

“Although We are Catholic, We are Dutch”—The Transition of the Dutch Catholic Church from Sect to Church as an Explanation for its Growth and Decline

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The Dutch Catholic Church has experienced an immense growth and an equal measure of decline in the last two centuries. This article explains this development by using the sect-to-church theory, as has been developed by the rational choice theory of religion. This theory explains the growth and decline of a church by the degree of tension it has with society. Historical evidence is used to test this theory with regard to the Dutch Catholic Church. As long as that church was in tension with society it kept growing, but as soon as the tension decreased, which was already taking place prior to 1960, it declined.

INTRODUCTION

The Dutch Catholic Church has dramatically changed its face since World War II. From a community that was posed as an example for the universal Catholic Church because of its unity, its social and religious organizations, its conformity to church doctrine, and its high number of clerics, it became the outcast of the Catholic world, deprived of its organizations, suffering from low participation, factional conflict, and a scarcity of candidates for the priesthood. This article examines this change, arguing for a particular “sect-to-church” theory as has been developed by scholars of rational choice theory on religion. This theory, which was the basis for *The Churching of America* (Finke and Stark 1992), may provide an explanation for the changes in the Dutch Catholic Church.

In the second section I will summarize the sect-to-church theory. In doing so, I will focus primarily on the dynamics between deviance, or tension, and mobilization, and on their supposed influence on church growth, rather than on other factors that, according to the theory, may also lead to a decline in attachment (such as the influence of other religious organizations, the state, or the modernization of society). To illustrate my hypothesis, I will examine the history of Dutch Catholicism in the 19th and the 20th centuries in the third section. In the fourth and final section I will conclude the argument.

RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY ON SECT-TO-CHURCH MOVEMENTS

The rational choice theory on religion orders religious groups according to their degree of tension with or, synonymously (Stark and Bainbridge 1996:142), deviance from, the surrounding society. The more a religious group holds to distinct beliefs and practices, has separate social networks, and is antagonistic to the surrounding society, the more this group is believed to be in tension with, or deviant from, the surrounding society (Stark and Finke 2000:143). Rational choice theory credits deviant religious organizations with a potential for growth because membership

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in a deviant organization is costly by nature: when switching in or out of the religious group, members and potential members find that many opportunities will be lost and that there are many new demands to be met. Tension is thus a prerequisite for social, psychic, and secular resources to flow to and be retained by a religious organization. An organization in tension will ask a lot from its members, who in turn will give a lot to the organization.

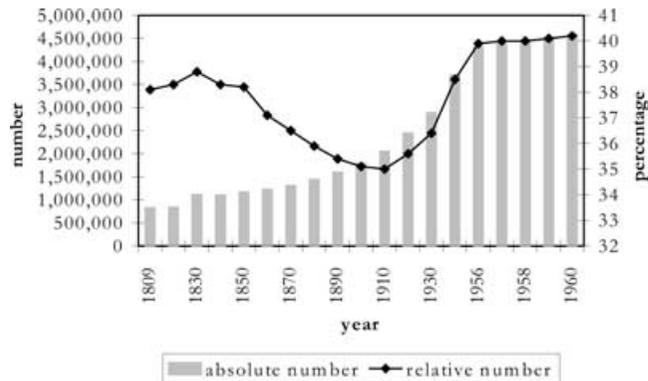
If a religious organization is to grow, it must find means to increase the conformity of people to the organization. As rational choice theory supposes that humans are rational, utility maximizing actors, it is likewise supposed that people will become attached to a religious movement when they, through rewards offered by the organization, have a stake in conformity to the movement (Stark and Bainbridge 1996:246, 276). The theory distinguishes between “attachments,” “investments,” and “beliefs” as rewards with which people can develop these stakes. Furthermore, by deliberately offering or withholding these rewards, a religious organization can tie people exclusively to the organization and ensure that they will give their rewards to the organization alone. Such a policy will even tend to increase the tension of the organization with the outside world, as distinct, separate, and antagonistic relationships are reinforced. Thus, these measures are supposed to contribute to the religious organization’s success, although they seem to make it less attractive and increase its costs.

