

“The silence of the Middle Ages is still audible in the 21st century”

Experiencing religious heritage in a secularizing context

Master thesis Religious studies, Religion in the public domain

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1. Introduction

Several empirical studies indicate that since the 1960s, church attendance has declined dramatically in the Netherlands.¹ Because of this development a substantial number of churches had to close their doors, as they were no longer able to pay the costs of maintenance of the building.

Once a church building loses its initial function, it is either demolished or given a new purpose. Some church buildings have therefore been converted into supermarkets, concert halls, theaters, restaurants or apartment buildings. Other churches operate as heritage sites, open to the public.

Although the number of people in the Netherlands that do not (regularly) attend church services is growing, this does not necessarily mean that these people never enter a church building. In fact, most people visit a (monumental) church during their holiday or city trip. Looking for art and culture, Western tourists seldom fail to visit a local church or monastery.

According to the Belgian scholar Hans Geybels, Western tourist no longer simply 'travel' but look for experiences instead.² Visiting monumental churches can therefore be seen as seeking experiences. Such experiences could include admiring the aesthetics of architecture, praying or lighting a candle for a deceased person and even experiencing the historical by standing amidst an interior which has, for instance, remained virtually unchanged since the 18th century.

With regard to visiting religious monuments as a leisure activity, I am especially interested in the question how people, living in a secularizing context as the Netherlands, actually experience the church building. What does the building represent to them and how does this influence their experiences? What are they actually looking for? What are their motives and expectations?

¹ J. Becker and J. de Hart (Eds.), *Godsdienstige veranderingen in Nederland. Verschuivingen in de binding met kerken en de christelijke traditie* (Den Haag 2006) 13, J. de Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband. Godsdienstige ontwikkelingen in Nederland* (Den Haag 2014) 38, H. Schmeets, *De religieuze kaart van Nederland, 2010-2013* (Den Haag/Heerlen 2014) 5-12.

² H. Geybels, 'Religious Common Culture and Religion Tourism', *Yearbook for liturgical and ritual studies* 30 (2014) 48.

To examine how monumental churches are experienced by visitors, I selected 5 churches from the Dutch province of Groningen; the Martini church of Groningen, the church of Leermens, the church of Zeerijp, the church of Pieterburen and the former monastery of Ter Apel. These monuments attract a substantial number of visitors every year. Every church from this selection has a guest book placed centrally inside, encouraging visitors to leave a note on how they experienced visiting the church building.

I decided to focus my research exclusively on the guest books of the churches in the province of Groningen because of the relatively short distance between the different churches and because of their national reputation. More than any other province in the Netherlands, Groningen presents itself in the media and on commercial platforms as a province that boasts a high density of medieval churches. Largely due to the work of the Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken (SOGK), an organization dedicated to the preservation of churches in the province of Groningen, the churches of Groningen have a national reputation for their respectable age and cultural historic worth.

The notes in the guest books have been my main source of data in analyzing how religious heritage is experienced by people that live in a secularized society. Not only do these books contain a broad variety of notes written by different people over several years, they can also reveal whether the general content, form and tone of these messages has changed throughout the years.

Because people have the opportunity to sign their note or remain anonymous, I have taken as an assumption that the majority of notes is an honest reflection of how people experienced their visit and what has motivated them to do so. On the other hand, it could be argued that because the notes can be read by other visitors, people are persuaded to emphasize the positive rather than the negative, as they do not want to criticize. Such sentiments may have influenced the content of some notes but, for various reasons, I am confident that this has not played a significant role. First, many people are alone while visiting the church or only accompanied by a only a small group of relatives, friends or family. The fact that the only people that might read their note are people with whom

they probably feel comfortable with, will scarcely influence the content, if at all. This argument however, does not account for organized tours in the church. Second, people do not have to sign their note and can therefore remain completely anonymous. Third, having read and structured dozens of guest book notes, I encountered an overwhelming variety with regard to form and content. There was very little evidence to suggest that people were inclined to mimic each other to write only positively nor that they were reluctant to reflect on what they did not like.

The notes make clear what visitors liked or disliked about the church and for what reasons. People not only reflect on the church building but also describe the activities they engaged in during their visit. Together, the messages form an interesting empirical basis to study how religious heritage is experienced by visitors.

My research question is as follows: 'How do people, living in a secularizing context, reflect in the guest books upon their experiences of visiting a monumental church?' In order to answer this question, the following sub questions need to be answered: A: 'What characterizes our current secularized society in terms of dominant attitudes and beliefs with respect to the religious?' B: 'How do people reflect on their experiences with church monuments in the guest books?' C: 'How do these messages relate to what has been written regarding the dominant attitudes and beliefs that are characteristic of modern day secularized Dutch society?'

I began this project with analyzing the guest book notes from the 5 churches I selected. Of every church, I started with the oldest guest books and worked up to the book of the most recent date. This method of analyzing, helped me to see whether the character and content of the notes had changed throughout the years. Of every church I made a database in which I collected and structured these notes. The notes were structured as follows: remarks on the interior, reflection on the historical/history, remarks on the exterior, notes with a religious/spiritual content, notes in which people expressed to have engaged in some kind of ritual, reflections on the peaceful/quiet atmosphere inside the church and a category of notes that did not fit in any of the other categories.

When citing a guest book note in the text, I will use a translation in English unless the note was already written in English. In the footnote the original text will be cited together with – if possible – the date of writing and the location.

When quoting the guest book notes of visitors, I have tried to reproduce the original text as accurately as possible. This means that I did not correct written errors. I also literally copied the use of punctuation marks, multiple question marks for example, in the English version of the text.

From time to time I will use the term 'spirituality'. This term allows a broad range of interpretations. I will elaborate on the meaning of this much used term within the boundaries of this research project in chapter 2.1.

The guest book messages are analyzed with the use of discourse analysis, as it focuses on how language is used to communicate ideas and structure reality.³ Special attention is therefore given to the terminology used by visitors as they reflected on the church building and their experiences. Eventually, most experiences could be structured according to the following 4 categories: aesthetic experience, historical experience, religious experience and the experience of a peaceful/quiet atmosphere.

Finally, I discussed the 4 categories of experience into more detail by outlining their characteristics and the context(s) in which they most commonly appeared.

³ R.H. Jones, *Discourse analysis. A resource book for students* (London 2012) 4.

2. Secularization in the Netherlands

Many people today do not feel the need to attend church services anymore because they no longer rely on traditional religion for moral and/or spiritual guidance. Numbers of church attendance in the Netherlands have therefore declined severely. Nevertheless, church buildings continue to exert a remarkable attraction to many individuals because of their often extraordinary qualities, which are generally hard to find in any other public building.

This research project aims to answer the question how people, living in a secularizing context, reflect in the guest books upon their experiences of visiting a monumental church. Therefore, this chapter begins with a brief history concerning the secularization of the Netherlands. Subsequently, the characteristics of religiosity in the 21st century Dutch context will be discussed. Finally, I will look at the current status of churches as religious heritage and elaborate on what exactly makes churches attractive places to visit for modern individuals.

2.1 History of secularization in the Netherlands

At the start of the 20th century, the church played an important role in the lives of people living in the Netherlands. Approximately 95% percent of the Dutch population at that time was affiliated to a church.⁴ Although these numbers formally do not represent whether people considered themselves religious or not, they illustrate that the church had a considerable amount of influence in the Netherlands.

However, times have changed. Nowadays, 58% of the Dutch population is affiliated to a church and 17% regularly – at least once a month – visits a religious service.⁵ This is, even over the course of a century, an immense difference.

In this section I will present a brief history on how the Netherlands developed from a vividly religious country, in which the church held a powerful

⁴ E. Meijering, *Het Nederlandse christendom in de twintigste eeuw* (Amsterdam 2007) 19.

⁵ Schmeets, *De religieuze kaart van Nederland*, 4-5.

position in society, into one of Europe's most secularized regions. In doing so, extensive attention will be given to what has been described by Charles Taylor as 'the massive subjective turn of modern culture' and how this has played a significant role in the secularization of Dutch society.⁶

2.1.1 Secularization as a process and theory

Before discussing the history of secularization in the Netherlands into more detail, it is useful to briefly underline the theoretical difference between the process of secularization and secularization theories in order to prevent misunderstandings.

The process of secularization is characterized by (a) a decline of religious institutions, (b) a decline in importance of religion for society and (c) a decline in importance of religion for individuals.⁷ The theory of secularization on the other hand, which explains rather than describes, is based upon the idea that modernity has a corrosive effect on religion.⁸

The scholars who agree on this basic statement dissent with respect to the question whether religion is on course to disappear completely (disappearance thesis) or whether religion will continue to exist but in a more privatised form and of almost no social or cultural significance (differentiation thesis).

Two varieties of the secularization theory are the *de-intensification theory* and the *co-existence theory*. The de-intensification theory assumes that religion will continue to exist but in a weak and insubstantial form. The theory of co-existence holds that whilst the position of religion weakens in certain contexts, in others it retains or even strengthens its vitality.⁹

In this section I will argue that the position of religion in the Netherlands is not only characterized by secularization and decline. The emergence of what has been generally referred to as 'spirituality' has, especially from circa 1985

⁶ C. Taylor, *The ethics of authenticity* (Cambridge 1991) 26.

⁷ G. Davie and L. Woodhead, 'Secularization and secularism', L. Woodhead, P. Fletcher, H. Kawanami, D. Smith (Eds.), *Religions in the modern world. Traditions and transformations* (Wiltshire 2009) 524.

⁸ P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *Religion in modern times. An interpretive anthology* (Oxford 2000) 307.

⁹ Heelas and Woodhead, *Religion in modern times*, 307-308.

onwards, increasingly demanded attention and can be interpreted as a form of sacralization.¹⁰ Therefore, the theory of co-existence will underlie and structure this study.

In discussing and commenting on the secularization of Dutch society, I will be using the 'subjectivization thesis' as an interpretative framework. This hypothesis has been developed by Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas and tries to explain why certain forms of spirituality are gaining popularity whereas congregational religion is struggling with continuous decline.¹¹ The thesis argues that those forms of the sacred that support values that are characteristic of the subjective turn and think of the individual as a primary source of significance and authority, are likely to grow and those that do not are likely to decline.¹²

This hypothesis is based on the principle '(....) that people are more likely to be involved with forms of the sacred which are consistent with their ongoing values and beliefs'.¹³ As subjective wellbeing, development and expression, in line with broader individualization tendencies, have gained significant cultural importance, they must have also influenced the religious ideas of modern day individuals.

In this section, I shall argue that the 'individuating revolution' which penetrated western culture from the 1960s onwards, has been an important factor in the decline of congregational religion and can simultaneously, to some extent, explain why spirituality has grown in popularity.¹⁴

2.1.2 The socio- cultural revolution of the 1960s

In the first 65 years of the 20th century, Dutch society was largely organized along different ideological and religious pillars.¹⁵ In this politico-denominational segregated society, Catholic, Protestant and Liberal pillars formed enclosed

¹⁰ P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution. Why religion is giving way to spirituality* (Oxford 2005) 9-10.

¹¹ Heelas and Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution*, 78-82.

¹² Heelas and Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution*, 78.

¹³ Heelas and Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution*, 78.

¹⁴ C. Taylor, *Varieties of religion today* (Cambridge MA 2002) 80.

¹⁵ J. Peters, A. Felling. P. Scheepers, 'Individualisering van godsdienst en levensbeschouwing', P. Scheepers (Ed.), *Individualisering In Nederland aan het einde van de twintigste eeuw. Empirisch onderzoek naar omstreden hypotheses* (Assen 2000) 52.

communities that strived to provide everything needed to maintain their identity and hold a sovereign position within its community. A Catholic for instance, had the opportunity to visit a Catholic school, study at a Catholic university, vote for a Catholic political party, read a Catholic newspaper and exercise at, for instance, a Catholic soccer club.¹⁶

With the different pillars providing a variety of institutions, there was a strong presence of the religious within Dutch society. Numbers of church attendance were among the highest in Europe¹⁷ and people almost lived their entire social and cultural lives within the boundaries of their particular confessional subculture.¹⁸

After approximately 1960, the distinctive character of the different pillars grew more and more blurred as the leaders of these social groups gradually became less interested in maintaining an isolated community and began to open up dialogue with the other pillars. They adopted a different way of thinking, one that '(...) eschewed sectarianism and which regarded traditional theology and traditional forms of religious organization as outmoded.'¹⁹

Despite the far-reaching consequences of these developments, religious organizations continued to have important organizational influence over Dutch society. It is therefore more accurate to refer to this development as a process of 'de- confessionalisation' rather than 'de- pillarization'.²⁰

The 1960s turned out to be a decade of significant socio- cultural change. As the Netherlands enjoyed economic prosperity, the level of wealth among its inhabitants grew significantly. People were now able to afford things which they previously could have only dreamed of and with this came a new concentration on private space.²¹ Car and television possession increasingly undermined local

¹⁶ A.M. Greely, *Religion in Europe at the end of the second millennium. A sociological profile* (New Jersey 2004) 198.

¹⁷ J.C. Kennedy, 'Recent Dutch religious history and the limits of secularization', E. Sengers (Ed), *The Dutch and their Gods. Secularization and transformation of religion in the Netherlands since 1950* (Hilversum 2005) 30.

¹⁸ P. van Rooden, 'Oral history en het vreemde sterven van het Nederlandse Christendom', *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 119 (2004) 524.

¹⁹ Kennedy, 'Recent Dutch religious history and the limits of secularization', 30.

²⁰ Kennedy, 'Recent Dutch religious history and the limits of secularization', 36.

²¹ C. Taylor, *A secular Age*, (Cambridge MA 2007) 474.

community life and people started focusing more on their own lives and that of their nuclear families.²²

As personal financial resources grew and the market became more diverse, purchasing products became an important means to cultivate and express one's identity. Unlike previous times, in which people used to share a collective identity, provided by the church or a particular pillar, people now had the opportunity to cultivate an identity of their own. Gradually a transition took place from a collective identity bound together by rituals, to a self-made identity characterised as reflexive and expressive.²³

In correspondence with the spread of consumerism culture and its focus on personal choice and individuality, a form of self-understanding developed which has been described by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor as a culture of 'authenticity'. Although the central ideas of this new form of self-understanding emerged with the Romantic expressivism of the late 18th century, it became a widespread phenomenon from the 1960s onwards, as it benefitted from the opportunities consumerism culture had opened up.²⁴

Central to the culture of authenticity is the idea that everyone has to find, realise and live in accordance to one's own true self without depending (much) on structures and ideas which are handed to us by society, a previous generation, or religious or political authority.²⁵

The assumption that 'there is a certain way of being human that is *my* way' deeply influenced modern consciousness.²⁶ Because of this, individuals feel a sort of moral obligation to look for and live in accordance with their authentic self, which they see reflected in their innermost feelings and desires. For if one fails to do so, one fails to live up to the demands of what being human is all about.²⁷ The importance people started to attach to self-expression, self-

²² M. ter Borg, 'Religie na 1945', M. ter Borg, E. Borgman, M. Buitelaar, Y. Kuiper, R. Plum, *Handboek religie in Nederland* (Zoetermeer 2008) 56.

²³ P. van Rooden, 'Oral history en het vreemde sterven van het Nederlandse Christendom', 548.

²⁴ Taylor, *Varieties of religion today*, 80.

²⁵ Taylor, *A secular Age*, 475.

²⁶ Taylor, *The ethics of authenticity*, 29.

²⁷ Taylor, *The ethics of authenticity*, 29.

fulfilment and feelings should be understood as a result of this new cultural orientation.

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead have described the 'subjective turn of modern culture' as 'a turn away from life lived in terms of external or 'objective' roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences (relational as much as individualistic)'.²⁸ Instead of surrendering to conformity, people increasingly wanted to live in accordance to their individuality, their unique selves. Self-fulfilment and authenticity (being true to oneself), became guiding moral principles.

With this new form of self-understanding, the location of ultimate authority was drastically relocated from the external towards the internal. The individual became a source of significance, meaning and authority in its own right.²⁹ As more and more people had the feeling that they should live in unity with their inner feelings and desires, the ideal of self-assertion gradually replaced the traditional ideal of self-denial.³⁰

This new cultural emphasis on the individual and its feelings and desires, had a profound impact on both a societal and a religious level. Within the religious realm, this individuating revolution manifested itself in a fourfold way.³¹

1. People began to detach themselves from traditional social bonds within the religious sphere by leaving the church or participating less often within its community.
2. Traditional religious values and opinions changed considerably. Inner worldly interpretations of reality became more dominant and people increasingly attempted to give meaning and significance to life themselves, without consulting religion or religious authority figures for orientation and advice.
3. The connection between religious denomination and social class became less determinant and the distinctive features of the confessional cultures of both Catholics and Protestants less recognizable.
4. Religious convictions gradually became more fragmented. As personal convictions became a matter

²⁸ Heelas and Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution*, 2.

²⁹ Heelas and Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution*, 3-4.

³⁰ Taylor, *The ethics of authenticity*, 29.

³¹ Peters, Felling, Scheepers, 'Individualisering van godsdienst en levensbeschouwing', 59-62.

of choice, people started to combine elements from all sorts of religions and traditions on the basis of their personal preferences.

