

Struggle for a Calvinist and Presbyterian Church Order in the Countryside of South Holland and Utrecht before 1620.”¹⁰⁴ Beyond these relatively few studies just mentioned, which are mostly in Dutch, the rural areas of the Low Countries have still not received adequate scholarly investigation. Here, the focus is on small villages. A basic argument of this book is that despite the relatively small populations of these communities, the community's and the individual's religious life were important and provide insights into how people understood themselves, their communities, and their Christianity.

A critique of the research in this book could be that the selection of towns is too narrow or that the events highlighted from the church records are too anecdotal. A practical response might include reminders that limits of time and resources require restricting the number of towns and churches and that one could not possibly include in one book all the material and stories contained in the various consistory records. A more theoretical response, however, is that the research on these communities and the evidence remaining about them matters regardless of how widely it is corroborated. Of course, it may be helpful to determine whether patterns found in the communities studied here appear in other parts of the Low Countries. However, even if the situations here are unique, they existed for these people in these communities. Put another way, the uniqueness of the rural strategies of navigating religious identity within small parishes does not negate the value of studying those communities and the individuals therein. Their religious lives, beliefs, and identities *were* the religious life, belief, and identity of the early modern Dutch Reformed Church, whether their experiences are corroborated widely or turn out to be unique. To be sure, expansion of the research presented here is welcome and even necessary, but, I would argue, these communities and their stories of lived religious experience are valuable in and of themselves and not simply because they do or do not fit broader patterns within the Dutch Reformed churches, the religious culture of the Low Countries, or the Protestant Reformations more broadly.

Research Questions and Argument

How, exactly, was Dutch Reformed religious experience lived in early modern rural communities, and how did the rural nature of those communities affect

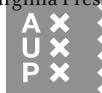
104 Alastair Duke, “The Reformation of the Backwoods: The Struggle for a Calvinist and Presbyterian Church Order in the Countryside of South Holland and Utrecht before 1620,” in *Reformation and Revolt in the Low Countries* (London: Hambledon Press, 1990), 227–68.

those experiences? As these questions indicate, this book seeks to investigate the processes, practices, and beliefs of early modern Dutch Reformed religious life, particularly as it was experienced in rural areas. Through this investigation, it argues primarily that the seemingly insignificant or random aspects of rural Dutch Reformed religious practice are not to be dismissed but, instead, should be studied with careful attention. Thus engaging in an in-depth study of the “loose ends of history” will provide a more complete understanding of the religious beliefs, practices, and identities of these rural Dutch Christians.¹⁰⁵ Across the following chapters, I will attempt to demonstrate that various aspects of rural Dutch Reformed religious life might seem random to the modern eye but are, in fact, not random at all and instead make up the very essence of religious experience. In other words, while it may be difficult for the contemporary scholar to systematize the relationship between accounts in church records of the elections of elders and deacons, inter-confessional conflicts, Sabbath debates, and so on, trying to form a cohesive narrative may miss the point entirely. Instead of trying to fit these various issues into a singular narrative, this book argues, precisely by examining these loose threads of religious experience will we be better positioned to understand the religious experiences of these Christians, in all their complexity, messiness, and randomness.

In researching the Dutch Reformed church records, a number of helpful research questions can guide one’s inquiries. In particular, what aspects of religious life appear consistently in rural consistory records, and what do those aspects tell us about how Dutch Reformed Christians understood their religious lives? What was the interplay between theology and practice in rural Reformed churches? What agency did lay Dutch Christians in these communities have, and how was it expressed? Were there unique challenges that rural churches faced and strategies that they adopted which were specific to their small size and geographical isolation and which urban churches may not have encountered or, at least, may have encountered differently? With this line of questioning, I am drawing on David Lubke’s notion of “hometown religion”—a notion that leads him to reflect how, for small communities in Westphalia, “The hometown environment, in other words, shoved people together despite their religious differences.”¹⁰⁶

105 See a series of panels organized by Jesse Spohnholz and Carina Johnson at the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference held in 2021 and 2022 in San Diego, CA and Minneapolis, MN, respectively: <https://sixteenthcentury.org/program-archive/>.

106 David M. Luebke, *Hometown Religion: Regimes of Coexistence in Early Modern Westphalia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 15.