When a religious organization is deviant, its members will differ from the rest of society in terms of their norms, behavior, and social contacts. However, over time, the organization will, as sect-to-church theory supposes, decrease its tension with the outside world. First, it is expected that a religious organization will socialize its members to the general and specific norms of society (Stark and Bainbridge 1996:268), thus causing a decline in tension between the religious group and the wider society. Second, the mere success of a deviant religious organization (in worldly terms) is also expected to contribute to the decline of tension. As we have seen, a deviant religious group demands a lot from its members and receives a lot from them. It exchanges religious rewards for secular ones and will consequently have a lot of members, money, and buildings, and thus assets in the secular society as well. This very success (according to secular norms) makes it a respected part of society, which further decreases the tension between the religious group and the surrounding society (Stark and Bainbridge 1996:270). In short, socialization and growth make deviant religious organizations become churches (Stark and Finke 2000:143): religious organizations not in tension with the surrounding society.

According to rational choice theory, a church, because of its lack of tension with the surrounding society, will have great difficulties in mobilizing people. It has no possibility to charge people when they want to become members or when they want to leave the organization. As a church is a part of society, it makes less of a difference, both for the church and for individuals, if someone is a member of this religious organization or not, or whether he or she wants to become an active member or not. For the religious organization, a further decrease of tension appears to be a solution to this deadlock: when tension with society is lower and therefore the costs for exchange with the organization are lower, it will be easier for society as a whole and for prospective members to exchange rewards with the religious organization, which enables it to grow (Stark and Finke 2000:205). In the long run, however, lowering tension is not a rational option for a religious organization. As the tension with the surrounding society becomes lower, it not only becomes easier for people to exchange with the organization, it also becomes easier and less costly for the members of the organization to exchange rewards with the wider world. These exchange relationships will be at the cost of the religious organization.

The heart of the sect-to-church theory is the thesis that deviant religious organizations can become successful, but that they bear the seed of decline in them. My intention is to concentrate on these internal and institutional factors to see if they occurred in Dutch Catholicism in the way rational choice theory hypothesizes, and to correlate them with its rise and fall in modern times.

FIGURE 1
MEMBERSHIP OF THE DUTCH CATHOLIC CHURCH 1809–1960



Source: Census.

THE DUTCH CATHOLIC CHURCH FROM A DEVIANT ORGANIZATION TO A CHURCH ORGANIZATION

Tension, Stakes, and Growth Since 1850

The Catholic Church in the Netherlands experienced a growth in attachment that started in the second half of the 19th century and continued in some respects until the 1960s. Because of the lack of data, the trend can only be noted. The absolute number of Catholics had been growing continuously since the first census in 1809, and proportional numbers had been increasing since 1910.

Correspondingly, the number of parishes grew 75 percent between 1864 and 1960 (Goddijn, Jacobs, and van Tillo 1999:502; Catholic Orientation Center for Foreigners 1959:10–11; Van Dam 1913:134). Only data from 1960 indicate more precisely how widespread the attachment of the Catholics to the church had become. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents professed to go to church regularly, 91 percent said grace at meals, 79 percent prayed at other moments during the day, 64 percent read a church magazine, 78 percent a Catholic newspaper, and about 90 percent sent their children to a Catholic school or were engaged in one of the many other Catholic social organizations (Kruijt and Goddijn 1962:238, 242, 243; Peters and Schreuder 1987:146). What did the church do to mobilize the Catholics to these high levels of commitment?

During the 19th century, the Catholic Church in the Netherlands changed from a marginalized but tolerated minority into a powerful organization that challenged Dutch society. This change was caused by a two-sided conflict of the church—with the state and with society. First, the church was in conflict with the liberal state of 1848 and especially with its neutral-enlightened identity. The conflict issue for the church was that the state did not respect the constitutional freedom of the church, especially in the fields of education and charity. In the case of education, there was a right to establish denominational schools, but as the state formulated higher standards for these schools, it became increasingly difficult for the church to meet these standards. Financial support was requested, but not granted (Witlox 1969:308–14, 352–55, 384). In the case of charity, the Constitution of 1848 guaranteed the primary role of the churches in this respect. Publicly funded assistance was to be provided only when private charity proved to be insufficient. As the following decades were times of industrialization and urbanization, private charity did indeed prove to be insufficient. New laws on poverty and greater public funding finally completely overwhelmed private charity. Second, the Catholic Church was in conflict with the Calvinist elite in the Netherlands, which excluded Catholics from the public sector. A questionnaire issued by

the Catholic journal *De Tijd* in 1848 showed that Catholics were heavily underrepresented in academic professions and in the civil service. The journal suggested that this could be attributed not only to the low level of education of Catholics, but also to social discrimination.