The subjective turn of the 1960s deeply affected the position and status of religion in the Netherlands. As self-development and individual expression had become dominant cultural norms, the traditional morality structures of the church were increasingly seen as too restrictive and incompatible with the new demands for individual freedom and self-expression.³²

As a result of the economic growth, more people had the financial means to afford a college education. Ideas, previously shared among a relatively small intellectual elite, found their way to the masses. At this time, European intellectuals had created a strong secular 'high culture'. The idea that religion, under the influence of modernization processes would eventually disappear, was widespread.³³ As growing numbers of people began to derive their cultural outlook from this secular elite, this type of thought began to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy. People began to associate being modern with scepticism towards religious beliefs.

More than ever before, not only the Dutch but Western Europeans in general associate being secular with being modern. To be religious, on the other hand, is seen as being backward and superstitious.³⁴

The prominent sociologist of religion José Casanova, has argued that this type of thinking should be understood as the result of modern historical stadial consciousness, which turns the idea of going back to a surpassed condition into an unthinkable intellectual regression.³⁵ Accordingly, he states that depending on the popularity of these ideas, the process of modernization is accompanied by rapid religious decline or not.

Since this type of thinking has developed especially within the western European context, it could help explain the high numbers of irreligiosity and

³² J.C.H. Blom, *Burgerlijk en beheerst. Over Nederland in de twintigste eeuw* (Amsterdam 1996) 242–243.

³³ R. Stark, 'Secularization, R.I.P.', W.H. Swatos, D.V.A. Olson Jr. (Eds.), *The secularization debate* (Maryland 2000) 42.

³⁴ P.L Berger, G. Davie, E. Fokas, *Religious America, secular Europe? A theme and variations* (Burlington 2008) 19.

³⁵ J. Casanova, 'The secular, secularizations, secularism', C. Calhoun, M. Juergensmeyer, J. van Antwerpen (Eds.), *Rethinking secularism* (New York 2011) 59.

declining numbers of church attendance within this context. Whereas countries where this type of thought is less common or even absent, display the actual reverse in terms of religiosity and church attendance. In Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia for example, the church has a progressive and modern reputation, as the church enables people, by teaching them to read and write, to participate within the modern world.³⁶

2.1.3 Religious ethical engagement

Around the second half of the 1960s, churches and religious organizations in the Netherlands shared a growing concern with public moral and ethical issues. Convinced that the church was called to ethical engagement, different church denominations started to partake in numerous initiatives for the benefit of society or the world at large. In contrast to the sub cultural fragmentation of pillarization and the idea that isolation would benefit organizational strength, the churches increasingly 'opened up' to each other.³⁷

Traditionally the different pillars had emphasized the importance of ecclesiastical unity, traditional dogmas and morality and were strongly transcendent in orientation. In order to establish a fruitful cooperation between the different pillars, the churches now increasingly adhered to a horizontal expression of faith which had a strong ethical dimension.³⁸ The emphasis was now on the public significance of religion and the performance of both moral and religious obligations in society.

At this time, exclusive loyalty to the pillar one was born into, had already substantially weakened among the members of the different pillars. Radio and television had made people aware that the moral convictions of the particular pillar they belonged to, did not differ very much from the beliefs of the other pillars.³⁹

Churches and religious organizations became more transparent and at the end of the 1960's there was a tendency to secularize institutions which previously

³⁶ L. Woodhead, *An introduction to Christianity* (Cambridge 2004) 394–401.

³⁷ Ter Borg, 'Religie na 1945', 52.

³⁸ Kennedy, 'Recent Dutch religious history and the limits of secularization', 35.

³⁹ Ter Borg, 'Religie na 1945', 55.

had a distinct denominational identity. This development had important consequences for the visibility of religion in society.

The focus of the different churches and religious organizations on moral and ethical matters rather than traditional theological issues can in itself be considered the result of secularization processes. However, what distinguishes this phase from the previous period is not the emphasis on profane rather than sacred issues, but the fact that moral and religious obligations were now mainly performed in a public arena, 'often in the service of ideals that consciously transcended religion.'⁴⁰

Sociologist of religion Anton van Harskamp describes the period from 1965 till 1985, as a phase in the 20th century history of religion in the Netherlands in which 'God was, as it were, pulled down in ethics.'⁴¹ Religious piety was strongly ethically orientated and there was a focus on God's presence in liberating acts.⁴² Notions as guilt, sin and fear gradually withdrew from individual religiosity and were replaced by trust and joy. Growing (religious) individualism made religious optimism far more appealing to modern individuals as it emphasizes the 'self' and a spirituality of the 'self' in a much more affirmative way than a pessimistic, and often traditional, religious approach.⁴³

2.1.4 Spirituality as an alternative to traditional religion

Around 1985, ethical engagement ceased as the dominant expression of religious motivation within the Dutch religious context. People increasingly experienced religion in a much more diverse and individualistic manner and in contrast to the period of 1965 – 1985, ethics had become a less important component of religious piety.⁴⁴ What now increasingly demanded attention, was what is generally referred to as *spirituality*, and the way the individual could benefit from it.

⁴⁰ Kennedy, 'Recent Dutch religious history and the limits of secularization', 35.

⁴¹ A. van Harskamp, 'Simply astounding', E. Sengers (Ed), *The Dutch and their Gods. Secularization and transformation of religion in the Netherlands since 1950* (Hilversum 2005) 50.

⁴² Van Harskamp, 'Simply astounding', 50.

⁴³ Van Harskamp, 'Simply astounding', 50.

⁴⁴ Kennedy, 'Recent Dutch religious history and the limits of secularization', 38.

Because spirituality is a label for many different types of practise and does not refer to a single variety of religion, it is useful to briefly discuss the concept of spirituality and elaborate its meaning within the boundaries of this research project before we continue.⁴⁵

Since the concept of spirituality has broken out of its traditional religious embedment and has begun to appear in a variety of academic and professional disciplines, it is increasingly problematic to isolate a single definition.⁴⁶

Traditionally the term spirituality referred to a 'mystical stream within mainstream religious traditions'⁴⁷ and was strongly practical moral orientated, emphasising personal piety and devotion to God.⁴⁸ From the mid-19th century onwards, the term spirituality was increasingly used to refer to religious practises that did not belong to the dominant traditional religious traditions of that time and was therefore gradually more presented as a reasonable alternative. This usage of the word, being an alternative to traditional religion, has persisted to the present day.⁴⁹

Today, the concept of spirituality has largely broken out of its original Christian context and refers to a non- institutional, more general orientated kind of religious interest and sensitivity.⁵⁰ Woodhead and Heelas note that the term spirituality nowadays is '(....) often used to express commitment to a deep truth that is to be found within what belongs to this world', as opposed to 'religion' which is generally known for its orientation towards a truth which essentially lies beyond this world.⁵¹

Within this thesis, the term *spirituality* will be used in reference to both *traditional religious* as well as *alternative religious* practices for the simple reason that praying inside a traditional church is as much a spiritual act as meditating in a modern eastern spiritual centre. *New spirituality* on the other hand, a term which

⁴⁵ G. Vincett and L. Woodhead, 'Spirituality', L. Woodhead, H. Kawanami, C. Partridge, *Religions in the modern world. Traditions and transformations* (Wiltshire 2009) 321.

⁴⁶ P.R. Holmes, 'Spirituality: Some disciplinary perspectives', K. Flanagan and P.C. Jupp (Eds.), *A sociology of spirituality* (Farnham 2007) 24.

⁴⁷ Vincett and Woodhead, 'Spirituality', 320.

⁴⁸ J. de Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen. Oude religie en nieuwe spiritualiteit* (Amsterdam 2011) 21-22.

⁴⁹ Vincett and Woodhead, 'Spirituality', 321.

⁵⁰ De Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen*, 21-22.

⁵¹ Heelas and Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution*, 6.

I will soon introduce, refers to a movement rather than a set of beliefs or a specific act.

From 1985 onwards, it became fashionable to identify oneself as being 'spiritual'. Although (eastern) forms of alternative spirituality had been an integral part of the counterculture movement of the 1960s and were certainly present throughout the seventies, it was not until the second half of the 1980s that they reached a level of substantial popularity.⁵²

This alternative spirituality has become known as the New Age movement. The term New Age merely functions as a container for a variety of spiritual ideas and practices. Therefore, it is not possible to give a clear account of what exactly characterizes the New Age movement other than that it was a combination of a broad variety of different spiritual ideas and practices.

Initially, New Age was in itself an underground subculture that did not exerted substantial influence over society.⁵³ This changed as the movement became more popular during the 1980s. Previously, the New Age movement was inherently critical of Western consumer culture and dismissive of a technocratic, capitalistic lifestyle. From the 1980s onwards however, it gradually became a part of mainstream culture as it succeeded in entering the commercial realm with the publication of various books and magazines. The commercialisation of New Age spirituality went hand in hand with a decline of its former critical attitude towards a Western consumptive lifestyle. The emphasis now lay on personal (spiritual) growth and wellbeing. Because of this the popularity of New Age spirituality grew substantially.⁵⁴

Part of the success of the New Age movement was that its (new) focus on personal (spiritual) development fit in well within a society in which personal choice and self-development had become popular principles. In comparison to traditional Christian religiosity and its emphasis on conformity to external authority, New Age spirituality encouraged individuals to look for authority within

⁵² Ter Borg, 'Religie na 1945', 55.

⁵³ De Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen*, 218.

⁵⁴ S. Aupers, 'We are all Gods', E. Sengers (Ed), *The Dutch and their Gods. Secularization and transformation of religion in the Netherlands since 1950* (Hilversum 2005) 188-190.

themselves.⁵⁵ People no longer had to submit themselves to external sources of authority but could now think of themselves as the ultimate source of authority. Within New Age spirituality, the emphasis lay on the experience and expression of the deeper self of the individual.⁵⁶

The adage was that everyone could experience the *spiritual* in a way that suited his or her personality best. New Age spirituality had anti-authoritarian characteristics as it did not recognize any official sources of authority. Therefore, the movement can be considered a cultural rather than a institutional trend.⁵⁷

Nowadays, the term 'New Age' is hardly used anymore and has mostly been replaced by terms as 'new spirituality', 'holistic spirituality' or 'spiritualities of life'.⁵⁸ All these terms refer to the kind of diffuse, heterogenic and subjective forms of spirituality which from now on I will address as 'new spirituality'. The new spirituality, which is largely unorganised with a strong focus on personal experience, shall be discussed into more detail in the next section.

2.1.5 The influence of the subjective turn on the position of religion

The second half of the twentieth century was a turning point for congregational religion in the Netherlands. The influential position of the churches in society rapidly collapsed when a cultural revolution swept over large parts of the Western world which the churches were not able to tackle sufficiently. This resulted in a growing gap between religious life, as advocated by the churches, and cultural life.

Due to the expansion of a culture of consumerism which encouraged people to emphasize and express their individuality, the ideas of late 18th century Romantic expressivism matured and gained influence over the general public. In particular, the idea that people should live their lives in accordance to their own true self, which is essentially reflected in their feelings and intuitions, became a central idea in modern day thought.

⁵⁵ Heelas and Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution*, 4.

⁵⁶ De Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen*, 25.

⁵⁷ S. Sengers, 'Kwantitatief onderzoek naar religie', M. ter Borg, E. Borgman, M. Buitelaar, Y. Kuiper, R. Plum, *Handboek religie in Nederland* (Zoetermeer 2008) 75.

⁵⁸ De Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen*, 21.

As the individual was encouraged to look for truth, fulfilment and happiness in his own self, religious authorities and their teachings, which often taught the opposite, were distrusted. People increasingly started to give meaning to life themselves. Partly because of this, public opinion, not in the least with respect to religion, grew more fragmented and less coherent. Ideas, both on an individual as on a societal level, generally became more heterogeneous.⁵⁹

Against the background of these developments, numbers of church attendance declined severely. People no longer felt comfortable with the teachings of the church as it was largely unsupportive of the values promoted by the subjective turn and did not acknowledge the subject as a primary source of significance. Although this may not have been the only cause in the impressive decline of church attendance, it definitely played an important, if not crucial, role.

Living in a society which has been thoroughly influenced by the subjective turn, people simply wanted to live their lives according to their own unique ideas and values instead of submitting themselves to the traditions and dogmas of the traditional churches.⁶⁰

The fact that (New Age) spirituality gained considerable popularity from the 1980s onwards, should be seen as a direct result of its ability to support certain key values of the subjective turn.⁶¹ Since it encourages individuals to look for truth, fulfilment, spiritual guidance and all kinds of other higher values within the own self, many people prefer this option because it is more consistent with contemporary cultural norms.⁶²

2.2 Characterization of religiosity in the 21st century Dutch context

As explained in the previous section, the position of the churches in the Netherlands changed significantly due to a number of socio- cultural developments. In particular, the process of subjectivization profoundly affected the position and status of religion, both in society as in the lives of individuals.

⁵⁹ Peters, Felling, Scheepers, 'Individualisering van godsdienst en levensbeschouwing', 44.

⁶⁰ Heelas and Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution*, 112.

⁶¹ Heelas and Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution*, 83.

⁶² Heelas and Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution*, 5-7.

Church attendance declined and the influence of congregational religion over society weakened substantially. Individuals, on the other hand, developed a growing concern for personal-wellbeing, self-fulfillment and self-development and were less willing to submit to the traditions, roles and duties which the traditional churches imposed on them.⁶³

Nonetheless, religious sentiments did not disappear. From the second half of the 1980's, partially due to the popularization of New Age spirituality, the religious, especially what is generally referred to as 'spirituality', demanded attention again. What had changed however, was the way in which people now experienced and conducted their religious impulses.

In this section I will discuss the current status of religion in the Netherlands, emphasizing the most important contemporary religious trends and developments.

2.2.1 Seemingly paradoxical religious developments

When looking at the current status of religion in the Netherlands, secularization seems to be the dominant force at work. Church attendance keeps decreasing and there are no convincing signs that this trend will change within the foreseeable future. According to a research program of the CBS⁶⁴ held in 2013, was 53% of the Dutch population part of a religious denomination. A quarter was Catholic, 16% Protestant and 5% identified themselves as Muslim. 6% belonged to a different church or religion: Jewish (0.1%), Hindu (0.6%) and Buddhist (0.4%). In 2013, 16.8% regularly visited a church, mosque or synagogue. Of this group 10.1% goes on a weekly basis, 3.6% a few times a month, 3.1% once a month and 6.9% attends a religious service less than once a month.⁶⁵

These numbers demonstrate that regular church attendance has in fact decreased considerably since, for instance, 1970 when 67 % of the people that were affiliated to a church attended Sunday service on a weekly basis.⁶⁶ However,

⁶³ Heelas and Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution*, 9-10.

⁶⁴ Statistics Netherlands. This organization strives to publish reliable and coherent statistical information which responds to the needs of Dutch society.

⁶⁵ Schmeets, *De religieuze kaart van Nederland*, 4.

⁶⁶ J.W. Becker and R. Vink, *Secularisatie in Nederland, 1966-1991* (Rijswijk 1995) 51.

this does not mean that religious sentiments have in fact become a marginal phenomenon within Dutch society.

Sociologist of religion Joep de Hart, who studies religious development in the Netherlands, writes that the contemporary religious climate of the Netherlands is characterized by seemingly paradoxical trends.⁶⁷ He points out that although the number of participants in traditional church services continue to decline, people simultaneously remain deeply interested in 'religious', existential questions. And while the contemporary cultural climate is characterized by individualistic tendencies, the popularity of participating in collective, (pseudo)religious processions is in fact growing.⁶⁸

Participating in a procession with like-minded people can give the individual the sensation of rising above everyday reality for a brief moment.⁶⁹ In processions, concerts, festivals or comparable activities where people come together outside of quotidian routine, limitations and ordinary (social) boundaries are transcended as people get absorbed into a common goal, which gives them the feeling of being part of something greater than themselves.⁷⁰ This type of experience actually lies at the heart of many religious and spiritual traditions; experiencing a reality that transcends the ordinary.

2.2.2 Religious bricolage

People today are generally more open and willing to learn about new (religious) ideas, and are also less reluctant to combine elements from different religious traditions. Especially within the field of new spirituality, people tend to use a 'pick and choose' tactic, taking bits from several religious and spiritual options, as they endeavour themselves to construct a religious/spiritual identity which is truly their own.⁷¹ Because this highly individualistic mechanism of 'bricolage' strongly

⁶⁷ De Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen*, 14.

⁶⁸ P. Post, 'Het rituele perspectief', E. Borgman, A. van Harskamp, A.M. Korte (Ed.), *De religieuze ruis in Nederland: thesen over de versterving en de wedergeboorte van de godsdienst* (Zoetermeer 1998) 51-55.

⁶⁹ Taylor, *A secular age*, 482-483.

⁷⁰ C. Scharen, 'Secular music and sacramental theology', T. Beaudoin (Ed), *Secular music and sacred theology* (Collegeville MN 2013) 100-101.