The argument posited in this book expands Luebke's focus on religious coexistence to the whole of religious experience. The premise is, then, that lived religious experience as a whole was complicated by the small size and geographical isolation of rural communities in the early modern Low Countries.

This book will focus on five elements that were recurrent parts of religious life in the early modern Dutch Reformed Church: church orders, electing elders and deacons, confessional interactions, conflicts in and among Reformed churches, and Sabbath observance. The array of topics addressed in the book's five chapters are hardly meant to be exhaustive but highlight frequently occurring topics gleaned from close readings of church records at the level of provincial synods, classes, and consistories. It is perhaps overly obvious to state that how Dutch Reformed church members and ordinary Dutch citizens experienced their religious lives was varied and local. On the other hand, common elements of piety, or at least shared expectations of piety, did exist in Dutch Reformed congregations. Without being audacious enough to feign being comprehensive, this book focuses on the frequently appearing features of religious life mentioned above and outlined in more detail below.

In seeking to understand these recurring aspects of Dutch Reformed religious life in rural areas, this book will use the conceptual category of religious identity. I define this category as those aspects of religious life by which religious authorities sought to shape the religious identities of congregants within their churches. Conversely, it was precisely in these arenas of religious life that Reformed Christians could and did assert their own religious agency and thus shaped their theology, piety, and religious identity in ways that they chose. In more theological terms, these religious issues were part of a Reformed Christian's discipleship, a process that was navigated among individuals, theological perspectives, and churches, all with occasionally conflicting visions of what a Reformed identity entailed. Researching how these aspects of religious life were understood and practiced can provide a more thorough understanding of the individual Christians themselves, their identities, and their lived religious experiences.

The topics addressed here as means of identity formation should not be considered an exhaustive list. Certainly, other means of identity formation functioned at a variety of levels. At the institutional level, the concept of poor relief and the procedures and institutions accompanying poor relief were often cast in confessional terms, to cite just one example.¹⁰⁷ In

107 Charles Parker, *The Reformation of Community, Social Welfare and Calvinist Charity in Holland, 1572–1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Charles Parker, "Moral Supervision

terms of lay practices, significant scholarly work has been done on sacred space, including confessional debates around burial disputes and burial sites.¹⁰⁸ Even sensory rituals, including those surrounding death, took on confessional qualities.¹⁰⁹

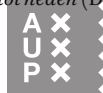
This book is also clearly focused on Reformed communities in the early modern Low Countries. It does not consider the ways in which other confessional groups approached religious identity. Limitations at the levels of both research and publishing require omitting the perspectives of other confessional groups, such as Anabaptists, Catholics, and Lutherans, as well as non-Christian minorities, for instance, Jewish populations, all of which were as varied and non-monolithic as the Reformed tradition. The absence of these groups is not in any way to suggest their unimportance. Other extraordinarily capable scholars, including Christine Kooi, Carolina Lenarduzzi, Charles Parker, Joke Spaans, and Judith Pollmann, have addressed the idea of religious identity as understood and practiced by these groups in the Low Countries, as have numerous journal articles by a wide range of historians.¹¹⁰

and Poor Relief in the Reformed Church of Delft, 1579–1609,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 87 (1996): 334–61.

108 For a well-rounded volume on sacred space, see Liesbeth Geevers and Violet Soen, eds., *Sacrale ruimte in de vroegmoderne Nederlanden* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017); more broadly, Will Coster and Andrew Spicer, eds., *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For sacred space surrounding death, see Tiffany Brouard, “Aan de rand van het graf. De transformatie van het funeraire leven en landschap in antwerpen en Brugge tijdens de calvinistische republieken (1577/1578–1584/1585),” in *Sacrale ruimte in de vroegmoderne Nederlanden*, 59–86; Judith Pollmann, “Burying the Dead, Reliving the Past: Ritual, Resentment and Sacred Space in the Dutch Republic,” in *Catholic Communities in Protestant States*, 84–102; Andrew Spicer, “Rest of Their Bones: Fear of Death and Reformed Burial Practices,” in *Fear in Early Modern Society*, eds. William G. Naphy and Penny Roberts (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 167–83.

109 Louise Deschryver, “You Only Die Once: Calvinist Dying and the Senses in Lille and Tournai during the Dutch Revolt,” *Early Modern Low Countries* 4, no. 1 (2020): 35–57; Tarald Rasmussen and Jon Øygarden Flaeten, eds., *Preparing for Death, Remembering the Dead* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 108–22, 361–77.