In response to these conflicts, bishops withdrew Dutch Catholics from wider society and forced them to conform to the Catholic movement alone. In 1869, a mandate was published that forbade them to attend public schools. Instead, Catholics were required to attend Catholic schools, and where these were not available, they were to be founded. In the case of charity, such severe provisions were not made, but between 1848 and 1960 the bishops protested repeatedly against the growing role of public charity and investigated ways church charity could be better organized in order to discredit the necessity of state control on charities (Van der Valk 1986:9–10, 12–26, 66). In 1933, shortly before elections, the bishops warned Catholics that their salvation would be at stake if they mingled in organizations other than Catholic ones. Only in unity could the aims of the individual Catholic and the re-Christianization of society (in the Catholic way, of course) be realized (*Mandement* 1933). In 1954, the bishops again stressed Catholic organizational unity. The success of the Catholic Church in society and the positive influence of Catholic teaching on society as a whole had been accomplished, as they saw it, by the unity of all believers. To preserve and extend these successes, the unity of the Catholics had to be preserved, and they again forcefully forbade Catholics to interact in a variety of organizations of socialist, communist, and liberal character (*De katholieke* [1954]).

Social prejudices were more difficult to combat. Catholics made great efforts to show they belonged to the Dutch nation, which bore a distinct Protestant character due to history (the origins of the state lie in a 17th-century Calvinist revolution) and with the Protestant House of Orange (which has ruled the country since it became an independent kingdom 1815/1830). Catholics attempted, for example, to correct the view that they had been disloyal during the Dutch Revolt. Later, they revived medieval culture (expressed in neo-gothic art and architecture) to emphasize that the unified Dutch state did not originate in the Revolt, but had older roots of which Catholicism had been an inherent part. The climax of these efforts was the attempt in 1898 to “prove” that the Protestant Queen, Wilhelmina, had actually descended from the medieval/Catholic Saint Elisabeth of Thuringia and Emperor Charlemagne (Raedts 1992:714–23)!

Meanwhile, the Dutch Catholic Church mobilized its members by offering them distinct religious and social rewards that they would lose by leaving the church, and by monitoring their social, religious, and private compliance to the Catholic movement. The church offered a religion with strong religious rewards, influenced by the worldwide ultramontane promotion of neo-scholasticism. This theology promised perfection in a life after death if one led one’s life in line with the commands of God. As the Roman Catholic Church and its teaching were considered to be the only true source of knowledge of this God, compliance with the church was necessary to reach this supernatural salvation. By participating in the sacraments in particular, Catholics could take part in the historical act of salvation once extended through Jesus Christ (Kreling 1958).

As civil society developed, opportunities to interact with non-Catholics became increasingly available to Catholics. In response, parallel Catholic social organizations were founded with regard to virtually all aspects of society (Duffhues et al. 1985). As these organizations were the only ones allowed for Catholic lay social engagement, they served to keep Catholics bound to the Catholic movement exclusively. For example, in addition to the schools and charity organizations already discussed, Catholic youth organizations, labor unions, and sports organizations were founded. From 1846 on, priests and laymen alike, in organizations such as Saint Vincent’s Society and Kolping Family, created opportunities for children of the working class to receive enhanced education and to engage in meaningful leisure activities (Selten 1991). Official church teaching opposed sports as being morally dubious and creating the opportunity to mingle with non-Catholics on a friendly basis, but as sports became a popular activity among Catholics, it became clear that there was a distinct need for them. To avoid losing support, exclusive Catholic sports organizations under clerical control were founded, culminating in a national Catholic soccer league (Derks and

Budel 1990). The socialist unions were, from the point of view of the church, a real threat to the Catholic workers. Some clerics actively engaged in the workers' movement and pleaded for unions, but only the success of socialist and Protestant unions convinced the bishops of the need to found (Catholic) labor unions, which Catholics were required to join from that point on (Van Meeuwen 1998:31–59).