⁷¹ De Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen*, 141.

resembles broader socio- cultural developments due to the importance attributed to personal choice and authenticity, many modern-day individuals feel comfortable doing this.⁷²

Combining elements from different religious and spiritual traditions allows individuals to construct a religious/spiritual identity which is not only unique, but also, and probably more importantly, is adapted to their personal preferences and desires.

Although this strategy of bricolage, as I mentioned earlier, is most common within the field of new spirituality, it can also be found in traditional Christian circles. Previously, individual beliefs were largely determined by the religious tradition one was born into. Today, this 'tight normative link' between a religious identity and the faithful acceptance of a specific set of theological propositions has, save of some exceptions, largely disappeared.⁷³ Religious convictions therefore increasingly reflect people's personal preferences, with a strong emphasis on trying to be an authentic person.⁷⁴ Authenticity, in this respect, is understood as creating and governing a personal kind of religious piety without depending (much) on traditional sources of religious authority.⁷⁵

Sociologist of religion Anton van Harskamp writes: 'One could say that people are less inclined to accept as a matter of course the traditional sources of religious authority, such as the Scriptures, the religious tradition or the clergy. Which, I might add, does not necessarily mean that individuals do not make use of tradition. They experience themselves as beings who make decisions and choices for themselves in the religious field, and who appropriate elements from one or more traditions on the basis of their own authority.'⁷⁶

Instead of holding on to a specific set of theological propositions that used to characterize a specific religious identity, many people today, especially those who identify themselves with one of the traditional church denominations, have adopted a so-called intermediate position. This means, for instance, that these

⁷² A. van Harskamp, *Het nieuw-religieuze verlangen* (Kampen 2000) 251.

⁷³ Taylor, *A secular age*, 514.

⁷⁴ D. Hak, 'Nieuw-religieuzen: 'Ik ben een God in 't diepst van mijn gedachten', J. Kroesen, Y. Kuipers, P. Nanninga (Eds.), *Religie en cultuur in hedendaags Nederland* (Assen 2010) 134.

⁷⁵ Taylor, *A secular age*, 475.

⁷⁶ Van Harskamp, 'Simply astounding', 47.

people are willing to accept certain religious beliefs or moral principles which clearly move outside the circle of conservatism of their specific church denomination or Christian orthodoxy as a whole.⁷⁷

Partly because of this, the beliefs that used to distinguish the traditional character of a particular church denomination are increasingly subjected to change and adaptation.⁷⁸ More and more people find it increasingly difficult to accept traditional concepts of God, heaven, hell, miracles, etc, either because of the dominance of rational, empirical thinking or because of a growing concern for individual freedom and wellbeing. Another example is that more people with traditional Christian beliefs are now prepared to accept certain beliefs which previously would be considered untenable, like doubting the exclusive truth claim of Christianity. People have also often become less strict with respect to the traditional moral principles of Christianity. Many Catholics, for instance, no longer live in accordance to the strict sexual ethics which the church advocates.

Increasingly, people who are no longer active members of a church community nonetheless continue to consider themselves practicing Christians. The British sociologist of religion Grace Davie has described this phenomenon as 'believing without belonging'.⁷⁹

2.2.3 The individual and (religious) authority

Because people find it more difficult to adhere to or even trust a fixed set of truths and rules, religiosity in the Western European context is more and more characterized by open questions rather than fixed answers.⁸⁰ Noteworthy is that the process of 'soul searching' is generally considered more important than finding the truth itself.⁸¹

Within a cultural climate where truth, especially within the realm of new spirituality, is seen as a subjective category, many people no longer seek to find objective, unshakable facts. Nonetheless, being concerned with the inner depths

⁷⁷ Taylor, *A secular age*, 513.

⁷⁸ Becker and de Hart, *Godsdienstige verandering in Nederland*, 63 -73.

⁷⁹ G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without belonging* (Oxford 1994) 78-81.

⁸⁰ De Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen*, 225.

⁸¹ A. Droogers, 'Beyond Secularization versus Sacralization: Lessons from a study of the Dutch case.', K. Flanagan and P.C. Jupp (Eds.), *A sociology of spirituality* (Farnham 2007) 93.

of the soul is seen as a noble and admirable effort because it demonstrates that the individual is concerned with self-development and authenticity.

Many of the developments that can be observed within the field of religion today are connected with the two important socio- cultural developments I discussed in section 2.1: a radical new perspective on (religious) authority and a growing emphasis on individual authenticity and development. Because of the importance attributed to authenticity and self-development, (traditional) authority and tradition are increasingly met by scepticism in large parts of the Western world.

Sociologists have referred to this development as a 'flight from deference'. This process and the cultural climate it has produced, are characterized by an increasing unwillingness to submit oneself to rules, tradition and authority.⁸² It should be noted however, that scepticism towards authority does not only manifest itself within the context of religion, it can also be found in contemporary art, culture and politics.⁸³

The so-called 'subjective turn of modern culture' has revolutionised the way in which both religious and spiritual identities are being organised and experienced. It should be seen as the catalyst in '(....) a wider cultural turn from transcendence to immanence; from an external locus on authority to an internal one; from fate to choice; from ethical principles to ethical experiences; from test by way of text to test by way of experience; from negative evaluations of human nature to positive; from living in terms of what the established religious order announces (or imposes) to living out one's own spirituality; from differentiated religion to de-differentiated; from happiness by way of sacrifice to happiness by way of realization; from salvation by following tradition to enlightenment through self-chosen rituals (....) and, very importantly, from looking to the future in terms of the past to experiencing 'life' itself in the here-and-now.'⁸⁴

⁸² P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, 'Homeless minds today?', L. Woodhead, P. Heelas and D. Martin (Eds.), *Peter Berger and the study of religion* (London 2001) 70.

⁸³ I. Furseth and P. Repstad, *An introduction to the sociology of religion. Classical and contemporary perspectives* (Farnham 2006) 122.

⁸⁴ Heelas and Woodhead, *Religion in modern times*, 343-344.

Charles Taylor has noted that there is an important difference in our time between (traditional) religion and new spirituality regarding their stances towards authority. In traditional religion, authority is fundamentally important. Therefore, traditional religion is generally dismissive of the contemporary 'modes of quest', which focuses on open questions rather than fixed answers. On the other hand, new spirituality fundamentally embraces and welcomes a seeking attitude, and it is uncertain if they will ever come to recognize (a form of) authority.⁸⁵

Woodhead and Heelas have made this dichotomy of authority the focal point of their 'subjectivization thesis', which tries to explain why the popularity of spiritual practices is in fact growing while congregational religion is in decline. They argue that congregational religion generally locates ultimate authority in an external and objective source which demands the individual to conform, which is increasingly at odds with current cultural trends in which the individual is expected to organize and control his own life.

Due to the emergence of a *culture of authenticity*, which I described in the previous section, people ascribe great importance to their feelings and aspire to act in accordance with these feelings.⁸⁶ In other words; they want to do *what feels right*. The idea that feelings and actions should not conflict, has deeply penetrated modern Western thought. For contemporary individuals this means that in order for a decision to be authentic, it needs to feel good.⁸⁷ Therefore, many people today rely on their intuition and feelings for guidance.

The importance of experience within modern-day culture should not be underestimated. To experience has in fact even become a requirement for enjoying a religious service.⁸⁸ If a religious service does not touch the individual on an emotional level, he will likely lose interest.

⁸⁵ Taylor, *A secular age*, 510.

⁸⁶ Taylor, *The ethics of authenticity*, 31.

⁸⁷ Heelas and Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution*, 80.

⁸⁸ Droogers, 'Beyond Secularization versus Sacralization', 94.

2.2.4 Being 'spiritual'

Nowadays, people who are religiously interested but do not explicitly identify themselves with a particular tradition or movement, often describe themselves as being 'spiritual'.⁸⁹ Besides the fact that this may sound exotic and exiting, the term *spirituality* is generally associated with features that have a positive connotation within the current cultural climate. It is, among other things, associated with self-development, being open-minded, diversity and authenticity.⁹⁰ Religion, on the other hand, is more often associated with negative characteristics such as dogmatism, conflict, (indisputable) authority and rules.

People who describe themselves as spiritual often have individualistic, eclectic and dynamic religious convictions and are likely to be seen as spiritual searchers.⁹¹ Despite the fact that not everyone of this group actually prays, prayer is often considered as a sort of psychological technique to meditate rather than as an expression of faith.⁹²

The new spirituality is dynamic, open and personal.⁹³ It has an informal character and is therefore more commonly found in a (relatively) de-institutionalized setting such as workshop, healing session, training or fair.⁹⁴ New spirituality is largely experienced in a diffusely organised sphere of interest whereby individuals exchange ideas and experiences by way of spiritual magazines, internet forum or occasional face to face meetings.⁹⁵

Because of the importance attributed to feelings and experiences, the 'spiritual option' is generally more in line with broader socio-cultural developments and subsequently more appealing to individuals. Most importantly, new spirituality allows the modern individual to organize his own religious identity, unrestricted by traditional dogmas or (moral) teachings.

⁸⁹ Van Harskamp, 'Simply astounding', 50.

⁹⁰ De Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen*, 26.

⁹¹ De Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen*, 217.

⁹² De Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen*, 217.

⁹³ De Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen*, 25.

⁹⁴ Heelas and Woodhead, *Religion in modern times*, 343.

⁹⁵ Vincett and Woodhead, 'Spirituality', 322.

Sociologist of religion Steve Bruce has pointed out that new spirituality often contains a strong component of inner worldly utilitarianism.⁹⁶ This means that there is a strong focus on good health, personal (financial) success, self-confidence, relaxation, etc. The people participating in several spiritual practices are often explicitly concerned with obtaining these (personal) goals and are much less interested in forms of spirituality in which the individual is, for instance, encouraged to overcome his ego.

2.2.5 The religious beliefs of Dutch citizens

In January 2015, the Dutch newspaper 'Trouw' commissioned Ipsos and Kieswijzer to conduct a large scale investigation on the status of religion and spirituality in the Netherlands. This was done as part of the '*month of spirituality*' which was given extensive attention by the newspaper. For this investigation, around 12.000 Dutch citizens were questioned about their religious beliefs. Political scientist André Krouwel and psychologist of religion Joke van Saane, both connected to VU University Amsterdam, led this research project.

Over the course of a few weeks, the results of this investigation were published in a series of articles in the newspaper's daily section '*religion and philosophy*'. One of the surprising outcomes was that for the first time in history, the people who stated that they did not believe in God (slightly more than 25%) outnumbered those who said they did (17%). The largest group, around 60%, positioned themselves between both poles. These people were either Agnostic, formally stating that they simply cannot know whether there is a higher power or not, or letsist, which means having an unspecified belief in the existence of a undetermined higher power.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the investigation indicated that a majority of the Dutch population, 53%, believes in life after death and that 40% considers himself a spiritual person. Of this group, no less than 33% believes in heaven.

Reacting to the results of the investigation, van Saane noted that individuating socio- cultural processes have played an essential role in the

⁹⁶ S. Bruce, *God is dead: Secularization in the West*, 85.

⁹⁷ M. van Beek, 'Ongelovigen halen de gelovigen in' (Trouw 16-01-2015).

continuing decline of church membership. She notes that as being yourself, being unique, is the (cultural) norm, dogma's that ought to apply to every person lose their credibility. And because the identity of traditional churches is more or less built upon these dogma's, leaving the church is a logical step for many people, according to van Saane.⁹⁸

Another notable outcome of the investigation was that the belief in heaven (33%), scored much higher than the belief in hell (7.6%). According to van Saane, this is another example of the influence of individualization processes upon our religious thinking. She thinks that, as the traditional institutions have lost much of their authority and are no longer in a position to prescribe what people ought to believe, people increasingly decide what they believe in themselves. As there is a strong emphasis on personal wellbeing within our current cultural climate, people simply continue to believe in heaven but largely stop believing in hell.⁹⁹

2.2.6 Diversity and flexibility

Religion in the Netherlands is currently diverse and flexible. Although the large church denominations have lost a considerable percentage of their members and their position of influence has waned substantially, religious ideas are still very much alive.

Both the ideas and practices offered by religion are numerous. Because individuals are increasingly cultivating their spiritual impulses outside the influence of traditional religious authorities, the variety in religious practices and ideas has grown considerably.

With respect to the supernatural, people rely on personal experience and intuition and usually have a special interest in how this can help them to develop personally. Religious convictions have therefore increasingly become a reflection of the personal preferences of the individual. The fact that many people from traditional church denominations are also (sometimes even openly) willing to accept certain religious beliefs or moral principles outside those of their specific

⁹⁸ M. van Beek, 'Ongelovigen halen de gelovigen in'.

⁹⁹ Redactie, 'Het hiernamaals is vooral een walhalla zonder God', (Trouw 17-01-2015).

church denomination, just illustrates how much the subjective turn has influenced how people think and act.

The contemporary individual is a self-governing agent, who self-consciously chooses to adopt a specific religious identity or not, decides on the ideas that he believes in and the type of practices he engages in as a result of his beliefs. He is not afraid of combining elements from different religious and spiritual traditions and does not like to submit himself 'unconditionally' to rules, tradition and authority.

2.3 Churches as cultural heritage in the Netherlands

Today, more and more people visit churches for numerous reasons other than to attend a religious service. They visit churches because they feel comfortable in the characteristic quiet atmosphere of a church interior, wish to encounter medieval artefacts or because they take pleasure in the harmonious contours of Romanesque (church) architecture. Their motivation for visiting a church is, in a nutshell, strongly characterized by a desire to experience.

Due to the impressive decline of churchgoers, a growing amount of church buildings in the Netherlands are no longer used for religious services. Present indications even suggest that in the next decennium approximately 1200 churches, both Catholic and Protestant, will have to close their doors in the Netherlands. This is about 25% of the total quantity of church buildings.¹⁰⁰

I will begin this section by briefly discussing the factors that play a role in the closing of churches. Then I will address the most important topics concerning reuse and demolition and present some facts and figures. After that, I will briefly outline the work of heritage foundations, especially the work of the Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken (SOGK) because they are exclusively concerned with the religious heritage of the province of Groningen. Finally, I will discuss the current popularity of visiting church monuments as a leisure activity.

¹⁰⁰ A. Molendijk, J.E.A. Kroesen, P. Post, 'Ritual Space in Modern Western Culture: Some Current Trends', A. Molendijk, J.E.A. Kroesen, P. Post (Eds.), *Sacred places in modern Western culture* (Louvain 2011) 3.

2.3.1 Demolition or reuse?

Churches are appreciated and valued by religious and non-religious people alike. One does not necessarily have to be a religious person or have a religious background in order to admire the aesthetics of a church building, for example. Church buildings may be treasured for many different reasons. Some people appreciate a church because of its aesthetic qualities, while others cherish certain memories connected to a specific church building.¹⁰¹ A church can also hold iconic significance for the surrounding district or area. Theologian Henk de Roest has pointed out that the church building is not only of significance for the celebration of the liturgy, but that it also has cultural, historical, architectural, landscaping, urban and social cultural value.¹⁰²

Secularization is not the only factor which can cause a church to experience a severe decline in visitors. The demographic developments of the region in which the church is situated regularly play a crucial role as well.¹⁰³ Rural communities are increasingly shrinking due to the process of urbanization. As these communities lose a significant number of inhabitants, the local church simultaneously loses (potential) church participants. In larger cities, the ethnic and religious composition of certain neighbourhoods has sometimes changed drastically due to immigration.

When church communities suffer a substantial loss of members, they also experience a notable decline in financial income. And as the funds, necessary for the – often – costly upkeep of the building start falling short, many church communities eventually have to close their church doors.

Once a church has lost its former function, the question presents itself: demolition or reuse. And although most people would prefer the second option, providing a church building with a new function is not always easy. The special status of the building has to be taken into consideration, for example. Since

¹⁰¹ L. Voyé, 'The need and the search for sacred places. A sociological perspective', T. Coomans, H. de Dijn, J. de Maeyer, R. Heynickx, B. Verschaffel (Eds.), *Loci Sacri. Understanding sacred places* (Louvain 2012) 77.

¹⁰² H. de Roest, 'Kerksluiting in perspectief', H. Bisseling, H. de Roest, P. Valster (Eds.), *Meer dan hout en steen. Handboek voor sluiting en herbestemming kerkgebouwen* (Zoetermeer 2011) 72.

¹⁰³ De Roest, 'Kerksluiting in perspectief', 32.

various important rituals take place within a church, people understand it to have a special status and do not necessarily welcome the idea of demolition or that it will be given a new (often profane) function.

Although people generally do not object against the idea of hosting classical music concerts inside a monumental church, many people object when other kinds of music are concerned, like rock, rap or techno.¹⁰⁴ The idea that church buildings have a special status, on a social, religious and architectural- city planning level, is shared among all levels of society.¹⁰⁵

Plans for the reuse of church buildings regularly lead to protest, as people find it difficult to accept that the building in which they used to attend services and prayed to God will be transformed into, for example, a supermarket. Jo Coenen, the former chief architect of the Netherlands, has stated that when church buildings are reused, there is often a tension between the former sacred function of the building and its new secular function(s). Even if a church has already been converted into, for instance, an apartment building, most people will still recognize its original status and know that something meaningful sticks to the building. This often clashes with the building's new secular purposes, especially when the interior is removed or unrecognizably changed.¹⁰⁶

Although a combination of both a religious and a secular function seems to be an attractive compromise, this form of reusing church buildings is still rare. There is, however, a slight upward trend since 2000.¹⁰⁷

Of the churches in the Netherlands that already have been demolished, most had no monumental status and date from the so called post-war period of reconstruction (*Wederopbouw*), from 1945 to 1961. The second largest group of demolished churches was built between 1900 and 1940. The third group consists of churches built between 1850 and 1899 and mainly consists of neo Gothic churches.¹⁰⁸ In general, it can be concluded that the younger the church building,

¹⁰⁴ Voyé, 'The need and the search for sacred places', 82.

