Discerning Christian anti-liberalism from the far-right in the Netherlands

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Introduction

The potential for the development of a Christian Right in the Netherlands is relatively limited. In 2019, out of a population of approximately 17 million, 20.1% associated themselves with the Roman Catholic Church, 14.8% with a range of liberal and conservative Protestant churches, 5% with Islam, and 5.9% with other groups, while 8.6% of the population attended some kind of religious service once a week or more (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2020). Unlike countries with a long tradition of an established church, the Dutch religious landscape is fairly decentralized and even fragmented: there are many types of conservative Christian churches, and the differences between them may not necessarily be obvious to the external observer. Among the more conservative Reformed traditions are the Gereformeerde Gemeenten, the Christian Reformed Church, and the Restored Reformed Church, which split from the moderate Protestant Church in the Netherlands. These churches are strongly represented in the Bible Belt, which is concentrated in suburban and rural spaces in the Netherlands. Politically, the Netherlands is among the most advanced constitutional democracies in Europe. Moderate to conservative Christians tend to be represented by the center-left Christian Union, while some conservative Christians may vote for the conservative-right Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (Reformed Political Party). Some conservative Christians have sporadically voted for the far-right Forum voor Democratie (Forum for Democracy).

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This chapter explores anti-liberalism in Dutch conservative Christian communities in relation to their openness to far-right content. It does so through the lens of three issues: 1) The political alliance between the conservative Christian Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP) and the far-right Forum voor Democratie (FvD); 2) the import of anti-liberal content by means of the Nashville Statement; and 3) the existence of a Christian far-right fringe, the so-called Bodegraven circle, which espouses a localized version of QAnonesque ideas. My main argument is that the susceptibility of conservative Christians to the far right (where this exists) seems to lean on particular intersections with anti-liberal sentiments. More specifically, these include the role of left-leaning elites in processes of secularization; anger about COVID-19 measures as well as political pressure to get vaccinated against COVID-19; and the use of the Christian imaginary of the end times in QAnonesque conspiracy theories by a fringe of radicalized Christians. This intersection of conspiracist thinking with anti-liberal sentiments is unusal among Dutch Christians; however, the pandemic provided relatively fertile ground for seeds of far-right content to be sown within conservative Christian communities. While the platform of the far right has been contested from within Christian communities in the Netherlands, its resonance is a warning sign that must be taken seriously.

The incoherent overlap of conspiracy theories, far-right politics, and conservative Christian politics

Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, far-right content entered conservative Christian communities through the political backdoor: the alliance that the Reformed SGP fostered with the far-right FvD, led by Thierry Baudet, for the purposes of the 2019 midterm elections, in which the FvD won 14.8% of the vote (Kiesraad n.d.). The FvD represents a form of elitist populism, nationalism, and cultural Christianism, vocalizing this in dramatic characterizations of left-leaning elites, Islam, and migration, as well as at any hint of restrictions of personal freedoms. The party has since styled itself after the Make America Great Again campaign and appears to be relatively well connected with far-right intellectuals and politicians internationally. Thierry Baudet is linked a circle of far-right thinkers that gathered around the now emeritus professor Paul Cliteur in the law faculty of Leiden University where Baudet wrote a doctoral thesis with strong romanticist–nationalist overtones. This circle briefly included right-wing opinion maker Eva Vlaardingerbroek, a recent convert to

Catholicism, who according to her own X-account has made appearances in Dutch, Swedish, and American media, and spoke about free speech at CPAC Hungary in 2023. Baudet's own international connections include far-right figures such as John Laughland (Botje and Cohen 2020, 104–105), Theodore Dalrymple (Botje and Cohen 2020, 158), and a circle of intellectuals who appropriated the work of Roger Scruton. Within the Netherlands, Baudet attracts the support of the alt-right ethno-nationalist group called Erkenbrand and is often criticized for tolerating antisemitism within the youth organization of the party, led by Freek Jansen (Botje and Cohen 2020, 223–226; Sterkenburg 2021, 213–218).

