kregting mapped the modalities of the PKN, concluding that 26% of PKN members identify as confessional, 16% as GB, and 20% as middle orthodox (*Trouw*, 9 september 2011). Unfortunately, these numbers are not sufficiently detailed to include the confessional wing in my study. As will become evident below, the problems associated with the construction of a reliable estimate for the size of the GB were themselves already substantial.

The order in which the denominations appear above will be maintained throughout this study. They are divided into two groups: the first four churches are referred to as “orthodox” and the second set of four are “experientialist”

(see paragraph 2.3 below for this classification). Within these sets, the denominations are listed chronologically in order of institution. Once again, the GB forms an exception in this respect; even though it is not the youngest member of the second group, it has been listed last because it has several characteristics that it does not share with other denominations (as noted above), and because data for this group were difficult to collect and least accurate (see paragraph 3.2 for discussion).

Although this study aims at an overview of all *Gereformeerde* churches, it is impossible to be complete. As the reader may have noticed, five of the twelve total *Gereformeerde* denominations – the GB does not qualify as such – are absent from the list because they do not publish membership statistics. The *Oud Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland* (OGG) are the oldest and largest of these, often estimated at 15,000-20,000 members, comparable to the GGN. The OGG can be characterised as experiential, like the GG and GGN, to which they are closely related. The *Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland (buiten verband)* represent a much smaller entity, but belong to the same group. For the sake of completeness, we also need to mention the existence of a number of independent congregations with a clearly experientialist character but have no denominational affiliation. As to the churches characterised as orthodox, three small denominations were established after 2000: the *Voortgezette Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (which issued from the GKN in 2004), *De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (which issued from the GKv in 2003), and the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (which issued from the GKv in 2009). These have been left out of this study due to their small size and the paucity of available information, due in most cases to the fact that they do not publish year-books.

This study deals with denominations in the Netherlands only. If they do have local congregations in other countries, these have not been included in the dataset. Since information on the GKN is available from 1892, that year functions as the starting point for our study. Data collection ends for the year 2015 in order to prevent chaos from the addition of data during writing. Writing was completed in 2019, so that any important developments after that year have not been included.