¹⁰⁵ J. Coenen, 'Het kerkgebouw en zijn betekenis, op zoek naar elan', K. Doevendans, G. van der Harst (Eds.), *Het kerkgebouw in het postindustriële landschap* (Zoetermeer 2004) 182.

¹⁰⁶ Coenen, 'Het kerkgebouw en zijn betekenis, op zoek naar elan', 182.

¹⁰⁷ F. Asselbergs, P. Morel, M. Linssen, P. Houben (Eds.), *Onderzoek herbestemming kerken en kerklocaties. Een inventarisatie vanaf 1970* (Houten 2008) 33.

¹⁰⁸ Asselbergs, Morel, Linssen, Houben, *Onderzoek herbestemming kerken en kerklocaties*, 29–33.

the more likely it is to be demolished once it is no longer used for its initial religious purposes.

2.3.2 Heritage and heritage organizations

Before taking a closer look at the objectives and work of these foundations, it is helpful to briefly discuss the term 'heritage'. Heritage is what we inherited from past generations, maintain in the present and strive to preserve for future generations because we believe it contributes to our sense of identity. Heritage involves more than plain conservation and upkeep of, for instance, a church building. It should play an active role within society, in the present and in the future, and should give us a feeling of continuity with respect to our identity.¹⁰⁹

The term heritage communicates that a certain object is of importance to the identity of a country, group or region.¹¹⁰ The monumental church buildings of the Netherlands bear witness to a collective religious past and should therefore be appreciated as examples of a distinct religious, cultural and artistic identity, that, for centuries, has stood at the heart of both faith and community.¹¹¹

From the 1960s onwards, several foundations were established in the Netherlands that endeavored to preserve the churches that have lost their liturgical function and/or have become a financial burden to the church community in possession of the building. A foundation exclusively concerned with the preservation of churches in the province of Groningen, is the Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken (SOGK). This foundation currently possesses 85 churches, which is the largest quantity in possession of any foundation in the Netherlands. The official objective of the SOGK is to preserve the historical churches of the province of Groningen and to enthuse people for this unique heritage. While doing this, the foundation strives to maintain the original character of the churches as much as possible.

¹⁰⁹ W. Frijhoff, *Dynamisch erfgoed* (Amsterdam 2007) 8-9.

¹¹⁰ P. Post, *Voorbij het kerkgebouw. Speelruimte van een ander sacraal domein* (Heeswijk 2010) 171.

¹¹¹ S. de Blauw, *De versteende droom* (Amsterdam 2016) 29.

2.3.3 The current interest in church monuments

Today there is a growing interest in church monuments. Although many churches have lost some of their religious significance, as they no longer host religious services, they have also gained functionality, for instance as a center for religious cultural heritage. The search for sacred places is in fact growing in Western Europe. Approximately twenty years ago, the popularity of spiritual practices for the benefit of individual wellbeing grew substantially. Because of this, people started undertaking pilgrimages, booking a retreat in an old monastery or simply visiting a monumental (local) church to find rest and have a moment of silent reflection.¹¹²

Paul Post, a Dutch scholar who has extensively studied the ritual sacred space of the church building, thinks that the current revival of interest in churches can be explained by the fact that a monumental church and its interior are an ideal environment to dream and to experience the past.¹¹³ When a church and its interior date back to, for instance, the 18th century, people have the possibility to form an impression of (church)-life during this century, simply by entering the church and observe its interior.

Churches are also visited for their quiet and peaceful atmosphere which helps people to relax and reflect upon their lives. Therefore, people often, for a short period of time, visit a church during shopping activities, a day trip or when they are on their way to work.¹¹⁴ Church buildings allow people, particularly in urban areas, to escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life and enjoy a moment of silence and meditation.

Visiting monumental church buildings has also become a popular activity during vacations or city trips. Due to the speed of modern transport, both pilgrim and heritage sites are more easy and faster to reach than ever before in history. The reasons for visiting a religious heritage site vary from exclusive tourist interests to deeply religious motives. According to the sociologist of religion, Grace Davie, the increase in the number of Europeans that visit monumental

¹¹² Voyé, 'The need and the search for sacred places', 83.

¹¹³ Post, *Voorbij het kerkgebouw*, 58.

¹¹⁴ Voyé, 'The need and the search for sacred places', 85.

churches should be understood as the result of a collective desire to step back from everyday life and create a moment of reflection.¹¹⁵

In a PhD- study on spaces of silence in public institutions of the Netherlands, the author Jorien Holsappel-Brons, uses Foucault's concept of the *hétérotopie* – literally 'other place' – to investigate and interpret the nature of spaces of silence.¹¹⁶ In his theory, Foucault describes how certain places can relate to other places but simultaneously represent something different.¹¹⁷ This contrasting nature of the *hétérotopie* is characterized by the fact that in relation to other 'spaces' it evokes both illusion and compensation. Illusion because from the perspective of the *hétérotopie* the outside world can look unreal. Compensation because the *hétérotopie* can achieve a certain amount of perfection, especially with respect to those qualities 'the world' fails to accomplish.¹¹⁸

The concept of the *hétérotopie* can help us understand why people visit church monuments and what causes them to almost collectively praise certain specific qualities. The church building represents what Foucault's *hétérotopie* signifies, namely a place that is different from the places we usually reside in.

The church building distinguishes itself from other buildings not only by means of its (initial) purpose as a place where God should be praised and people can pray, but because it is often much older than most of the buildings that people usually encounter in their daily lives. This makes church buildings essentially different from other public places and can help to '(...) open an imaginary world with new perspectives, and let opportunities emerge that the routine of everyday life occludes.'¹¹⁹

2.3.4 The worth and significance of monumental churches anno 2017

¹¹⁵ G. Davie, *Religion in modern Europe. A memory mutates* (New York 2000) 161.

¹¹⁶ J. Holsappel-Brons, *Ruimte voor stilte. Stiltecentra in Nederland als speelveld van traditie en vernieuwing* (Ridderkerk 2010) 53-55.

¹¹⁷ F. Foucault, 'Des Espaces Autres', *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984) 46-49.

¹¹⁸ Holsappel-Brons, *Ruimte voor stilte*, 55.

¹¹⁹ Voyé, 'The need and the search for sacred places', 87.

Since the 1960s, a considerable number of churches in the Netherlands were forced to close their doors. Some of these churches ended up demolished, while others were given a new function. Churches have been transformed into supermarkets, libraries, restaurants, café's, etc. By providing church buildings that have lost their initial function with a new purpose, demolition or further deterioration can be prevented.

Fortunately, not every church has undergone extensive changes. A substantial number of church buildings that are no longer used for religious purposes, have maintained their historic appearance and more or less function as museums. And since these buildings connect us in a way to the thoughts and experiences of people from the past, they possess an unprecedented potential to inspire. The special atmosphere inside a church building can help people to find rest and to temporarily distance themselves from a world in which consumption, success and individual gratification are so important.¹²⁰

A broad variety of people, religious or not, use elements of the church building to meet their personal needs, showing that the exceptional characteristics of these buildings are still very much needed within a modern secularized society. Since the (monumental) church building is appropriated in many different ways and for many different reasons by people with all sorts of backgrounds, it's clear that its worth and relevance do not only exist within its original religious context.

Whoever enters their interiors, will temporarily be incorporated into a different world and may also find a peace and silence which is generally hard to find in any other public space. This certainly contributes to the worth and significance of monumental churches.

¹²⁰ De Blauw, *De versteende droom*, 30.

3. Analyzing the data

In this section I will present an analysis of the guest book notes. Every church will be discussed individually. After having structured the notes of every church in a database according to subject, I identified four categories of frequent visitor reflections. These categories are: reflections on interior/exterior, religious/spiritual references, reflection on the peaceful/ quiet atmosphere of the church and the experience of history or the historical. Each analysis will start with a brief description of the discussed church.

3.1 Pieterburen

The church of Pieterburen is a Gothic church dedicated to Saint Peter and was built in the 15th century. Its interior dates back to the 17th and 18th century and is therefore Protestant in appearance. The influence and power of the family Alberda who lived in the nearby located borg (castle) Dijksterhuis, can be observed in the interior. Because the furnishing of the church was completely financed and controlled by them, they made sure that the interior reflected the prominence and importance of their family. They had a private pew and a burial vault built located underneath the choir.

A beautifully decorated wooden triumphal arch separates the choir from the nave and there are several funerary hatchments, under which the oldest as well as the youngest of the province of Groningen.¹²¹ Apart from a religious service on Christmas eve and an occasional wedding, the church is not used by a religious congregation. People visit the church almost daily because it is situated at the start of one of the Netherlands' most frequently walked long-distance trails.

The church's guest book is placed on a table situated in the nave close to the entrance. Although the church of Pieterburen has a history of guest books dating back to the end of the 1930s, these books mainly listed the names of the

¹²¹ Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken, *De oudste en de jongste rouwborden uit de provincie*. Available at: https://www.groningerkerken.nl/downloads/ROUWBORDEN_IN_PETERBUREN.pdf.

people attending holy communion. People first started writing about the church and how they experienced their visit around the start of the 1990s.



©A.J. ter Veen, 2009

With regard to the interior of the church in Pieterburen, visitors are foremost struck by the splendid wood carved details inside the church. People praise the 'beautiful', 'splendid', or 'fine' woodcarving. Only two people refer to what fascinates them specifically: 'Very interesting, especially the details on the pulpit.'¹²² and 'Fantastic woodcarving. Especially the arch is very special.'¹²³ Their messages do not reveal more details regarding why the wood carved details on the pulpit or the wooden triumphal arch appeals to them in particular.

Some visitors are surprised by the bright atmosphere inside the church due to the high windows of the Gothic choir: 'A surprisingly bright church. Beautiful, sober, intimate.'¹²⁴

The funerary hatchments, which can be seen in the choir of the church, are not given much attention. The notes that do discuss the funerary hatchments, simply consist of short appraising remarks. One person writes that he and his companions, have never seen or even heard of funerary hatchments before: 'An

¹²² 'Heel interessant, vooral de details van de preekstoel.' 07-08-1994.

¹²³ 'Fantastisch houtsnijwerk. Vooral de boog is heel bijzonder.' 27-06-2012.

¹²⁴ 'Een verassend lichte kerk. Mooi, sober, intiem.' 17-07-2012.

extraordinary church. We saw funerary hatchments for the first time. Never heard of before.¹²⁵

Of the terms used by visitors to refer to the building, 'church' is most common. Other terms are 'building' and 'house of God'. Two people speak of 'culture' and 'culture history'.

Regarding religious references in the guest book notes, people frequently note how much they regret it that the building is no longer used by a church community. Sometimes this is briefly mentioned at the end of a short note, without distinctive Christian references: 'A very beautiful church. A pity it does not host services anymore.'¹²⁶, 'Splendid little church. A shame it has lost its real function.'¹²⁷, 'A beautiful church, but is it also a 'living church'??'¹²⁸ Whereas other notes are written with a clearly Protestant tone, specifically mentioning the preaching of 'the Word' or 'God's word': 'What a splendid building and such a pity that the Word is no longer being preached here.'¹²⁹, 'Very beautiful this church. I hope God's word shall be preached here again.'¹³⁰, 'Splendid church. But without the preaching of God's Word, it is like a human without a soul.'¹³¹

Of every note containing religious language, only one is dedicated to the praising of God. The writer praises God for what He has done in his or her life: 'Give God all glory, every time again. He is Creator of heaven and earth. God is a fantastic person. Received a lot of healing from Him. All thanks to Him!'¹³²

There were no messages in which a personal prayer was written nor did anybody mentioned to have performed a certain ritual. One person however, desires to light a candle in the church one day: 'A very beautiful church! But maybe I could come here someday to light a candle.'¹³³ In one note people write

¹²⁵ 'Een bijzondere kerk. We hebben voor de eerste keer rouwborden gezien. Nooit eerder van gehoord.' 08-2011.

¹²⁶ 'Een heel mooie kerk. Jammer dat er geen diensten meer plaats vinden.' 01-07-1995.

¹²⁷ 'Schitterend kerkje. Jammer dat het de echte functie verloren heeft.' 2011.

¹²⁸ 'Een mooie kerk, maar is het ook een 'levende kerk'??' 08-2011.

¹²⁹ 'Wat een prachtig gebouw en wat jammer dat het Woord hier niet meer gebracht wordt.' 04-07-1998.

¹³⁰ 'Heel mooi deze kerk. Ik hoop dat Gods woord hier weer gepredikt zal worden.' 28-08-2001.

¹³¹ 'Prachtige kerk. Maar zonder verkondiging van het Woord Gods, is het gelijk een mens zonder ziel.' 24-07-2013.

¹³² 'Geeft God alle eer, telkens weer. Hij is Schepper van hemel en aarde. God is een fantastisch persoon. Veel genezing van Hem ontvangen. Alle dank aan Hem!' 04-10-2014.

¹³³ 'Een hele mooie kerk! Maar misschien kan ik er nog ooit een kaarsje komen branden.' 2001.

that they have sang a psalm together, ending their message with a blessing: 'A very beautiful church, where we could sing with the three of us: 'The Lord is my Shepherd'. Ps. 23. Beautiful acoustics. We wish you God's blessing and His guidance during your sermons.'¹³⁴

Two persons remark that they have experienced a certain energy and since they conclude their message with 'Namesté', which is a greeting commonly found among Hindus, it is the only recorded note referring to a religious experience without using 'Christian' terminology: 'Special place of energy. Thanks for the experience! Namasté.'¹³⁵ and 'The energy of this small church feels like a warm cloak wrapped around me (....)'.¹³⁶

The church, just like all the other church buildings from this investigation, is frequently praised for its peaceful atmosphere and its soothing effect on visitors. The notes in which people write about having experienced peace, enjoyed the silence or found rest, are in fact abundant. These messages vary from short remarks: 'Such rest and silence!'¹³⁷ to more detailed accounts: 'This church gives rest and peace. If only the world was as calm and peaceful! Then the world would look different. No war, no grief. Only peace.'¹³⁸ 'Silence has become scarce. Such a delightful silence!'¹³⁹

There is also an important historical component to how the church is experienced by visitors. People write to have visited the church because family members or they themselves used to live in the region and/or attended church here: 'From Amsterdam back to the land where my mother was born. Pleasant memories!'¹⁴⁰ One visitor specifically mentions that he (probably) is a relative of the Dijksterhuis family: 'Wonderful feeling to sit in the pew of one's ancestors. Splendid church.'¹⁴¹

¹³⁴ 'Een heel mooie kerk, waar wij mochten zingen met z'n drieën: 'De Heer is mijn herder'. Ps. 23. Mooie akoestiek. Wij wensen u Gods zegen toe en Zijn leiding in uw diensten.' 27-07-2009.

¹³⁵ 'Bijzondere energieplek. Bedankt voor de ervaring! Namasté.' 27-05-2012.

¹³⁶ 'De energie van dit kerkje voelt als een warme mantel om me heen (....)' 27-05-2012.

¹³⁷ 'Wat een rust en stilte!' 07-2014.

¹³⁸ 'Deze kerk geeft rust en vrede. Was het op de hele wereld maar zo rustig en vredig! Dan zou de wereld er anders uit zien. Geen oorlog, geen verdriet. Alleen maar vrede.' 08-2012.

¹³⁹ 'Stilte is een schaars goed geworden. Wat een heerlijke stilte!' 02-07-1995.

¹⁴⁰ 'Vanuit Amsterdam terug naar het land waar mijn moeder is geboren. Fijne herinnering!' 28-07-2012.

¹⁴¹ 'Heerlijk gevoel om in de bank van je voorgeslacht te zitten. Prachtig kerkje.' 06-2009.

However, the historical is not only experienced when people have a personal history with the church. It is also being experienced by means of the church's monumental architecture and its age-old interior: 'As if time stood still! Magnificent.'¹⁴², 'History encased within church walls.'¹⁴³, 'Splendid church, a nice part of history which is well-preserved. Thanks for the explanation!'¹⁴⁴ People repeatedly praise the well preserved interior of the church and express the hope that its beauty can be admired for many years to come: 'Exquisitely beautiful church and I hope that such beauty will never perish.'¹⁴⁵

3.2 Leermens

The church of Leermens is one of the oldest churches in the province of Groningen and was originally dedicated to Saint Donatus of Arezzo. The church dates back to the second half of the 11th century and has undergone several alterations throughout the years. The nave, build out of tuff stones, was erected in the 11th century. The late Romanesque choir, dating back to the mid 13th century, was one of the last major alterations the church underwent. The architectural style of the church is a combination of Romanesque and Romano-gothic. On the north and south side of the choir, there are 15th century murals of several saints, including Saint Ursula and Saint Sebastian.¹⁴⁶ The building is used by a local church community.