The FvD has received financial and intellectual support from among conservative Christians, who may be associated with the SGP, the FvD, or both. For example, Bart-Jan Spruyt is chair of a small anti-liberal and internationally seemingly well-connected foundation called the Edmund Burke Foundation, which in the past received donations from Pfizer and Microsoft and organized lectures and Summer Schools for emerging conservatives (Botje and Cohen 2020; Rietveld 2020, 55–56). According to Harm Ede Botje and Mischa Cohen, who wrote a lengthy book on Baudet's far-right networks in and beyond the Netherlands, this foundation facilitated the growth of Baudet's political movement in his early days (Botje and Cohen 2020, 53–61). It is unclear what its current activities are, and its most recent annual financial accounts (of just a few lines) give the impression of a dormant organization under the continued leadership of Bart-Jan Spruyt, Diederik Boomsma, and Jonathan Price, the latter of whom is an Oxford scholar and a graduate from Leiden Law School (Edmund Burke Foundation 2018). Its website still links to a number of conservative and far-right organizations (Edmund Burke Foundation n.d.), though it is unclear what the character of these connections is. Another example is Reformed entrepreneur Cor Verkade, who enabled the rise of Baudet's political party Forum voor Democratie by making meeting spaces available to them in the city center of Amsterdam (Botje and Cohen 2020, 145). He, as well as a circle of Reformed entrepreneurs under the leadership of Reformed lawyer (and FvD member) Jan Louis Burggraaf, has made significant financial contributions to the FvD. Verkade also supports the Transatlantic Christian Council, established by Henk Jan van Schothorst and Todd Huizinga, which, according to Follow the Money, acts as an international anti-genderist lobby (Wijnen and l'Ami 2020).

In light of the connections between parts of the Dutch Reformed elite and Forum voor Democratie, it is perhaps not surprising that the Dutch Reformed

party, the SGP, forged a short-lived strategic alliance with the FvD. The SGP is a very small party and has made use of the possibility of forging strategic alliances for electoral purposes (lijstverbindingen) in national elections. In the past, the SGP often allied itself with the Christian Union, a small centrist political party. However, in 2019, the SGP allied itself with the FvD, and gained an extra seat in the Dutch Senate as a result of it. This alliance coincided with disagreements over the suitability of political alliances between Christian parties and far-right parties at a European level, as well as over the direction of Christian Democracy in Central Europe, leading to the departure of the Christian Union from the increasingly right-wing European Conservatives and Reformists. This alliance between the SGP and right-wing politics soon came under scrutiny within the Dutch Reformed community, especially after Jan Schippers, who worked for the academic division of the SGP, suggested that the populist inclinations of the FvD were in tension with the foundations of the SGP (Beverdam 2019).

Jan Schippers' criticism coincided with a growing unease with populism and the apparent effects thereof under the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States. One of the main spaces for contention was the *Reformatorisch Dagblad* (Reformed Daily), which is the main news outlet for the orthodox Reformed community. In response to this criticism, the Guido de Brès-Stichting (Guido de Brès Foundation), the academic division of the SGP, issued a public-facing apologetic publication entitled *Concurrent of Bondgenoot: een Christelijk Perspectief of Populisme*, written by J. O. van de Breevaart (Van de Breevaart 2020). In the prologue, the chair of the foundation, Arjan Klaassen, suggested that the book's author was searching for "honest answers" to the sticky issue of populism (Van de Breevaart 2020, 8). In reality, the author chose to present existing academic definitions and critiques of populism as left–liberal framing (and therefore suspect, irrelevant, or both): "Onder het mom van een wetenschappelijke definitie is hier feitelijk sprake van framing" ("Although disguised as an academic definition, what we factually see is framing"; Van de Breevaart 2020, 19). Thus, he downplayed the risks of the far right (on the basis of anti-liberal sentiment) and suggested that populism is a possible ally for the Christian political right (as a new form of neo-conservatism).

The short-lived alliance between the SGP and the FvD needs to be understood within a transnational context. The political leader of the SGP, Kees van der Staaij, attended two key congresses in 2017 and 2019, one in Verona and one in Budapest. The official page listing his extracurricular activities lists attendance at a three-day conference of the World Congress of Families in Verona

in 2019, which was paid for by the SGP. The other conference that is listed is the three-day conference Pro Family and Pro Life, held in Budapest in 2017, with his attendance partially paid for by the SGP and partially by the conference organizers (Tweede Kamer 2022). These conferences are known as spaces where European (including Russian) and North American anti-liberals and far-right politicians intermingle. In 2019, the Orbán government awarded Van der Staaij a high Hungarian medal for his work in protecting European families, his efforts against the persecution of Christians, and his general support for Hungary (Rietveld 2021, 109–110). That Van der Staaij received this medal, which few had been willing to accept from the Orbán government, is perhaps not surprising given the general interest in Christianity in Central and Eastern Europe in the Netherlands, but this was something that the SGP could have considered more carefully.