The most effective method to control and mobilize Dutch Catholics was the house visit. Already at the Provincial Council of 1865 it was decreed that the parish priest had to visit all the families in his parish every year, around Easter. He had to see if the family had been participating in religious education and the sacraments, if the children were being raised as Catholics, and if they were obeying their parents. He also had to see if family members were in contact with secular culture, if they behaved in a Catholic way, and if any doubts existed in their faith. If necessary, the priest had to further devotion and membership in Catholic organizations (Caspers 1995). Noncompliance with the rules set by the church meant social exclusion and deprivation of the religious and social rewards offered by the Catholic movement, as some autobiographical publications show (Wolters 1985).

Thus, from the 1850s through the 1960s, the tension of the Dutch Catholic Church increased and Catholics were offered great stakes in conformity to the church. The church became distinct by creating its own subculture and national history. It became separate because Catholics were forbidden to enter the larger cultural, educational, and political society. And the church became antagonistic, fiercely opposing modern times, contemporary culture, and the liberal state. Dutch Catholics were mobilized by offering them a religion that provided great social and religious rewards, which were available only on terms set by the church. For this purpose, a variety of Catholic social organizations were founded, and in these Catholics were also educated and socialized in Catholic values, which further attached them to the Catholic Church movement. Whereas these organizations functioned as a mechanism for control and mobilization in public Catholicism, the house visits did the same in the private sphere. Catholics were thus forced, because of the tension of the church, to invest heavily in their church or to leave it. Catholics who left the church were penalized with the loss of social and religious rewards. Membership and, especially, active membership was thus a rational choice for Catholics in this period, which explains why the attachment to the church grew between 1850 and 1960.

The Move to the Social Center

The Dutch Catholic Church experienced a tremendous growth in attachment until 1960. However, even before 1960 there were signs that the attachment of the Catholics was in decline. The growth in Catholic membership, in both absolute and proportional numbers, flattened after the war, as can be seen in Figure 1. Also, church attendance declined in the three major cities of Amsterdam (1948: 53 percent; 1967: 38 percent), Rotterdam (1951: 48 percent; 1967: 33 percent), and Utrecht (1950: 67 percent; 1967: 49 percent) and in a number of smaller towns (Kusters 1968:159). This beginning decline shows that Dutch Catholics had become less interested in the church. Rational choice theory suggests that this was caused by processes of socialization and a decline in tension, both originating from the church itself.

A "civilization" process and the school sector promoted the socialization of the Catholics. In the early 1900s, Catholics were statistically more involved in crimes than people from other denominations. They were especially engaged in petty crimes, like pickpocketing, alcohol abuse, and burglary (Kemppe 1938). Therefore, a "civilization offensive" among Catholics was started. The youth organizations played a huge role in this offensive. In these organizations, youth were not only offered leisure activities, religion, and education, they were also taught how to be good and reliable workers, fathers, and members of society. Several religious organizations continually sifted through the lowest classes of society, looking for the "rascals" and involving them, and their families, in "sound" sports, leisure, and educational activities (Heikens 1985). The Catholic

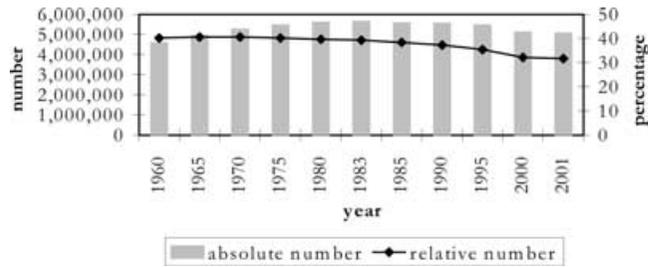
abolitionist movement was a short-lived but very active undertaking. The society *Sobriëtas* fought the evils of alcoholism in the families of Catholic workers through a network of organizations, including alcohol-free assemblies, cafés, and libraries (Van Schaik 1985). Together with the expanding charity sector, these civilization efforts brought the average living standard of the Catholics to a higher level, and their part in the crime statistics decreased.