The church of Leermens' guest book is placed upon the communion table situated in the choir of the church. The oldest guest books date back to the beginning of the twentieth century, although these books, just as with the church of Pieterburen, primarily listed the names of the people attending holy communion. The earliest guest book with comments on the experience of visiting the church dates back to the 1980s.

¹⁴² 'Alsof de tijd heeft stil gestaan! Prachtig.' 26-06-2012.

¹⁴³ 'Geschiedenis binnen de kerkmuren gevat.' 29-05-2013.

¹⁴⁴ 'Prachtige kerk, een mooi stuk geschiedenis wat goed bewaard is gebleven. Bedankt voor de uitleg!' 31-08-2013.

¹⁴⁵ 'Prachtig mooie kerk en ik hoop dat zoiets moois niet verloren gaat.' 07-1998.

¹⁴⁶ Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken, *Leermens – Donatuskerk*.

Available at: <https://www.groningerkerken.nl/downloads/LEERMENS.DONATUSKERK.2015.pdf>.



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The architectural features of the church of Leermens received frequent attention in the writings of the visitors. The attention given to the architecture of the church is unique in comparison to the guest books of the other churches within this research project. People repeatedly referred to and reflected on what they considered extraordinary architectural forms. Especially the vaults are a much discussed item in the guest book notes: ‘Lovely church, with its stone vaults in various shapes.’¹⁴⁷, ‘A place to return to someday. Those vaults!’¹⁴⁸ Other people refer specifically to the dome, which is located in the choir of the church: ‘(...) Especially the cupola of tiny stones and decorations I find particularly beautiful! (...)’¹⁴⁹, ‘Beautiful church. Especially the cupola. Contemplative silence..... Delightful.’¹⁵⁰

Furthermore, the colours and the frescoes/paintings are recurring themes in the writings of visitors: ‘Such beauty, especially the rood screen on the right with the frescoes. Very beautiful cupola.’¹⁵¹, ‘Magnificent church. Beautiful choir

¹⁴⁷ ‘Prachtige kerk, met z’n stenen gewelven in allerlei vormen.’ 02-05-2008.

¹⁴⁸ ‘Een plek om nog eens terug te komen. Wat een gewelven!’ 02-09-2004.

¹⁴⁹ ‘(...) Vooral de koepel van steentjes en versieringen vond ik bijzonder mooi! (...)’ 19-02-2012.

¹⁵⁰ ‘Mooie kerk. Vooral de koepel. Bezinnende stilte..... Heerlijk.’ 12-08-2012.

¹⁵¹ ‘Wat een pracht, vooral het rechter doxaal met de fresco’s. Heel mooie koepel.’ 02-08-2011.

and paintings.¹⁵² Only a few people explicitly refer to the architectural style of the church.

Visitors use words like 'simple', 'plain' and 'moderate' to describe and praise the interior of the church: 'The beauty of the simplicity is splendid.'¹⁵³ and 'The beauty of the church is impressive. Wonderfully simple and subtle.'¹⁵⁴ One visitor recognizes in the so-called 'plain architecture' of the church an analogy with how 'the faith' should be: 'Lovely, simple architecture, unpretentious. As the faith should be.'¹⁵⁵

Notes with religious references are only found on a regular basis from 2004 onwards. Throughout the 1990's, not a single religiously inspired message can be found. It was not until around 2000 that people started writing lengthier messages in which they described their experiences more openly. Three people report to have had some sort of religious experience while visiting the church. A visitor writes: 'A shelter! For us now just because of the rain, but especially a shelter in the vicinity of God! Good to dwell in!'¹⁵⁶

Although three visitors mentioned having prayed during their visit, only one note is an actual written prayer: 'Impressive building. Such rest and quiet to come to yourself and God. "Those who lived before us passed away. This old building of wood and stone remained, as a prayer to You. We pray along, hear us now."¹⁵⁷ In the other two messages, one person makes a promise that he or she will pray and someone mentions to have uttered a short prayer during his or her visit.

People also experienced peace and quiet during their visit. Visitors mentioned meditating, listening to the sound of birds singing, and finding inspiration by simply enjoying the silence. The silence they experienced is described as 'serene', 'meditative' and 'reflective'. When people refer to or praise

¹⁵² 'Prachtige kerk. Mooi koor en schilderijen.' 08-11-1995.

¹⁵³ 'De schoonheid van de eenvoud is prachtig.' 29-07-2003.

¹⁵⁴ 'De schoonheid van de kerk is indrukwekkend. Prachtig eenvoudig en subtiel.' 28-10-2000.

¹⁵⁵ 'Prachtige, eenvoudige architectuur, pretentieloos. Zoals het geloof moet zijn.' 21-08-2013.

¹⁵⁶ 'Een schuilplaats! Voor ons nu even vanwege de regen, maar vooral een schuilplaats in Gods nabijheid! Goed om te vertoeven!' 2009.

¹⁵⁷ 'Indrukwekkend gebouw. Wat een rust en stilte om even tot jezelf en God te komen. "Wie voor ons leefden gingen heen. Dit oud gebouw van hout en steen bleef staan, als een gebed tot U. Wij bidden mee, verhoor ons nu."¹⁵⁷ 07-07-2005.

the quiet atmosphere inside the church, they tend to critique, both explicitly and implicitly, today's increasingly stressful society. 'A benchmark and a place of rest in this hectic time.'¹⁵⁸, 'What a splendid church! In here one can learn to relax (....)'.¹⁵⁹

As I mentioned earlier, the church is repeatedly praised because of its plain 'no nonsense' architecture. A visitor states that its modest appearance helps one to relax: 'After having seen many splendid, abundantly decorated churches in Brittany, this church is a relief in the sense of the rest and peace it radiates. And the silence, delightful.'¹⁶⁰ The convincing number of notes praising the serene atmosphere of the church interior suggest that this opinion is shared by other visitors.

Reflecting on history also plays an important role in how visitors experience the church. With regard to these 'historical experiences' a distinction can be made between people with actual memories of the church and those that try to picture a period of history, such as the Middle Ages. A few visitors wrote that they recalled scenes from their childhood and others remarked that, for instance, their father was born in the village of Leermens. However, in most messages people reflect on the age of the church building and their feelings of how this connects them to the past: 'In this beautiful old church one experiences the course of history.'¹⁶¹, 'The silence of the Middle Ages is still audible in the 20th century.'¹⁶²

Four people reported that they sang during their visit. One of them writes about having sung an aria: 'Fine acoustics! Just sung "Bist du bei mir", without audience.'¹⁶³ One unique feature of Leermens in comparison to the notes found in the guest books of other churches is that is that visitors of this church also refer to the texts written on the gravestones around the church. These texts mainly describe the vulnerability and finiteness of human life, and visitors

¹⁵⁸ 'Een ijkpunt en een rustpunt in deze hectische tijd.' 27-07-2010.

¹⁵⁹ 'Wat een prachtige kerk! Hier kan je leren te onthaasten (....)'. 12-08-2005.

¹⁶⁰ 'Na heel veel prachtige uitbundig versierde kerken in Bretagne te hebben gezien, is deze kerk een verademing in de zin van rust vrede die het uitstraalt. En de stilte, heerlijk.' 10-08-2012.

¹⁶¹ 'In deze mooie oude kerk ervaar je de loop van de geschiedenis.' 16-05-2005 .

¹⁶² 'De stilte van de middeleeuwen is nog hoorbaar in de 21^{ste} eeuw.' 15-08-2005.

¹⁶³ 'Akoestiek prima! "Bist du bei mir" nog even gezongen, zonder publiek.' 18-08-2003.

mention how this made a – deep – impression on them: ‘Beautiful church(colours) and impressive epitaphs on the graves outside.’¹⁶⁴

3.3 Zeerijp

The church of Zeerijp is a Romano- gothic church dedicated to Saint James the Greater. It was built in the first part of the 14th century and is, because of its size, a true landmark. In the church, both Romano- gothic as early Gothic style elements can be recognized. The interior of the church dates back to the 17th century and includes an impressive oak wooden pulpit, decorated with allegorical representations of Christian virtues. The painted red brick imitations on the walls are unique and are typical of churches that were part of the diocese of Münster in the period 1250 – 1350.¹⁶⁵ The church is used by a local church community. Because of its unique character, the church attracts thousands of visitors annually.¹⁶⁶

From 1966 onwards, visitors have been able to leave a message in a guest book and reflect on their experiences with the church. The church of Zeerijp’s guest book is placed upon the communion table in the nave of the church, in front of the pulpit.

¹⁶⁴ ‘Mooie kerk(kleuren) en indrukwekkende grafspreuken op de graven buiten.’ 11-08-1998.

¹⁶⁵ Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken, *Zeerijp – Jacobuskerk*.

Available at: <https://www.groningerkerken.nl/downloads/ZEERIJP.JACOBUSKERK.20151.pdf>.

¹⁶⁶ R. Steensma, ‘Hoe God opnieuw verschijnt in Zeerijp. Vormen van Godsbeleving in een oude kerk’, J. Kroesen, Y. Kuiper, P. Nanninga (Eds.), *Religie en cultuur in hedendaags Nederland* (Assen 2010) 17.



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The church of Zeerijp holds a special position within this research project. Not only does the church possess the largest quantity of guest books, but these books also contain the largest number of detailed notes written by visitors. The church is open almost every day and has a unique ability to appeal to its visitors.

For example, many people praise the splendid light of the bright interior: 'The enlightening light in this church, wonderful! Very special church.'¹⁶⁷ One person writes about enjoying this special light every time he or she visits the church: 'Every time again we take pleasure in the devotion and the lovely light.'¹⁶⁸ Four people describe experiencing the extraordinary light within the church in a religiously contemplative way: 'The light sparks through the windows, a moment of contemplation on our walk through the beautiful north. Delight!'¹⁶⁹

The organ is a much discussed item in the guest books of the church of Zeerijp. These notes vary from brief references in which the instrument is praised among other interior elements, to notes in which the 'splendid organ' is exclusively praised. Interior elements that receive surprisingly little attention are the pews, pulpit and funerary hatchments. The funerary hatchments for example, are mentioned only four times.

¹⁶⁷ 'Het verlichtende licht in deze kerk, prachtig! Heel bijzondere kerk.' 18-04-2009.

¹⁶⁸ 'Elke keer weer genieten we van de devotie en van het prachtige licht.' 03-06-2007.

¹⁶⁹ 'Het licht sprankelt door de ramen, een moment van bezinning op onze wandeling door het mooie noorden. Genieten!' 29-05-2012.

Just as in the guest books of the church of Leermens, though less frequently, visitors praise the so-called simplicity of the interior. Also like the guest books from Leermens, a writer compares the church with more exuberantly furnished churches seen on a holiday. In this note, the writer concludes that the plainness of the church of Zeerijp is equally beautiful: 'Recently seen many churches in Tuscany. This one is because of its simplicity certainly just as beautiful!'¹⁷⁰

The church is generally referred to as (James') 'church'. Furthermore, 'house of God' is the most frequently used term. The word 'cathedral' is used three times. Unlike the church of Leermens, visitors rarely discuss the architectural features of the church of Zeerijp. Only one person describes the architectural features of the church and uses the term 'Romano- gothic'.

Concerning the use of religious language, a notable number of notes exclusively worship God. Sometimes a Psalm is cited, as in one note which reads: 'Open the ancient gates so that the glorious King may come in. Psalm 24.'¹⁷¹ Sometimes visitors use Biblical language to describe their experiences with the church, without explicitly citing Scripture. 'House of God, a small reflection of His Heavenly home! Believed and to be praised is He who loves us!'¹⁷²

No fewer than six written prayers are written in the guest books. Even more people mention having prayed inside the church. In their prayers, people ask for protection, that no harm will come to them or their loved ones. Furthermore, people ask for strength in difficult times and one person requests support from heaven during the walk of the James'- path: 'A delightful place to send up a prayer for energy to continue the 'James'- path', and for a blessing for this village. I'm curious where this path will lead me, Lord?!' And with whom I will

¹⁷⁰ 'Kortgeleden vele kerken gezien in Toscane. Deze door zijn eenvoud zeker zo mooi!' 24-06-2001.

¹⁷¹ 'Heft, poorten, uw hoofden omhoog en verheft u, gij aloude ingangen opdat de Koning der eren inga. Psalm 24.' 13-07-2004.

¹⁷² 'Huis Gods, een kleine afspiegeling van Zijn Hemels huis! Geloofd en geprezen is Hij die ons liefheeft!' 05-08-1999.

continue it.¹⁷³ Although more people mention that they are walking the James'-path, these messages do not contain relevant information for this investigation.

The guest-books of the church of Zeerijp are the only ones in which people mention having read and subsequently reflected on a text from the Bible during their visit. There are three of these notes in total, including one which reads: 'An accidental passer-by, also in time. Read Romans 8, it strengthened me in my faith.'¹⁷⁴

The acoustics of the church are praised repeatedly and in eleven notes people describe having sung during their visit: 'Visited this church at 9 o'clock this morning. The door was already open. Have sung Psalm 23 by myself. The Lord is my shepherd. It resonated beautifully. Extraordinary that people have sung and prayed here for centuries.'¹⁷⁵

A great many notes indicate that visitors enjoyed the peace and silence within the church. These notes vary from short remarks: 'Being silent for a moment.'¹⁷⁶ to more lengthy descriptions: '(...) holy place of rest and space, repentance and contemplation. For those who want to see and feel it. It is good here; in this world that is drowned out by itself, places like this are 'safe havens'.¹⁷⁷

In some messages discussing the silent and peaceful atmosphere inside the church, people critique the so-called overwrought world/society: 'The silence, the sunbeams, the rest of this timeless house of God: overwhelming! Contemplation is very much needed in this overwrought society.'¹⁷⁸ At least twelve people use the word 'contemplation' or the phrase 'a moment of

¹⁷³ 'Een heerlijke plek om een gebed op te sturen voor energie om het 'Jakobspad' te vervolgen, en voor een zegen voor dit dorp. Ik ben benieuwd waar dit pad me gaat leiden, Heer?! En met wie ik het ga vervolgen.' 25-08-2010.

¹⁷⁴ 'Een toevallige voorbijganger, ook in de tijd. Gelezen Romeinen 8, heeft mij gesterkt in mijn geloof.' 14-08-2009.

¹⁷⁵ 's Morgens om negen uur deze kerk bezocht. De deur stond al open. In m'n eentje Ps. 23 gezongen. De Heer is mijn herder. Het galmde prachtig. Bijzonder dat hier al eeuwen lang mensen gezongen en gebeden hebben.' 13-07-2007.

¹⁷⁶ 'Even stil zijn.' 09-08-2002.

¹⁷⁷ '(...) heilige plek van rust en ruimte, inkeer en contemplatie. Voor wie het zien en voelen wil. Het is goed hier; in deze wereld die zichzelf vaak overschreeuwt, zijn plaatsen als deze 'veilige havens'. ' 31-05-2003

¹⁷⁸ 'De stilte, de zonnestralen, de rust van dit tijdloze Godshuis: overweldigend! Contemplatie is zó nodig in deze overspannen samenleving.' 01-05-2008.

contemplation', as they reflect on their visit: 'Thirty degrees Celsius, on the racing bike. A moment of cooling and contemplation in this church. What a beautiful first day of the holiday.'¹⁷⁹

The church is also visited by people who are looking to find traces of their personal past or from history itself. The first group consists of people that visit their birthplace or that of their (grand)parents. Others have distinct memories which are linked to the church itself: 'What a splendid church and so well preserved. I have to think of everything that has taken place here.'¹⁸⁰ and 'Dear grandma. After years I visit your and grandpa's grave and the church which I visited with you as a child. Childhood memories never pass, just as my thoughts of you! Till someday!'¹⁸¹

The second group is experiencing the historical in a more anonymous way. They do not have personal memories of the church building, nor does their family have a connection with the church- and village community. These people want to experience a period of time embodied in the architecture of the church: 'The ambience of the middle ages and the ambience of the 21st century meet each other.'¹⁸² and 'Very beautiful church with an age-old wonderful tradition, place of silence - rest.'¹⁸³

3.4 Groningen

The Martini church is, with its 97-meter-high tower, one of the most impressive (religious) buildings of the province of Groningen. The church is dedicated to the Saint Martin of Tours and its history dates back to around the year 1000 when the first stone church stood at the Martini cemetery. Over the years the church has been gradually expanded. In the first part of the 13th century a Romano- gothic Basilica was built to replace the first tuff stone building. At the start of the 15th

¹⁷⁹ '30 graden Celsius, op de racefiets. Even verkoeling en bezinning in deze kerk. Wat een mooie eerste vakantiedag.' 06-08-2004.

¹⁸⁰ 'Wat een prachtige kerk en goed bewaard gebleven. Ik moet denken aan alles wat zich hier heeft afgespeeld.' 17-08-2005.