Since 2019, the SGP has chosen a different direction under the administrative leadership of Dick van Meeuwen (Bouma 2021). It severed its ties with the increasingly extreme FvD, but a clear rejection of the ideas of the FvD remains lacking within the SGP, partially because its political leader, Van der Staaij, himself has been hesitant to do so. This ambivalence has a social and religious cost. By treating the political alliance with the FvD as merely a political opportunity in isolation from local, national, and international formations of the far right, the SGP made far-right content look like respectable prejudice at the time of its alliance. By since failing to speak out against far-right content with one voice, it continues to facilitate the relative respectability of far-right content among conservative Christians. However, at a local level, SGP city councilors have been increasingly unwilling to form coalitions or otherwise collaborate with the FvD. Some major SGP figures have distanced themselves from the FvD as well, or even left the SGP (Keultjes 2021). This makes a significant difference at a local level. Even so, the churches remain spaces in which support for either the SGP or the FvD may continue to exist, which puts pressure on local religious leaders to navigate political ambivalences and articulate clear boundaries.

The American Nashville Statement against homosexuality in the polder

The second dimension to the growth of the Christian Right in the Netherlands is the Dutch translation of the American-made Nashville Statement of

the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which made its rounds among evangelical circles in the United States in 2018, amassing signatories from a great variety of conservative Christian churches and organizations in the United States (Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood n.d.). The Nashville Statement embodies a conservative backlash to left–liberal stances on sexuality and understands homosexuality, as well as other non-traditional relations, as an unjustified self-conception (Article 7): "We deny that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is consistent with God's holy purposes in creation and redemption." This statement was translated by a group of Dutch pastors toward the end of 2018 and sent around the Dutch Christian landscape to ask for more signatories (Nashville-verklaring n.d. a). The signatories appeared to include Van der Staaij, church leaders, and even conservative Christian university professors. Although the statement itself is more expressive of Christian anti-liberalism than far-right anti-liberalism, its American origins impressed on its Dutch supporters a stronger rejection of homosexuality than was common in Dutch conservative Christian churches: whereas in many Dutch conservative churches, an acceptance had been growing of the reality that some people *are* gay (as opposed to practicing), the Nashville statement asserted that being gay would be unnatural in itself.

Its publication caused a major outcry in January 2019, including from within the Dutch Christian community. It turned out that not everyone who was listed had actually signed the statement. Some had merely expressed sympathy with the project, including Van der Staaij. But the harm had been done. The impression given was that the statement enjoyed wide-ranging support among conservative Christians in the Netherlands. The statement has led a quieter life since, although it has triggered further conversations in a number of conservative churches. The appropriation of the Nashville Statement is perhaps an indication of the broader interconnectedness between Anglophone evangelicals and conservative Dutch Christians. For example, through the translation of books, some American pastors, including John Piper and Tim Keller, have become household names among Dutch conservative Christians, as has the British theologian Tom Wright. Moreover, churches maintain formal relationships with Reformed and Presbyterian denominations abroad, and their seminaries are spaces of connection for the Reformed and Presbyterian intelligentsia. This is only somewhat reflected on the Dutch website of the Nashville Statement, which references the Southern Baptist Convention and the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church in the United States, both known as extremely conservative associations of churches which

backed Donald Trump. The website also includes a letter to Olaf Latzel, pastor of the St Martini Church (Evangelische Kirche Deutschland, Bremen), who is known for his controversial teachings on homosexuality. There are also links to Walter Heyer Ministries and the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry (Nashville-verklaring n.d. b).

Some of the apparent signatories (though the full list has been taken offline) include pastor and spokesman of the translators Rinie van Reenen, pastor Orlando Bottenbley, and public intellectual Bart-Jan Spruyt, who continued to defend his support for the statement in the media. What stood out is the relatively large support within networks in the Restored Reformed Church, the Christian Reformed Church, and variations of the Gereformeerde Gemeenten, whereas representation from Pentecostal leaders, for example, relatively limited. This is reflective of the group of individuals who steered its publication. What is interesting is that the Nashville network in the Netherlands shows some overlap with religious figures who have shown themselves to be susceptible to conspiracy theories or who have felt the attraction of allying with the far right, which will be discussed in the next section.