The expanding school sector further contributed to the integration of Catholics in society. In 1917, state and church reached an agreement on public funding of denominational schools: the state held the right to formulate the standards of quality; all else, especially the content of the courses, was left to the responsibility the church. This subsidiarity principle was applied to the charity sector (cf. Wijnen-Sponselee 1997:32–33, 53–61) and to other Catholic organizations (Pennings 1991:145–49) as well. Increasing endowments from the government furthered the expansion and quality of the Catholic schools. Catholics began to enter into (Catholic) secondary education, which they had previously done only hesitantly because of the “naturalistic character” of the courses. The crown on the Catholic emancipation was the establishment of a Catholic university. In 1923 it was opened in Nijmegen in the east of the Netherlands. Deriving its name from the (medieval) Emperor Charlemagne, the university aspired to a nonsectarian Catholic identity and to play a beneficial role for the whole of Dutch society. The emancipatory goals of the university, such as increasing the number of Catholic intellectuals and the number of Catholics in academic professions, were reached within one generation: in 1955, the proportion of Catholic students, professors, and civil servants was almost equal to the proportion of Catholics in Dutch society (Matthijssen 1958:30–38). From the early 1930s on, Catholics increasingly went to work in higher-level, better-paid jobs, which previously had been closed to them (Kuiper 1964).

Tension further declined as Catholics came to see themselves more as a part of Dutch society. In the last quarter of the 19th century, bishops stimulated Catholics to participate in national festivities concerning the royal House of Orange (Groot 2000). The subsidies of the state to the Catholic organizations and the political influence of the Catholic People’s Party, which was one of the two biggest parties in Parliament from 1918 until the 1970s, solved most of the church’s problems with the state. Around 1900, many apologetic and proselytizing societies and fraternities had the aim of converting the Dutch to Catholicism and “defending” the Catholic faith from attacks by “others.” However, two decades later it was noticed, especially in elite circles, that the opposition to modernity hindered the integration of the Catholic Church. From then on, these societies began to lose their antagonistic characteristics. It became fashionable to convince others of the richness of the Catholic faith and its positive contribution to wider society (for example, at the centennial of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, cf. Loeff et al. 1913), rather than aggressively trying to win converts. Even before World War II, ecumenical circles were discussing the similarities rather than the differences between Catholics and Protestants. The contribution of Catholics to the resistance during the Nazi occupation (1940–1945) received wide recognition and high esteem. After 1945, new apologetic initiatives centered on a humanistic general Christian morality, rather than a specific Catholic one. The proselytizing activities were changed into ecumenical ones, aiming no longer to attract members from other churches but to work together for the Christianization of Dutch society (see, e.g., Jacobs 1998).

All in all, one can say that between 1930 and 1960 the Catholic Church became an accepted institution in Dutch society. There were a large number of Catholics, and thanks to the efforts of the church itself, they had become ordinary Dutch citizens. They successfully integrated into middle-class society, not least because of the educational system. On the ideological level, the church no longer sought confrontation but was investigating how positive aspects of modern society and Catholicism could go together. Tension with the state came to an end around 1920, as Catholic social activities became subsidized, and tension with society ended around 1945, after Catholics had shown their loyalty to the nation in the resistance. Although tension remained high in some aspects (see above), in other aspects, at least officially, the tension declined noticeably. According to rational choice theory, such a decline in tension means a lower demand of the church

FIGURE 2
MEMBERSHIP OF THE DUTCH CATHOLIC CHURCH 1960–2001



Sources: Census, KASKI.

on its members. It became easier and less costly for the Catholics to participate in society, and participating in the Catholic Church or Catholic organizations was no longer the only option available. A decline in participation is the logical consequence.

Decrease in Tension as a Strategy

After 1960, the decline of the Dutch Catholic Church continued, and at a much faster pace than before. Indeed, the decline is perceptible in every aspect of church commitment. The proportion of Catholics in Dutch society has gradually declined since the end of Vatican II in 1965. After 1983, when a new constitution left the church administration to the denominations themselves, the absolute number of Catholics also declined. This is shown in Figure 2.

The adherence of a Catholic to his or her church can be established by analyzing the levels of participation in the sacraments (Table 1). Ever since annual counts of Mass attendance began in 1966, the number of Dutch Catholics attending Mass has been declining. Furthermore, although the number of children baptized counted as a percentage of those registered as Catholic at the civil administration has been high, it too has declined (see Column 3). Column 4 presents the number of children celebrating their communion as a percentage of the number of those baptized seven years earlier. This column shows that 6–12 percent of the children had lost contact with the church by the age of seven. By confirmation age (12), 23–40 percent of the children had lost contact with the church (Column 5). Finally, of those registered as Catholic, an increasingly declining number had a religious wedding. In 1983 only half of those Catholic in name married in the church (Column 6).