¹⁸¹ 'Lieve oma. Na jaren bezoek ik uw en opa's graf en de kerk waar ik als kind met u kwam. Jeugdherinnering gaat nooit voorbij, even als mijn gedachten aan jullie! Tot ooit!' 01-08-1999.

¹⁸² 'De sfeer van de middeleeuwen en de sfeer van de 21^{ste} eeuw ontmoeten elkaar.' 01-07-2009.

¹⁸³ 'Heel mooie kerk met een eeuwenoude prachtige traditie, oord van stilte – rust.' 16-04-2011.

century, the church once again underwent notable alterations. The choir of the church was heightened and the nave of the church enlarged according to hall church principles, with the nave and side aisles having approximately the same height.

In the church one can find Romanesque, Romano- gothic and Gothic architectural style elements. Much of the wall and roof paint work has been preserved. A depiction of particular value is a 16th century depiction of the life of Jesus Christ on the walls inside the choir.¹⁸⁴

The baroque organ of the church is one of the largest of northern Europe and was built by the highly influential organ builder Arp Schnitger. Every Sunday three different services are held by two different congregations. The church building is also used for receptions, exhibitions, meetings and concerts.



©J. Huisman, 2005

The Martini church distinguishes itself from the other religious monuments from this investigation by being the only church that is located in a

¹⁸⁴ Stichting Martinikerk Groningen, 'Geschiedenis van de Martinikerk'. Available at: <http://www.martinikerk.nl/index.php/gebouw>.

city. As the city of Groningen is home to a university and is visited by a substantial number of tourists, the church is regularly attended by (international) visitors. However, the guest books did not contain the richest material. Many people only left their names, without reflecting upon their experiences.

The guest book is placed upon a table in the nave of the church. It is difficult to say when visitors were first given the opportunity to write in a guest book because some of the guest books have unfortunately gone missing and the start of this initiative was not reported elsewhere. The oldest surviving guest book of the Martini church dates from the 1980s.

The organ is a much-praised artefact of the church's interior. In most of the notes on this topic, the writer or writers mention to find the organ 'beautiful', 'wonderful' and even 'a work of art': 'Large, impressive yet simple. Splendid organ!'¹⁸⁵ Some of the visitors heard the organ being played and are impressed by its sound: 'Overwhelming, the organ music after the funfair sounds.....'¹⁸⁶, 'How lucky we were, even the organ was played upon.'¹⁸⁷

In nine notes people praise the frescoes. They describe the frescoes as 'beautiful', 'unique' and 'impressive'. One person thinks the restoration of the paintings has been done too carefully: 'Too bad, the frescoes have been restored too beautifully.'¹⁸⁸ The graves, which can be seen inside the church, were not frequently discussed in the guest book notes. In only three notes visitors mention to have been 'touched' by their beauty or because a particular grave belonged to a distant relative.

People critiqued elements of the interior surprisingly often. Visitors stated that they were irritated by the chairs that were placed inside the church because they considered them as too modern to fit harmoniously within the overall character of the interior: 'A shame about the seats. (Wood was perhaps more appropriate).'¹⁸⁹ The lamps were also critiqued for being too modern and '(....)

¹⁸⁵ 'Groot, indrukwekkend doch ook eenvoudig. Prachtig orgel!' 01-05-2014.

¹⁸⁶ 'Overrompend, de orgelmuziek na de kermis geluiden.....' 25-08-1990.

¹⁸⁷ 'Was für ein glück wir hatten, sogar die orgel wurde bespielt.' 28-07-2010.

¹⁸⁸ 'Jammer, de fresco's zijn te mooi gerestaureerd.' 14-08-1992.

¹⁸⁹ 'Jammer van de stoeltjes. (Hout was misschien passender).' 05-08-2011.

the painted bricks on the pillars.¹⁹⁰ awful. One note perfectly illustrates the annoyance felt by a considerable part of the visitors about the presence of 'modern objects' in an age-old building/interior: 'I find it a privilege to visit this church but what I find very unfortunate, that on the left side of the back of the church, a wonderful antique door has been repaired with an ordinary lock. Awful. A pity that it is treated like this.'¹⁹¹

Three types of religious language can be distinguished in the guest book notes. First, notes in which visitors, without reflecting on the church building, only cite a Bible verse: 'I am the way, the truth and the life.'¹⁹², give thanks: 'We thank the Lord for his great sacrifice. Thank you Jesus!'¹⁹³, or wishes God's blessing: 'God bless you! Jesus loves you! Hallelujah.'¹⁹⁴

Then there are messages in which people, using religious language, critique the furnishing of the church: 'Where did the altar go? After the cleared table in the nave we at least thought to find one in the choir, – only exhibition – walls looked at us. What is a church without the table of the Lord, when the chairs are facing the organ and the visitor is greeted with organ music coming from the loudspeaker.'¹⁹⁵ However, most of the religiously inspired critique is directed at the church's policy to ask an entrance fee.

Written prayers are also found in the guest books. In one of these prayers, God is addressed, using feminine nouns: 'Dear mom and mother god, protect us on our further path in life, with lots of happiness and health.'¹⁹⁶ Of all written prayers, four out of six are written in German. It could be possible that writing prayers in guest books of churches is more usual in Germany.

¹⁹⁰ '(...) nageschilderde bakstenen op de pilaren.' 20-06-1991.

¹⁹¹ 'Ik vind het een voorrecht deze kerk te bezichtigen maar wat ik erg jammer vind, dat links achterin de kerk een prachtige antieke deur met een gewoon lip slot is gerepareerd. Afschuwelijk. Jammer dat er zo mee om wordt gegaan. 18-06-1991.

¹⁹² 'Ich bin der Weg, die Wahrheit und das Leben.' 20-08-1991.

¹⁹³ 'Wij danken de Heer voor zijn grote offer. Dank U Jezus!' 5-08-2010.

¹⁹⁴ 'God zegent u! Jezus houdt van u! Halleluja.' 24-07-1990.

¹⁹⁵ 'Wo ist denn der Alter geblieben? Nach dem abgeräumten tisch im schiff dachten wir wenigstens in Chorraum einen zu treffen – lediglich Ausstellungs – wände sahen uns an. Was ist eine Kirche ohne Tisch des Herrn, wenn das Gestühl zur orgel hin ausgerichtet ist und der besucher von orgelmusik aus dem lautsprecher begrüsst wird.' 24-07-1990.

¹⁹⁶ 'Lieve mama en moeder god, bescherm ons op ons verdere levenspad, met veel geluk en gezondheid.' 14-06-2011.

The prayers can be separated into two different categories. The first is a request for blessing: ‘Lord, Father in Heaven, give us strength, health and a lot of love.’¹⁹⁷, ‘I hope my son in the UMCG will get better?’¹⁹⁸ The second is praise: ‘Thank you dear God, that I may live on. Make me strong to make it through your trials.’¹⁹⁹ From 2011 onwards, visitors were given the opportunity to light a candle inside the church: ‘Lit two candles for 4 lovely people, took a rest and watched your beautiful church. Splendid!’²⁰⁰

The church is also praised for being a place where one can find rest, think and meditate. One person writes that because of this, the church is indispensable: ‘Oasis of rest in a busy city. I need you for rest, inspiration, gratitude and hope.’²⁰¹

With regard to experiences of the historical in the Martini church, some people mention that they have actual memories of the church. To other people, the past is experienced in a more anonymous way by simply contemplating on the church’s history. Of the first group, we find notes such as: ‘Lovely reunion, impressive. Dear memories of earlier days when we used to sing as kids in the Martini church’s choir.’²⁰² Others visit the church, looking for family connections: ‘My dad was baptized here.’²⁰³ It needs to be said that the first group of experiences outnumbers the notes in which visitors simply reflect on history by means of the church’s architecture and artefacts.

3.5 Ter Apel

Ter Apel monastery is a former monastery located in the village of Ter Apel in the south east of Groningen. It was built in 1465 and used to belong to the Canons

¹⁹⁷ ‘Herr, Vater im Himmel gib uns kraft, gesundheit und viel liebe.’ 04-05-2013.

¹⁹⁸ ‘Ik hoop dat mijn zoon in het UMCG weer beter wordt?’ 22-07-2011.

¹⁹⁹ ‘Danke lieber Gott, dass ich weiter leben darf. Mache mich stark um deine prüfungen zu bestehen.’ 15-06-2012.

²⁰⁰ ‘Twee kaarsjes aangestoken voor 4 lieve mensen, even uitgerust en gekeken naar uw mooie kerk. Prachtig!’ 22-09-2011.

²⁰¹ ‘Oase van rust in een drukke stad. Ik heb je nodig voor rust, inspiratie, dank en hoop.’ 05-08-2010.

²⁰² ‘Heerlijk weerzien, indrukwekkend. Fijne herinneringen aan vroegere tijden toen we als kinderen zongen in het koor van de Martini kerk.’ 11-07-1990.

²⁰³ ‘Mijn vader is hier gedoopt.’ 25-05-1990.

regular of the order of the holy cross. It is the last monastery established in Groningen and also the only monastery which has not been demolished. It is beautifully located in a woody area.

Today the convent buildings of the monastery house a museum for monastery and church history and for religious and contemporary art. A local Protestant church community uses the former lay church for their weekly services. The monastery of Ter Apel is visited by a considerable number of (international) visitors each year.

Since 2002 visitors can sign a guest book and write about their experience visiting the former monastery of Ter Apel. This guest book is placed upon a table situated in the cloister, strategically located at the place where people both start and end their tour through the monastery.



© H. Binnendijk, 2003

In the writings of the visitors, there is hardly any reflection on the interior of the former monastery. Only one visitor, for example, mentions the rood screen which can be seen in the monastery church: 'Beautiful monastery. Splendid rood screen.'²⁰⁴ The beautiful woodcarving, which can also be seen in the monastery church, is not given much attention either. Only a handful of people mention it in their notes: 'I found the woodcarving brilliant. The entire building is interesting.

²⁰⁴ 'Mooi klooster. Schitterend doksaal.' 11-2009.

You could stay here for hours.²⁰⁵ A German visitor is especially impressed by the old brick structure of the walls inside the former monastery: 'The old walls are very impressive.'²⁰⁶ Surprisingly, there are no messages about the vaults, which can be seen while walking through the cloister. Two persons do express their admiration for the beautiful 'ceiling'. The stained glass is discussed in two notes.

The rebuilt west wing is a recurrent theme in the guest book notes. Between 2000 and 2003 this west wing is (re)constructed to enable a complete round walk through the former monastery, which previously was not possible. Although the west wing is harmoniously connected to the rest of the building, one clearly sees it does not belong to the monastery originally. The opinions of visitors about this architectural intervention vary widely. Some consider it a violation of the historical appearance of the place: 'Unfortunately the new part also looks so 'new'. A bit heartless.'²⁰⁷, while others think the building has benefitted from this intervention: 'How incredibly beautiful and interesting! What a lot of work has been done and the new fits the old very good.'²⁰⁸

The people who think the appearance of the former monastery has benefitted from the newly built west wing, argue that the architecture style of the new goes well with the old. The people who do not like the west wing claim that it violates the general appearance of the monastery and therefore its capacity to evoke the atmosphere of the past: 'I think the newly built west wing is beautiful but I would have found it more special to walk through the monastery just as it was in the past. Now it was too 'neat' here and there. I do understand that this is necessary for preservation and information purposes but for me it takes a part of the experience away.'²⁰⁹ It is noteworthy that people only use the word 'monastery' to refer to the building. Other descriptive terms were not found.

²⁰⁵ 'Het houtsnijwerk vond ik schitterend. Het hele gebouw is interessant. Uren kun je hier vertoeven.' 23-08-2006.

²⁰⁶ 'Das alte gemäuer is sehr beeindruckend.' 09-07-2006.

²⁰⁷ 'Jammer dat het nieuwe deel ook zo 'nieuw' oogt. Beetje harteloos.' 07-2007.

²⁰⁸ 'Wat ontzettend mooi en interessant! Wat is er veel werk verzet en het nieuwe past heel goed bij het oude.' 30-10-2008.

²⁰⁹ 'Ik vind de nieuwbouw wel mooi maar had het toch meer bijzonder gevonden in het klooster rond te lopen echt zo het vroeger was. Nu was het hier en daar te 'aangekleed'. Ik begrijp wel dat dit voor het behoud en de informatie nodig is maar het haalt voor mij een deel van de beleving weg.' 27-04-2003.

There is a surprising quantity of religiously coloured notes in the guest books. Visitors use religious language to describe their experiences and the thoughts they had during their visit. There are also a considerable number of written prayers.

The notes that contain religious language are diverse. First of all, messages wherein people do not reflect on how they experienced visiting the monastery but only proclaim: 'Only Christ's way leads to salvation.'²¹⁰, worship: 'My soul praises the Lord! Hallelujah!'²¹¹, or cite a Bible verse: 'Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.'²¹²

Furthermore, notes in which visitors describe having contemplated on the monastery's age old history: 'The centuries looked down on us. We felt ourselves connected to monks and prior: in the Lord!!'²¹³, 'Here the Lord is being praised for centuries. Praise be unto Him.'²¹⁴ People also mention to have experienced God's presence during their visit: 'A place of silence, where God's silent presence has lingered on, after years of worship to Him. God is good and great!'²¹⁵, 'Here you're completely on your own with God. Delightful the tranquillity.'²¹⁶

Written prayers are the most common expression of religious language in the guest book notes. Some visitors only (briefly) mention that they have prayed during their visit: 'Beautiful, quiet and gives me a good feeling. Rest, ruminate, praying and talking to God, Mary and Jesus.'²¹⁷, while others actually write down their prayers. In these prayers, people ask for help and assistance: 'Let peace – love descend upon us! We need you.'²¹⁸, abase themselves and ask for forgiveness: 'Lord forgive us and increase our faith in You.'²¹⁹, or thank God:

²¹⁰ 'Alleen door de weg van Jezus Christus is de weg tot zaligheid.' 08-01-2006.

²¹¹ 'Meine seele lobe den Herrn! Halleluja!' 02-10-2005.

²¹² 'Komt allen tot mijn die vermoeid en belast zijn en ik zal u rust geven.' 01-12-2006.

²¹³ 'De eeuwen keken op ons neer. Wij voelden ons verbonden met monniken en prior: in de Heer!!' 30-07-2003.

²¹⁴ 'Hier wordt de Heer al sinds eeuwen geprezen. Geloofd zij Hij.' 12-08-2006.

²¹⁵ 'Een plek van stilte, waar Gods stille aanwezigheid is blijven hangen, na jaren van aanbidding aan Hem. God is goed en groot!' 17-09-2011.

²¹⁶ 'Hier ben je helemaal op jezelf met God. Heerlijk die rust.' 22-07-2007.

²¹⁷ 'Mooi, rustig en geeft mij een goed gevoel. Rust, overdenken, bidden en praten met God, Maria en Jezus.' 04-08-2009.

²¹⁸ 'Laat er toch vrede – liefde op ons neerdalen! Wij hebben u nodig.' 03-07-2007.

²¹⁹ 'Heer vergeef ons en vermeerder ons geloof in U.' 07-2006.

'Good God. Thank you for all the blessings. Hosanna in the Highest and honour to Jahweh and the Lamb!'²²⁰

Because the museum, after numerous requests from visitors, provided the possibility of lighting a candle, there is also a selection of notes in which people mention performing this ritual: 'Lit a candle for all my loved ones.'²²¹, 'Lit a candle for Piet. Needs it, hopefully it helps.'²²² It seems that one person believes that he or she will be blessed, just by visiting the monastery: 'May my visit to this splendid, warm old monastery radiate to me and my family just happiness, warmth, health just as it used to be: all Blessings.'²²³

The notes in which people solely write that they have enjoyed the peaceful and quiet atmosphere outnumber any other category of notes found in the guest books of the former monastery. The language used in these messages was often also more 'emotional' than the language used in comparable messages from in the guest books of the other churches: 'From time to time I want to taste the ambience of rest and the past again. One feels something of eternity here!'²²⁴, 'Silence. (...) What a gift this monastery.'²²⁵ Five people mention that they meditated during their visit: 'It breathes the atmosphere of the Middle Ages, meditated in the soothing garden.'²²⁶ These notes demonstrate that certain people purposely visit the monastery to relax and enjoy the peaceful atmosphere.

More than at any other religious monument from this investigation, people write that they have experienced 'the past' while visiting the former monastery. A reasonable explanation for this fact is that ('operative') monasteries are far less common than churches and are therefore more easily associated with the past. The terms 'centuries' and 'middle ages' are frequently used in these notes. Many people mention that they experience the past while visiting the

²²⁰ 'Goede God. Dank U voor alle zegeningen. Hosanna in den Hoge en eer aan Jahweh en het Lam!' 23-02-2007.

²²¹ 'Kaarsje aangestoken voor al mijn dierbaren.' 24-7-2010.

²²² 'Kaarsje voor Piet gebrand. Heeft het nodig, hoop dat het helpt.' 28-07-2007.

²²³ 'Dat mijn bezoek aan dit schitterende, warme oude klooster mij en mijn gezin alleen geluk, warmte, gezondheid mag doorstralen zoals het vroeger was: allemaal Zegeningen.' 30-07-2007.