However, this does not mean that a conservative perspective on gender and sexuality automatically implies far-right content. This content exists in subsets of conservative Dutch churches independently of the far right; however, within its international networks, anti-liberal content is not always neatly separated from far-right content, especially on issues to do with gender and sexuality. As a para-church initiative (Byrd 2020), its shape as a petition is curious: whereas its initiators may have looked to maximize its impact by amassing signatures, as in the United States, this also shows something significant—that support for the statement is organized along the lines of the initiators' personal networks, which may not be reflective of the churches to which they are attached.

A Christian far-right fringe: The Bodegraven circle and their QAnonesque conspiracy theory

A third dimension is the appearance of a Christian far-right fringe. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a handful of people who identify as (non-denominationally) Christian spread on their social media a localized version of QAnon—a well-known conspiracy theory about satanic pedophilia among the elite. They frequented a cemetery in the Dutch town of Bodegraven, where they left flowers to commemorate the children who were the supposed victims. One of the

alleged perpetrators was Jaap van Dissel, chair of the Dutch Outbreak Management Team, the main advisory body to the Dutch government on matters regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. In an informative video on behalf of the public news show Nieuwsuur, journalist Rudy Bouma narrated how a handful of radical Christians were spreading conspiracy theories in the Netherlands through their social media channels, including the YouTube channel The Red Pill Journal. Their conspiracy theories are partially homegrown, like the Bodegraven conspiracy, but they also borrow from QAnon regarding the supposed Great Reset plans of the World Economic Forum and the COVID-19 pandemic (Bouma 2022).

This Bodegraven circle has a relatively small and volatile following. Their support tends to depend on specific triggers, such as COVID-19 measures, that may come and go. Their network is not necessarily limited to radicalized Christians. Moreover, they are one thread of a more diverse web of far-right fringe groups in the Netherlands. The Bodegraven circle fits with the analysis of Nikki Sterkenburg, who argues that new far-right fringes in the Netherlands operate more openly compared to, say, the neo-Nazi far right, which tends to remain in the background and whose followers have learned to navigate the boundaries of criminal law (Sterkenburg 2021, 24). Instead, these Christian conspiracists threaten political leaders in their homes, share their footage publicly, and openly rely on a radical version of their Christian faith. This combination is indicative of what Matthew Rowley calls a form of *prophetic activism* (Rowley 2021). Several of the Bodegraven protagonists have been taken into custody: a few were sentenced for intimidating and threatening two cabinet ministers, and two more were referred for psychological assessment. Even so, the Dutch authorities are worried about the radicalization of conspiracy thinkers (Botje 2022). Although this is a worrisome development, Sterkenburg argues, based on interviews with different types of far-right followers, that the ones who are most visible are also the ones who may be least persistent when they receive help with their immediate personal problems (Sterkenburg 2021, 231–232).

How significant is the Bodegraven circle to the development of a violent Christian Right? According to historian Beatrice de Graaf, a violent Christian-Right movement does not quite exist in the Netherlands: according to her, radical ideas must be distinguished from the willingness to engage in violence, which may develop as a result of a process of radicalization (de Graaf 2021, 4). This willingness to engage in violence occurs in a handful of people who associate with religious fringes outside the Christian mainstream: Dutch Christians regard violence to be incompatible with the traditional Christian

faith (De Graaf 2021, 6–7). Even so, conspiracy theories and radicalization are problems for Dutch churches: 1) they assume a prophetic alternative to the churches; 2) anti-liberal aspects to their protests may resonate with conservative Christians' attitudes to wider society; and 3) their apocalyptic style and performances of militant victimhood (or even martyrdom) reverberate with familiar theological language and imaginary. Via processes of contagion, they may influence larger circles of supporters and sympathizers who may not themselves engage in violence but who might agree with the more threatening language—or who might simply share certain anti-liberal sensitivities on the basis of Christian anti-liberal sentiment.