Another way to measure commitment to the church is through financial donations. Since 1972, the Dutch Catholic Church has taken part in the ecumenical fund-raising action “Church Balance.” This nationwide fund-raising effort has the intention of motivating church members to give money to their local church community. As the churches in the Netherlands no longer receive money from the state, this is their main source of revenue. The amount of money received has grown considerably since 1972, but in some years it has fallen in absolute numbers, and growth has regularly failed to keep pace with inflation.

Finally, after a slight growth, the number of volunteers has also declined. The average number of volunteers per parish grew from 139 to 188 between 1977 and 1987, but declined to 170 in 1997 (Maassen, Veerman, and Spruit 1998). Over these years, only a very small minority, about 4–6 percent, of all Catholics volunteered in the church. How can this decline be explained in terms of the changing stakes Dutch Catholics had in their church?

When emancipation had been completed and church power was at its highest, new policies had to set the course for future development of the Catholic Church in Dutch society. The direction chosen was one of further lowering the tension with society. The episcopal letter *The Catholic Social Organizations in These Times* (1960) set the tone. In this letter, the Dutch bishops broke

TABLE 1
SACRAMENTAL PARTICIPATION OF DUTCH CATHOLICS (%)

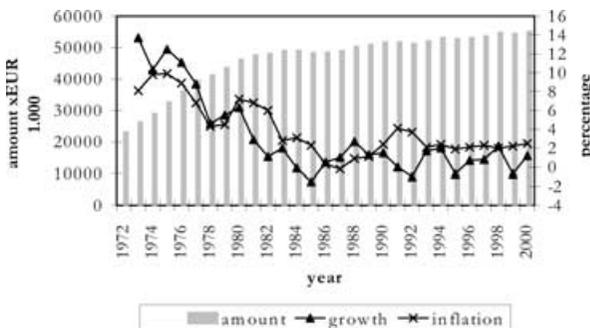
Year	Attendance	Baptisms	Communion	Confirmation	Marriage
1960		98.4	93.8		83.4
1965		97.5			80.6
1966	64.4	95.8			79.8
1970	47.2	93.4			
1975	32.6	90.4			67.5
1980	25.0	93.4	92.7	77.2	60.4
1983	21.6	90.1	98.2	77.5	58.0
1985	19.1		90.7	80.3	51.7
1990	14.9		88.7	70.2	
1995	11.8		88.2	63.9	
2000	9.2		87.9	60.0	

Source. KASKI (Catholic Statistical Church Institute, available at www.kaski.kun.nl).

with the tradition of unity of all Catholics and of all Catholic organizations. They still saw unity as an important value, but the concrete implementation of it had to be shaped by the organizations themselves. These had to find their own way in society, which included finding their own partners—even non-Catholic partners when necessary—and setting their own policy. In the following years, Catholics were gradually left free to join organizations of their choice (Sloot 1979). After this letter was published, the Catholic organization structure, which had been so important in mobilizing Catholics and separating them from the surrounding society, broke down. The prevailing opinion was that the activities the organizations undertook should no longer benefit Catholics alone, but the whole of Dutch society. Their religious identity and their bonds with the church were increasingly seen as obstacles to realizing professional, economic, or “Christian” goals in society. The result was that many organizations gave up their Catholic identity and merged with other Christian organizations, or at least severed the juridical and organizational ties with the church (Duffhues et al. 1985), a process that still continues.

The theological framework for the changes in the Dutch Catholic Church was, as in so many other church provinces, the *Nouvelle Theologie*. Theologians of this school wanted to make the Christian faith relevant to modern man by connecting the faith, and especially its practice, with modern life experience. As a means to this end, this theology put into perspective the exclusive and supernatural claims made by neo-Thomist theology. The life of Jesus revealed what it meant

FIGURE 3
REVENUES “CHURCH BALANCE” FOR DUTCH CATHOLIC CHURCH 1972–2001



Sources: Actie Kerbalans; Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics.