²²⁴ 'Af en toe wil ik de sfeer weer proeven van rust en het verleden. Je voelt hier iets van de eeuwigheid!' 26-04-2006.

²²⁵ 'Stilte. (...) Wat een geschenk dit klooster.' 20-05-2004.

²²⁶ 'Het ademt de sfeer van de middeleeuwen, gemediteerd in de rustgevende tuin.' 16-06-2013.

monastery: 'We came and felt ourselves around 1500 A.D. Splendid!!'²²⁷ 'The atmosphere of centuries ago in the here and now..... moment in eternity full of silence..... It is good to taste this, on the edge of the old year.'²²⁸

3.6 Categories of experience and their characteristics

With respect to how visitors generally reflected on their experiences with a monumental church, I distinguished four different categories. These categories are: comments on the interior, religious messages, the impact of the church on the minds of the visitor and experiencing history or the historical. In this section of the thesis, these categories will be discussed in more detail, using the empirical material from each church. By doing so, I want to present a more specific and detailed picture of the general characteristics of these different categories of experience.

The guest book notes of the five churches analyzed in this study are personal messages written by visitors about their experiences with a specific church monument. These notes are, understandably, very diverse. Religious expressions of sheer bliss and notes in which visitors report to have been disgusted or even angry over modern alterations to the interior of the church, often share the same page.

The notes give insight into the motives visitors have for visiting a certain monument and their ideas and expectations on religious heritage in general. Furthermore, it becomes clear which feelings and experiences the different churches evoke. In this section I will focus more specifically on the question: 'How do people reflect on their experiences with church monuments?'

²²⁷ 'Wij kwamen en voelden ons rond 1500 A.D. Prachtig!!' 05-2006.

²²⁸ 'De sfeer van eeuwen her in het hier en nu..... moment in de eeuwigheid vol stilte..... Mooi hiervan te proeven, op de rand van het oude jaar.' 28-12-2005.

3.6.1 Aesthetic experience

When discussing the aesthetics of church buildings, most people praise and reflect on notable or defining elements of the interior. These notes form about 60% of what visitors have written in the guest books. In the guest books of the Martini church for instance, the organ is the most commonly praised feature of the church's interior: 'Magnificent what an organ and splendid architecture!'²²⁹

The organ is also frequently praised in the guest books of the church of Zeerijp: 'A splendid church and an even more beautiful organ!'²³⁰ In Pieterburen most praise goes to the wood carvings: 'Magnificent church. Splendid wood carvings (...).'²³¹ And in the books of the church of Leermens, the typical Romano-gothic style elements of the building are mostly acclaimed: 'What a charming Romanesque church with a wonderful cupola painted ceiling and old floor tiles!'²³²

In the guest books of the former monastery of Ter Apel, remarkably few people reflect on the interior and/or the aesthetics of the architecture. These visitors are, more than the visitors of any other monument within this study, concerned with how the monastery affects them emotionally. While doing this, only a few people also refer to or praise the aesthetic qualities of the monastery. This is definitely remarkable. Apparently, the ancient monastery complex impresses its visitors to such an extent, making them feel as if they are back in medieval, pre-reformation times, that it causes them to reflect almost exclusively on the historical or the mystic atmosphere that surrounds the monastery.

Other interior elements that received frequent attention in the guest books are: wall/ceiling paintings, choir stalls, the pulpit(s), funerary hatchments and the vaults. People use words such as 'lovely' ('A lovely place, especially the choir with its vault.'²³³), 'beautiful' ('I find this a very beautiful church. Many

²²⁹ 'Schitterend wat een orgel en geweldige architectuur!' Groningen 28-05-2011.

²³⁰ 'Een schitterende kerk en een nog mooier orgel!' Zeerijp 03-08-2006.

²³¹ 'Schitterende kerk. Prachtig houtsnijwerk (...).' Pieterburen 15-07-2012.

²³² 'What a charming Romanesque church with a wonderful cupola painted ceiling and old floor tiles!' Leermens 19-06-2006.

²³³ 'Een prachtige ruimte, speciaal het koor met z'n gewelf.' Leermens 12-08-2004.

beautiful sculptures, truly a church to visit once in a while and find rest.²³⁴) and 'magnificent' ('What a delightful silence and that in this magnificent church, looking around, receive rest and enjoy the age old history.'²³⁵) to express appreciation for the elements that made an impression upon them.

The landscape in which the monument is located also influences how people experience their visit. A visitor of the church of Zeerijp notices the following: 'Amazement. A sunny, very summery landscape. Green, space, silence, scents (lime blossom), Zeerijp. The Church invites already from afar and open door. Sacred silence of bygone times. What a wonderful start to begin the pilgrimage route.'²³⁶

The notes in which people reflect on what they did not like about the monuments also provide useful information on what is generally considered beautiful with respect to religious heritage. In the guest books of the monastery of Ter Apel for example, several visitors discussed the rebuilt west wing in their writing. Although some visitors think it is beautifully done, the majority is openly negative: 'I understand that the new provides more space and it is all intelligently renovated and restored, but the atmosphere is gone. Such a shame. I was here 10 years ago, but I will never come here again.'²³⁷ Another visitor writes the following: 'I think the newly built west wing is beautiful but I would have found it more special to walk through the monastery just as it was in the past. (...) I do understand that this is necessary for preservation and information purposes but for me it takes a part of the experience away.'^{238 239}

²³⁴ 'Ik vind dit een hele mooie kerk. Veel mooi beeldhouwwerk, echt een kerk om af en toe binnen te lopen en rust te vinden.' Pieterburen 05-2009.

²³⁵ 'Wat een heerlijke stilte en dat in deze schitterende kerk, rondkijken, ontvangen van rust en genieten van de oudheid.' Zeerijp 30-05-2011.

²³⁶ 'Verwondering. Een zonnig, zeer zomers landschap. Groen, ruimte, stilte, geuren (lindebloesems), Zeerijp. De kerk nodigt reeds van verre en open deur. Gewijde stilte van weleer. Wat een fijne start om de pelgrimsroute te beginnen.' Zeerijp 28-06-2010.

²³⁷ 'Ik snap dat de nieuwbouw meer ruimte oplevert en het is allemaal knap vernieuwd en gerestaureerd, maar de sfeer is er uit. Heel jammer. Ik was hier 10 jaar geleden, maar ik kom hier nooit meer.' Ter Apel 05-2011.

²³⁸ 'Ik vind de nieuwbouw wel mooi maar had het toch meer bijzonder gevonden in het klooster rond te lopen echt zo het vroeger was (...) Ik begrijp wel dat dit voor het behoud en de informatie nodig is maar het haalt voor mij een deel van de beleving weg.' Ter Apel 27-04-2003.

²³⁹ I have also used this quote in 3.5 (Ter Apel).

Negative remarks on the addition of modern elements to a monument and its interior, are also found in the guest books of the Martini church. One visitor thinks that the lamps inside the church are too modern: 'The modern lamps are hideous.'²⁴⁰, someone thinks the chairs inside the church are inappropriate: 'These chairs are inappropriate inside a 16th century church.'²⁴¹ and another person shares his concerns about the plans for building the Groninger forum²⁴² close to the church: 'Let our Martini-tower and church exist in its full glory, undamaged by a modern building. I love our Martini-tower and church.'²⁴³

Notes like these demonstrate that visitors generally wish to see monuments that appear as authentic as possible. Modern additions to traditional, 'old' looking churches and their interiors are therefore considered disturbing and unattractive. This has to do with one of the main motives people have for visiting a religious monument, namely: to travel, as it were, through time and be part of a different world simply by standing amidst an age old interior.

3.6.2 Experiencing a peaceful/ quiet atmosphere

Notes on silence, rest and reflection make up an average of 20% of what has been written in the guest books of the different monuments. In these notes, people reflect upon the silence and rest they experienced during their visit. The church is represented as a place of rest and silence in which one can relax and have a moment for oneself: 'What a serene rest and silence. Old churches have something!'²⁴⁴, 'Oasis of rest in a busy city. I need you for rest, inspiration, thanks and hope.'²⁴⁵, 'Silence has become scarce. What a delightful silence!'²⁴⁶

²⁴⁰ 'De modern lampen zijn foeilelijk.' Groningen 06-1991.

²⁴¹ 'Deze stoelen zijn ongepast in een zestiende eeuwse kerk.' Groningen 06-1991.

²⁴² A building which is currently under construction in the city centre of Groningen, close to the Martini church. It is intended as a cultural centre, housing a cinema, a library and parts of the Groninger museum.

²⁴³ 'Laat onze Martini-toren en kerk bestaan in zijn volle glorie en niet beschadigt worden door een modern gebouw. Ik hou van onze Martini-toren en kerk.' Groningen 10-09-2011.

²⁴⁴ 'Wat een serene rust en stilte. Oude kerken hebben iets!' Zeerijp 01-08-2007.

²⁴⁵ 'Oase van rust in een drukke stad. Ik heb je nodig voor rust, inspiratie, dank en hoop.' Groningen 05-08-2010.

²⁴⁶ 'Stilte is een schaars goed geworden. Wat een heerlijke stilte!' Pieterburen 02-07-1995.

There is a significant quantity of notes in which people write to have experienced 'silence' and 'rest' and subsequently polarize these qualities with ordinary life, which is characterized as hectic, restless and noisy: 'A benchmark and a place to rest in these hectic times.'²⁴⁷, 'A relief in these restless times.'²⁴⁸

As visitors reflect upon their experiences of visiting a church monument, many are inclined to idealize the past over the present. The peaceful atmosphere they experienced inside the church is thereby often seen as a representation of how daily life must have been in the past. Although ideas like these should primarily be seen as (irrational) expressions of nostalgia, it is important to stress that these ideas were conceived inside a monumental church. The meditative atmosphere inside a quiet church encourages people to reflect on their lives and the society they participate in.

Numerous visitors write that they have experienced peace, silence and rest inside the church building. When visiting a monumental church, people can experience or even use this as a means to temporarily escape the negative sites of modern life.

Although the word 'meditation' is only used a few times, many messages suggest that more people engaged in this or comparable activities. Visitors wrote to have had a moment alone with their thoughts: 'Breathtakingly beautiful. Will enter here often for a moment alone with my thoughts.'²⁴⁹ or that they just have been quiet for a while: 'A moment of silence and contemplation at such a beautiful place.'²⁵⁰

3.6.3 Historical experience

The history of every monument from this research project goes back at least a few hundred years. This history is reflected in both the architecture and interior of the different buildings. Of the total amount of guest book messages, analysed

²⁴⁷ 'Een ijkpunt en een rustpunt in deze hectische tijd.' Leermens 27-07-2010.

²⁴⁸ 'Een verademing in deze jachtige tijd.' Ter Apel 07-09-2007.

²⁴⁹ 'Adembenemend mooi. Zal hier nog vaak even binnenlopen voor een moment alleen met mijn gedachten.' Zeerijp 07-04-2000.

²⁵⁰ 'Een moment van stilte en bezinning op zo'n mooie plaats.' Leermens 28-08-2005.

for this study, about 10% consists of notes in which people share or reflect on some sort of historical experience. The experience of time is hereby crucial. For instance, people explicitly underlined that visiting a building where God has been praised for hundreds of years made a deep impression upon them and many notes demonstrate that visitors are impressed by and have a certain reverence for the building because of its age old history. People make frequent references to the monumental status of the building using words as 'old' and 'centuries' or 'age-old'. In these notes, such words have a highly positive connotation.

The age of a religious monument plays an important role in how it will be experienced by the visitor. A few quotes: 'Impressive, the centuries fall over you.'²⁵¹, 'Everything old, as long as it is worth it, should be cherished as a precious treasure! This church for example.'²⁵², 'A very beautiful church with a lot of old things from bygone times.'²⁵³ The last quotation in particular illustrates that a monumental church is often experienced in terms of seeing what 'the past' has looked like. The attractiveness of monumental churches largely consists of their ability to exhibit a world which embodies the past in its art and architecture.

Comparable to the notes where people reflect on the quiet and peaceful atmosphere inside the churches, notes on the historical show a tendency to idealize the past over the present. The following notes characterize how these feelings are being expressed in the guest book messages: 'Delightful to experience the silence of this church in this busy world.'²⁵⁴, 'Here you can still find the serene rest and the good feeling of the past.'²⁵⁵, 'Magnificent in this chaotic time, this rest (....)'.²⁵⁶

These type of messages can be found in the guest books of every church from this research project. They illustrate that monumental church buildings can awaken a certain form of nostalgia in its visitors, letting them dream of more

²⁵¹ 'Indrukwekkend, de eeuwen vallen over je heen.' Zeerijp 25-06-2006.

²⁵² 'Al het oude, voor zover het dat waard is, moet men als een kostbare schat koesteren! Bv. deze kerk.' Zeerijp 05-08-2003.

²⁵³ 'Een hele mooie kerk met veel oude dingen uit lang vervlogen tijden.' Groningen 07-07-2012.

²⁵⁴ 'Heerlijk om in deze drukke wereld de stilte van deze mooie kerk te ervaren.' Zeerijp 25-06-2005.

²⁵⁵ 'Hier vind je nog de serene rust en het goede gevoel van vroeger.' Ter Apel 08-2007.

²⁵⁶ 'Geweldig in deze chaotische tijd, deze rust (....)'. Zeerijp 09-09-2003.

quiet and less stressful times. To these visitors, the church building represents their dream world.

To describe what exactly triggers a historical experience, it can be helpful to use the metaphor of an encounter: the world of the visitor encounters the world of the monumental church. The present meets the past. The building itself represents a different time, as it stands out as an embodiment of religious and cultural history. Entering this material embodiment can give the visitor the experience of entering the past, of time travelling. After all, the person visiting the church enters a building that has been built several centuries ago.

Various visitors described their experience of visiting a monumental church as an encounter with 'a different world': 'Beautiful, almost silent, different world!'²⁵⁷, '(...) to walk here is like being in a different world of rest and austerity.'²⁵⁸ Others felt as if they were part of a specific period of history: 'Back in the days before the reformation. Good to see this back.'²⁵⁹ Most visitors however, used more general terms like 'history' and 'the past', as they reflected on their experiences: 'In this beautiful old church one experiences the course of history.'²⁶⁰, 'Living history, impressive!'²⁶¹, 'Atmospheric church, one tastes the past.'²⁶²

Historical experiences of visitors do not always focus on the building and the artefacts of its interior. Certain guest book notes show that people also visit a specific church either because they or a (distant) family member were part of the local church community. There are a variety of written reports in which people mention to have visited a particular church because they wanted to bring their memories back to life: 'Searching for memories of my grandparents who lived here for a brief period of time on (...) and the place where he is buried in 1987 (...) Nice to be here for a moment and to think of them both and that period

²⁵⁷ 'Mooi, bijna stil, andere wereld!' Zeerijp 23-07-2012.

²⁵⁸ '(...) hier lopen is zijn in een andere wereld van rust en soberheid.' Ter Apel 09-2013.

²⁵⁹ 'Terug in de tijd vóór de reformatie. Goed dit terug te zien.' Ter Apel 01-08-2005.

²⁶⁰ 'In deze mooie oude kerk ervaar je de loop van de geschiedenis.' Leermens 16-05-2005.

²⁶¹ 'Levende geschiedenis, indrukwekkend!' Ter Apel 07-2007.

²⁶² 'Sfeervolle kerk, je proeft het verleden.' Leermens 05-08-2013.

(...)'²⁶³, 'Lovely reunion, impressive. Dear memories of earlier days when we used to sing as kids in the Martini church's choir.'²⁶⁴ A few people wrote to have been looking for family graves or a funerary hatchment: 'A beautiful church and what a rest (...). We came for a 'funerary hatchment', which was mentioned in our family tree and we also found it.'²⁶⁵

It also happens that descendants of immigrants visit the region where their ancestors lived before their emigration. A church is often one of the few remaining buildings that stems from that particular period and is therefore taken as an example of how their ancestors' world must have looked like: 'Our great grandfather, Edo Hemmes, was born here in 1849 - how interesting to be standing in the church he was probably baptized in!'²⁶⁶

3.6.4 Religious experience

Notes with a religious character or content make up approximately 10% of the total amount written in the guest books discussed in this study. In these texts people write about, for instance, how they experienced the supernatural or they express their admiration for a religious monument using religious language.

Many people asked in their notes whether the church they visited still hosted religious services or not. In the guest books of Zeerijp for instance, numerous notes can be found in which people describe being delighted to know (or discover) that the church still hosted religious services. In the books of the church of Pieterburen on the other hand, visitors wrote how much they regretted the fact that the church is not used by a religious community anymore. However, no messages were found that could suggest that knowledge concerning the

²⁶³ 'Op zoek naar herinneringen aan mijn opa en oma die hier korte tijd woonden op (...) en de plaats waar hij is begraven in 1987 (...). Fijn om hier even te kunnen zijn en te denken aan hen beide en die tijd (...).' Zeerijp 23-02-2004.

²⁶⁴ 'Heerlijk weerzien, indrukwekkend. Fijne herinneringen aan vroegere tijden toen we als kinderen zongen in het koor van de Martini kerk. Groningen 11-07-1990.