The increasing susceptibility as well as the resilience to far-right content among parts of the conservative Christian community was particularly demonstrated in the aftermath of a livestreamed sermon on "The Great Reset" by pastor Paul Visser (Protestant Church in the Netherlands) in October 2021 (Visser 2021). Visser's sermon sent shock waves through the Netherlands. In this sermon, Visser connected the image of the apocalyptic beast (Revelation 13) with the supposed Great Reset plans of the World Economic Forum (though he confused this with the World Health Organization), the COVID-19 measures, and the ways in which elites supposedly used the pandemic to force significant societal change to the disadvantage of conservative Christians' lifestyles. It was the sort of sermon one might have expected from radical fringe figures, such as opinion maker Laurens van der Tang, pastor Rinie van Reenen, pastor Rennie Schoorstra, and writer and evangelist Jaap Dieleman in his magazine *Eyeopener* (van Beek 2021). Visser, who is known as a mainstream conservative from the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, saw his sermon picked up by the far-right party Forum voor Democratie as well as former Victoria's Secret model Doutzen Kroes, who promotes conspiracy theories through her social media. After a public outcry, Paul Visser apologized for his sermon, although some conservative Christians continued to see anti-liberal grains of truth in it (de Fijter 2021). This incident powerfully shows the significance of apocalyptic content, as secularized by the far right (van der Tol and Rowley 2021; van der Tol and Gorski 2022).

Although many Christians were embarrassed by the public debate over Christianity and the far right, the sermon may have been an important trigger for lay Christians to consider the boundaries between Christianity and the far right. In part, this was facilitated through lay contributions to the *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, a daily newspaper that is read by conservative Christians in the Netherlands. Some churches had already spoken out against the far

right at a senior level. For example, the synod of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands had earlier adopted the book *Heilige Strijd* by Beatrice de Graaf as an official synodical publication. This book explores the relationship between apocalyptic ideas and the search for security, and warns against the willingness to engage in violence and oppression in response to perceptions of evil (de Graaf 2017). However, among lay conservatives, such condemnation may have been less explicit or less confident. Anecdotally, many conservative Christians knew of fellow congregants who voted for the FvD or who played around with conspiracy theories. But who had the authority to say how far too far to the right would be? Perhaps the sermon by Visser provided a much-needed opportunity for lay Christians to engage with this question.

Conclusion

The decentralized organization of Christian churches in the Netherlands facilitates a space in which highly engaged conservatives, such as Bart Jan Spruyt, Cor Verkade, Henk Jan van Schothorst, Jan Louis Burggraaf, Rinie van Reenen, and Arjan Klaassen, are able to foster transdenominational and even transnational engagements with far-right politics. The strength of their initiatives in large part depends on the strength of their personal networks and interests. In the case of the Nashville Statement, these networks were significant within a specific number of denominations, but they could not begin to claim to speak on behalf of all conservative Christians in the Netherlands. Instead, this created space for moderates to affirm their disagreement with the position of the Nashville Statement. In the meantime, the SGP has moved away from a fraternal relationship with the FvD, lay contributors have spoken out against seeds of the far right in Christian circles, and, following the now retracted Great Reset sermon by Paul Visser, there is a greater awareness of the risks of the far right within Dutch conservative churches. This shows some of the resilience of Dutch conservative churches. In all of this, it remains important for churches to actively maintain the boundaries between Christianity and the far right, as Hannah Strømmen and Ulrich Schmiedel demonstrate (Schmiedel and Strømmen 2020). The Protestant Church in the Netherlands has assumed this responsibility by, for example, adopting the book *Heilige Strijd* by Beatrice de Graaf as an official publication of the synod, and there may be scope for further explicit rejections of the far right across the conservative denominations.

The three issues perhaps present a sliding scale involving a selection of Christian anti-liberalism concerning gender and sexuality, openness to collaboration with far-right political parties, and the promotion of conspiracy theories. The further down the scale, the smaller the support is within conservative Christian communities, and this is instructive. This scale indicates the priority of Christian anti-liberalism over support for the far right. Hence, a distinction must be made between Christian anti-liberalism and anti-liberalism as espoused by the far right. Motivations for anti-liberal orientations may be fundamentally different: Christian anti-liberalism may appeal primarily to the Bible, whereas far-right anti-liberalism may or may not take notice of biblical texts, yet alone attach spiritual authority to them, and instead places at the front the survival of white European cultural Christianity. Moreover, Christian anti-liberalism is not altogether anti-liberal: conservative Christians enjoy many freedoms that are grounded in the liberal tradition, although some disagree on specific ethical issues, such as abortion, sexual minorities, and issues in medical ethics. Christian anti-liberal sentiments are shared relatively broadly within conservative Christian communities in the Netherlands; this distinguishes them from liberal Christianity as well as from a society that is perceived to be liberal and secular. Their anti-liberalism may be present in political ideas, local conventions, theological rhetoric, and activism. But whereas Christian anti-liberal sentiments may be widely shared among Dutch conservative Christians, conservative Christianity's affair with far-right ideas does not seem to have grown deep roots.

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