for man to be truly human, showing plausible, but not definitive, answers. Jesus was portrayed as a human being, burdened with the same questions as modern man. God was seen to reveal his meaning in his historical collaboration with humans, and humans, including the church, could only try to grasp his meaning in a historical and thus fallible way (Houtepen 1997:178–277). The church was no longer exclusively identified with the hierarchical structures of the Roman Catholic Church, but defined as a collection of people (“God’s people on its way”) feeling called by Jesus’ spirit to bring the liberating Gospel to the world and serve the world accordingly (De Grijs 1996). This theology carried profound implications, for example, in moral theology, which no longer gave infallible guidelines for the afterlife but proposed only tentatively to advise Christians how to engage for a better here and now (Sloot 1979). The implications of this approach were also felt in Catholic religious education, which no longer taught the doctrines of the church but introduced the children to a variety of religious traditions so that they could make individual choices concerning their religion (Maas 1993), and in the liturgy, where Catholics were given freedom to express their faith in new forms and local contexts (Scheer 1975:117–34).

As the uniqueness of the church became relativized, the Dutch Catholic Church began to participate in the ecumenical movement. In 1964, the Catholic Church and the Dutch Reformed Church formally acknowledged each other’s baptisms (agreements with other Protestant churches were closed later), thereby mutually acknowledging their character as Christian churches. The Dutch Catholic Church joined the national ecumenical Council of Churches in 1968 and is one of the few Catholic provinces in the world that is a full member of such a council. At the Pastoral Council (1966–1970) initiated by the Dutch bishops as a follow-up to the Second Vatican Council, other churches actively participated in the discussions and an ecumenical commission advised regarding all proposals. At the local level it becomes clear how far the ecumenical contacts go. Some parishes strive for abolishing the differences between the churches by practicing intercommunion and/or sharing a church building. Religious education is being provided in ecumenical settings. Pastoral services of different denominations in the army and in health care cooperate. There is intense ecumenical cooperation in social welfare (Jacobs 1998). A new initiative is the Council for Religions, an initiative begun by several local ecumenical church councils where Christian churches, together with representatives of other religions, work on mutual positive contacts.

The new policy of the Dutch Catholic Church has consisted in a radical decline in its level of tension with society. The hostile stance toward modern society and against other churches and religions has been given up. The strict separation of the Catholic and non-Catholic world through the organizations of the pillar has been abolished. And the changes initiated by the Second Vatican Council have deprived the church of its distinct Roman characteristics and made it more indigenously Dutch. Because of these changes, Dutch Catholics have had fewer possibilities to develop stakes in conformity to the church. Social and religious rewards have become more easily and more widely available: participation in the church or baptism has not been required for membership in a parish community or entrance into a Catholic social organization. For one’s salvation it no longer matters whether one is a Catholic or not, or whether one is an active member or not. The church has humbly decreased its own importance and has come to see itself as a fallible means to make the world a better place to live. Thus, Dutch Catholics do not feel the need to participate in the church and because of the declining tension they are no longer forced to deal with the Catholic Church alone. Under the point of view of rational choice, the decline in participation in the church is the logical consequence.

CONCLUSION

The sect-to-church process as conceived by the rational choice theory of religion seems to provide a plausible explanation of the changes in the attachment to Dutch Catholicism. The attachment to the church increased until 1960, but by the 1920s growth slowed and in some areas, a decline set in. After 1960, the attachment to the church diminished further. Historical evidence,

interpreted with the help of rational choice theory, shows a rise and subsequent decline in the level of tension of the church with Dutch society, which can be correlated with increased and decreased stakes in conformity offered by the church. From 1850 until 1960, the Dutch Catholic Church was in tension with the state and society. During this period, Catholics received exclusive social and religious rewards through the Catholic Church and its connected social organizations. After 1920, the church, through its social organizations, now financed by the state, gradually became an institution in society, ensuring that Dutch Catholics became emancipated citizens not much different from other citizens in Dutch society. After 1960, a new orientation of the mission of the Dutch Catholic Church in Dutch society was found in a further decrease of tension. As most of the social and religious rewards became either secularized or available to everybody, the church had lesser stakes to offer to its members. The rise and decline of the Dutch Catholic Church can thus be connected with parallel changes in the internal mobilization structures and efforts that, according to rational choice theory, structure the choices of Catholics in the direction of affiliation or disaffiliation, respectively.

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