²⁶⁵ 'Een mooie kerk en wat een rust. We kwamen voor een 'sterfbord', genoemd in onze stamboom en die hebben we ook gevonden.' Zeerijp 17-11-2002.

²⁶⁶ 'Our great grandfather, Edo Hemmes, was born here in 1849 - how interesting to be standing in the church he was probably baptized in!' Zeerijp 18-05-2007.

religious activity within a church, influences the way in which people will eventually experience the church.

Visitors use the guest books to write down prayers, to praise God and to share special (religious) experiences. Some visitors refer to the church's long tradition of prayer and worship in order to validate why they have felt God's presence during their visit: 'A place of silence, where God's silent presence has lingered on, after years of worship to Him. God is good and great!'²⁶⁷ With respect to experiencing religious heritage, the oldness of the building does not only seem to determine whether people experience their visit as an encounter with the past. Several visitors wrote that they experienced God's presence inside a particular church while explicitly referring to the fact that people have praised and prayed there for centuries.

Many visitors wrote about having prayed and/or sung during their visit. Sometimes, these prayers were written in the guest books, but most people just mentioned to have prayed while they were inside the church. No other monument from this study has as many prayers written in its guest books as the former monastery of Ter Apel. Despite the fact that the monastery lost its Catholic status and identity in 1593, it continues to appeal to and attract people with a Catholic background. Therefore, many of the prayers written in its guest books have a distinctive Catholic character: 'Lord and Mary, may we receive your love and give you ours. Lord and Mary we thank you for your care. Hope, faith and love for us all.'²⁶⁸

The director of the monastery museum, aware of this form of appropriation, decided to give visitors the opportunity to light a candle beginning in 2006. This initiative is remarkable, given the fact that the monastery is formally a museum.

Religious heritage is experienced in many different ways and visited for many different reasons. Some people may visit a monumental church because they are interested in architectural history and primarily see the building as a

²⁶⁷ 'Een plek van stilte, waar Gods stille aanwezigheid is blijven hangen, na jaren van aanbidding aan Hem. God is goed en groot!' Ter Apel 17-09-2011.

²⁶⁸ 'Heer en Maria, mogen wij uw liefde ontvangen en u onze liefde geven. Heer en Maria wij danken u voor uw zorg. Hoop, geloof en liefde voor ons allemaal.' Ter Apel 20-09-2005.

cultural expression of aesthetic ideas, while to others it is a sacred place, the house of God where they wish to pray and meditate. These two different perspectives, will reasonably influence people's experiences and the activities they will subsequently engage in.

Although I've distinguished four different categories with respect to how visitors reflected on their experiences in the guest books, this does not in the least cover the broad variety of individual experiences. Just as people's backgrounds differ from each other, so do their interpretations and eventually their experiences. However different these experiences may be, what they have in common is the creativity with which a monument is approached and subsequently given meaning and relevance.

The mechanism of 'appropriation' enables people in a highly individualised culture to give personal meaning to something which more and more people seem to struggle with; understanding Christianity's material culture.

3.7 Similarities and differences among the (different) heritage sites

Just as every monument from this study is unique and has its distinctive characteristics, so do the experiences of visitors generally differ at every church. After categorizing the guest book notes of the five monuments from this study, I noticed remarkable parallels and differences concerning the experiences people reflected upon in the guest books. In this section I want to highlight the most notable parallels and differences with respect to how visitors experienced the different churches. Subsequently, I will explain these similarities and differences.

Many visitors of the former monastery of Ter Apel experience this monument as an authentic example of Catholic religious life. People describe its atmosphere as extraordinary and it is one of the most discussed topics in the guest books. The metaphor of time travelling is thereby often used to describe the effect this special atmosphere has upon its visitors.

The fact that the monastery stands out as a material remnant of Catholic piety before large parts of Europe turned Protestant, plays a significant role in the experiences of many visitors. Several visitors refer to the Catholic origins of the

complex and mention that they have experienced ‘the middle ages’ or ‘the past’ during their visit. Although every monument discussed in this thesis has a Catholic history and was once built to house a Catholic congregation in which a priest said the Mass, people only seem to associate the monastery with this past. This can be quite easily explained by means of the iconic Catholic features the monastery possesses, such as a well preserved roodscreen, and the fact that monasteries are an exclusively Catholic phenomenon within the Christian world. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the Catholic past of the other monuments is only mentioned once.

Obviously, the severely altered interiors of these monuments prevent visitors from realising that these churches were once Catholic too. Besides the fact that in the north of the Netherlands there are no Catholic churches that were not confiscated during the Protestant reformation nor have a history dating back to the middle-ages, the identity of the monument as a monastery, is enough to excite peoples’ imagination and to bolster the idea that it is truly old and unique. These exceptional characteristics make it an appealing and interesting place for people to visit. More than any other monument from this research project, is the monastery of Ter Apel associated with what visitors generally referred to as ‘the past’.

Religiously coloured messages, including prayer and the praising of God, are most commonly found in the guest books of the monastery of Ter Apel and the church of Zeerijp. In the guest books, visitors wrote prayers, praised God, described religious experiences or expressed their admiration for the monument using religious coloured language.

Both monuments were praised because they were historically built in reference to God: ‘It still is an impressively warm building. A stone witness of age old trust.’²⁶⁹, because of their impressive appearance ‘Unbelievable, such an enormous church in such a small village. Praise for its conservation!’²⁷⁰ and/or because of the pious history it represents: ‘Splendid monastery, very impressive.

²⁶⁹ ‘Het blijft een indrukwekkend warm gebouw. Getuige in steen van eeuwenlang vertrouwen.’ Zeerijp 07-07-2000.

²⁷⁰ ‘Onbegrijpelijk, zo’n enorme kerk in zo’n klein dorpje. Hulde voor de instandhouding!’ Zeerijp 17-06-2007.

You get the feeling of how monastery life must have taken place in the middle ages.²⁷¹

Although the church of Zeerijp is itself impressive-looking, this is accentuated even more by the modest architecture of the small village amidst it stands. Ter Apel monastery is not only beautifully located in a wooded area but also manages to impress with its history, architecture and the idea that it used to be a place where monks lived and worked. In many notes these qualities of the two monuments are being praised. The frequency and even tone, which sometimes could be labelled 'lyrical', of these notes are unique compared to what has been written in the guest books of the other monuments from this study.

There is a connection between the remarks of visitors on being impressed by the architecture and the overall appearance of the buildings, and the frequency and character of religious expressions written in the guest books of the same churches. The more a monument is considered to possess extraordinary qualities, whether aesthetic or historical, the more this will be reflected in the frequency of detailed religiously coloured notes produced by visitors. It seems as if visitors with a presumably Christian background feel themselves closer to God inside a religious monument with an impressive appearance and/or history and are inclined to express these feelings/experiences more easily.

A substantial amount of notes from both guest books can be seen as exemplary for this bond between the aesthetic and the experience of God: 'Deeply impressed by the beauty in honour of the Creator and Redeemer.'²⁷² 'Age old place of silence: connects me to heaven.'²⁷³, 'Praise God for the existence of this and nature (in these times). This is something amazing. Enjoy it and relax.'²⁷⁴, 'It is so beautiful and quiet! Here you get overtaken by the feeling of being very

²⁷¹ 'Prachtig klooster, zeer indrukwekkend. Je krijgt het gevoel hoe vroeger in de middeleeuwen het kloosterleven heeft plaatsgevonden.' Ter Apel 08-07-2012.

²⁷² 'Diep onder de indruk van de schoonheid ter ere van de Schepper en Verlosser.' Zeerijp 17-08-1999.

²⁷³ 'Eeuwenoude stille plek: verbindt mij met de hemel.' Zeerijp 20-10-2011.

²⁷⁴ 'Dank God dat dit en de natuur er is (in deze tijd). Dit is iets prachtigs. Geniet ervan en kom tot ontspanning.' Ter Apel 12-08-2007.

close to yourself and God, just as I have experienced in other monasteries.²⁷⁵ The aesthetic, according to these visitor notes, can be seen as something heavenly, thus giving certain visitors the idea of being closer to God.

One of the most striking similarities among the guest book notes of the different monuments in this study, is the emphasis on the quiet and peaceful atmosphere inside the church building. In the guest books of every single monument, numerous notes are written in which people say to have enjoyed the peaceful, quiet atmosphere of the church. These notes are, apart from a few exceptions, remarkably short: 'Being quiet for a while.'²⁷⁶, 'Impressive! Experiencing silence.'²⁷⁷ Most visitors just briefly report that they have experienced a quiet and serene atmosphere without providing detailed descriptions on what specifically characterizes this atmosphere.

It seems as if this serene atmosphere inside a church is seen as a self-evident quality and does therefore not require further explanation. People do however give insight into how they spent their time while enjoying the silence within the church: 'A moment of silence and contemplation at such a beautiful place.'²⁷⁸, 'Silence. Time for ourselves. What a gift this monastery.'²⁷⁹ Most of the people who wrote about having contemplated/meditated during their visit, took time for themselves while they rested or simply enjoyed the silence.

It is not hard to explain why visitors are inclined to praise a church for its quiet/peaceful atmosphere. This has to do with the identity of the religious building. As a place of worship and service to God, the church building has a different status and appearance than most profane buildings. Even when a church has lost this initial status, people are likely to experience a special ambience and act accordingly. They will begin to whisper and slow their pace as soon as they enter a religious building. Within this sacred atmosphere, people are more open to experience the silence.

²⁷⁵ 'Het is hier zo mooi en rustig! Er overvalt je hier een gevoel van heel dicht bij jezelf en God zijn, net zoals ik dat in andere kloosters heb mogen ervaren.' Ter Apel 03-08-2007.

²⁷⁶ 'Even stil zijn.' Zeerijp 09-08-2002.

²⁷⁷ 'Indrukwekkend! Stilte ervaren.' Leermens 17-08-2006.

²⁷⁸ 'Een moment van stilte en bezinning op zo'n mooie plaats.' Leermens 28-08-2005.

²⁷⁹ 'Stilte. Komen tot onszelf. Wat een geschenk dit klooster.' Ter Apel 20-05-2004.

4. Conclusion

The central aim of this research project has been to investigate how people living in a secularized society, experience Christian cultural heritage. In order to answer this question, I made a selection of 4 monumental churches and 1 former monastery from the Dutch province of Groningen and analyzed the notes visitors have written in the guest books of these monuments. Subsequently, I studied literature on secularization in the Netherlands and the way in which heritage is protected and, if necessary, provided with a new purpose.

Based on what people have written in the guest books, I distinguished 4 types of experiences: aesthetic, rest/silence, historic and religious. This order represents which type of experience is most common. Combinations of these types were not unusual.

The aesthetic category consists of notes in which people reflected on what they thought was beautiful about a specific monument. This can be one element in particular, for instance an organ, a combination of elements or 'the church' itself. The rest/silence category deals with notes in which people said to have enjoyed the silence of the church and its quiet or peaceful atmosphere. The quantity and nature of these messages are illustrative for how church monuments, apart from their (initial) religious purpose, are being appropriated by visitors. The church building is then used to find rest and forget about everyday life for a brief moment. Guest book messages in which people wrote to have experienced the historical, whether this concerned their own (family) history with the church or a more anonymous history of, for instance, the reformation, form the category of historical experience. The category of experiencing the religious is the last type of experience that could be extracted from the numerous notes. In these notes people reflect on, refer to or even address the supernatural.

In their notes, visitors put a lot of emphasis on personal experience(s). People describe what they experienced while visiting the church or former monastery and often reflect on how it affected them emotionally. They for instance describe what exactly made them happy, sad or confused and for which

reasons. From the year 2000 onwards, people started not only to write more lengthy notes concerning their experiences inside the church, but also more personally. I consider this to be a logical consequence of the subjective turn of modern Western culture which I described in chapter 2.1 and 2.2, as well as the result of the up-coming social media culture whereby people are encouraged to share their experiences and exhibit their personal identities.

As a radical new cultural focus on the individual taught people to trust intuition, focus on feelings and reflect on experiences, social media like Facebook made it a much more common practice to share them. People have become much more used to share their feelings/experiences with others. The overwhelming quantity of notes in which people describe how the church affected them emotionally, strongly resembles the current trend to reflect on and be concerned with one's personal feelings and wellbeing.

The notes of visitors did not tend to contain less religiously inspired references as time moved on. In fact, the quantity of notes with religious content grew. Especially during the 1990s, people seemed reluctant to share personal experiences. The religious notes that stem from this period are mostly brief and scarcely reveal any personal details. From approximately the year 2000 onwards, the notes became more lengthy and personal. Gradually, visitors started to reflect on their personal experiences, feelings and/or opinions more openly. The notes not only grew in length, but were also often much more detailed. This trend also accounted for how visitors reflected on the religious.

This development can be explained in a threefold way: 1. The increase of religious references in the guest book notes indicates that religious people have become more assertive. 2. There has been a revival of the religious within society and more people refer to the supernatural. 3 It is the logical outcome of subjectivization – Facebook legacy, as I described earlier.

Judging from the material from this study, the upsurge of religiously colored notes should be interpreted according to the third option. As the increase of notes with a religious character coincided with an overall increase of notes on personal experiences, option 3 is the best answer that can be given at this point. During this period, more people started to reflect on and share their experiences

and feelings more openly and so did those with religious beliefs. There is no reason to suspect that religious people have become more assertive or that religion has gained popularity.

In the guest books, many visitors reflected on their experiences with a church monument by contrasting it with the society they live and participate in. In these notes, people wrote that the church building represents a so much more peaceful, silent or beautiful atmosphere compared to the world at large or the society they personally engage in. The church, according to these people, represents a different world. The church building is described as a place in which it is possible to detach oneself for a short period of time from a world which is seen, both implicit and explicit, as a restless environment.

In these and comparable notes, the churches are implicitly described as 'counter-spaces': places unspoilt by what is generally referred to as the negative sides of modern Western society, such as stress, noise, an excessive amount of impulses, etc. To these people, the church resembles a world which now belongs to the past. This is a form of nostalgia which, according to the geographer and historian David Lowenthal, reflects traumas of loss and change experienced by people living within highly developed countries characterized by rapid changes and advances in technology.²⁸⁰ Whether the comparisons made by visitors are historically correct or not is unimportant. What is important for the goals set out in this research project, is that people have these sort of sensations and thoughts as they visit a monumental church building.

A (monumental) church is unlike any other building people usually visit. It is dedicated to praise and meet the transcendent, has a unique and clearly distinguishable physical appearance (both its ex- and interior) and is often of a respectable age. Being a religious building, the atmosphere within its walls can be characterized as devout. It is within this atmosphere, people feel themselves comfortable to do things that they would not do as easily within any other public building. Praying, or having a moment of silent reflection for instance. As the church is an expression of religious piety and religion is concerned with the mystique of both life and death, it is a place to mourn the dead, rejoice in life,

²⁸⁰ D. Lowenthal, *The heritage crusade and the spoils of history* (Cambridge 1998) 10-11.

pray, think, reflect, meditate or simply admire the aesthetics of architecture and art.

Philosopher Alain de Botton regards (monumental) church buildings as ideal places to reflect and meditate because of their special character and purpose: 'There are churches that can induce us to surrender our egoism without in any way humiliating us. In them we can set aside our ordinary concerns and take on board (in a way we never dare to do when we are under direct fire from other humans) our own nullity and mediocrity. We can survey ourselves as if from a distance, no longer offended by the wounds inflicted on our self-esteem, feeling newly indifferent to our eventual fate, generous towards the universe and open-minded about its course.'²⁸¹

If anything has become clear with respect to the question of how visitors, living in a secularizing context, experience religious heritage, it is that the answer to this question is as diverse as the average human being's preferences. It would be better to ask, what is the average visitor of a religious heritage site looking for? And again, it could be argued that this is just as diverse as the interests and preferences of people. But I am convinced that this question, in relation to what I managed to extract from the messages written in the guest books, is a more reasonable question. The answer to this question can be brief, just one word can summarize the entire analysis from this document, namely: experiences. People who visit a monumental church are looking for experiences. These experiences can generally be structured according to the 4 categories I described in the previous chapters and which I once more briefly summarized in this conclusion. Visiting a religious heritage site means to experience.

When entering a religious monument, people wish and expect to enter a world substantially different from theirs. A world of aesthetics, history, silence and religion. A world in which art and architecture can be experienced, one can stand amidst history and its artifacts, find rest, pray or feel oneself close to the transcendent. A world with the potential to transcend everyday life.²⁸² This is

²⁸¹ A. de Botton, *Religion for atheists* (London 2012) 261.

²⁸² R. Steensma and J. Kroesen: 'Experiencing the numinous in a medieval village church: The protestant church at Zeerijp', 143.

what visitors are looking for and of which the notes they have written in the guest books testify. The notes from the guest books demonstrate that although a church building has lost its initial purpose and therefore does not host services on a weekly basis anymore, people still find ways to make it a useful and special place.

By interpreting and subsequently giving meaning to a religious monument in a way that is strongly adjusted to one's personal needs and preferences, a building such as a church, can be given new importance and relevance. This highly diverse mechanism of appropriation should be welcomed by those concerned about the fate of our religious heritage. For it is only if we allow and benefit from these different views that monumental churches can regain importance and relevance.

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