110 The broadest but now quite dated treatment of Catholicism is L. J. Rogier’s classic book, *Geschiedenis van het katholicisme in Noord-Nederland in de 16e en 17e eeuw*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Urbi et Orbi, 1947). For other, more recent works on Catholicism, see: Carolina Lenarduzzi, *Katholiek in de Republiek. De belevingswereld van een religieuze minderheid 1570–1750* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2019); Parker, *Faith on the Margins*; Joke Spaans, “Catholicism and Resistance to the Reformation in the Northern Netherlands,” in *Reformation, Revolt and Civil War in France and the Netherlands 1555–1585*, eds. Philip Benedict, Guido Marnef, Henk van Nierop, and Marc Venard (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Academie van Wetenschappen, 1999), 149–63. Among other works, for the Lutheran tradition, see: C. Ch. G. Visser, *De lutheran in Nederland tussen katholicisme en calvinisme, 1566 tot heden* (Dieren: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1983); Sabine Hiebsch,



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The first two chapters of this book focus on identity formation in the context of the Reformed churches as an institution. That is, the emphasis is on the roles of church orders, elders, deacons, and pastors in the lives of rural churches. Particular attention is given to how the formal ecclesiastical structures served as a means to shape the church as an institution and, thereby, instruct individual church members.

Chapter 1 discusses the use of church orders at the national and provincial levels to organize the life of Dutch Reformed congregations. It explores the theological importance of order in the Reformed tradition and then moves beyond these well known, “from above” church orders to incorporate new research that uncovers a local church order developed by a Reformed consistory. This production of a local church order highlights the local agency of the consistory and the consistory’s recognition that ecclesiastical life in a small community required more localized ecclesiastical structures.

Chapter 2 considers elders and deacons, two of the church offices institutionalized in the church orders. It begins with a brief exploration of theological understandings of elders and deacons. From there, I examine the processes by which elders and deacons were nominated and elected. How many men were nominated? How were elections conducted, and did procedural difficulties emerge? The chapter also explores the men who were nominated and elected. Did men serve as deacons prior to serving as elders? How frequently were men reelected? Were there reasons men were or were not elected? These questions allow for conclusions about a variety of questions, including what church members prioritized, the challenges of religious life in rural communities, and the artificiality of lay and elite distinctions in Reformed Christianity.

In the remaining chapters the focus shifts from the church as an institution to the church as an organism. Rather than discussing “from the top down,” so to speak, the subsequent chapters will analyze the lay experiences of Reformed Christians in the Low Countries. These chapters continue the emphasis on theological articulations within the Dutch Reformed tradition and the importance of consistory and *classis* records for understanding lived religious experiences.

“The Coming of Age of the Lutheran Congregation in Early Modern Amsterdam,” *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 3, no. 1 (2016): 1–29. Among other works, for the Anabaptist community, see: S. Zijlstra, *Om de ware gemeente in de oude gronden. Geschiedenis van de dopersen in de Nederlanden 1531–1675* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2000). For works on Jewish communities, see: R. G. Fuchs-Mansfeld, *De Sefardim in Amsterdam tot 1795. Aspecten van een joodse minderheid in een Hollandse stad* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1989); M. Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).



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Chapter 3 considers the broadest of the remaining topics—confessional relationships between Reformed, Anabaptist, or Catholic Christians. The focus when examining these confessional relationships is on the ways in which Reformed churches and church members described and interacted with other confessional groups. As this chapter demonstrates, complaints about Catholics and Anabaptists were frequent, but consistorial efforts at disciplining confessional variance did not always go as the consistory would have liked. In fact, lay Christians had remarkable agency in these small communities; they resisted disciplinary oversight of their religious lives, explored religious belief, and educated themselves in their own theological confessions.

Chapter 4 addresses the specific ways in which conflict was seen as a crucial, ubiquitous aspect of religious life in Dutch Reformed churches, particularly as Reformed Christians could and did find themselves in intra-confessional disputes with their local church members, local church authorities, and other ecclesiastical bodies. The case studies explored here reveal varying types of conflicts, including conflicts between consistorial members, conflicts surrounding schoolmasters, and conflicts related to vacant churches and the process of securing pastors. As a whole, the chapter complicates the idea of unified religious elites functioning in unanimous agreement about how to regulate religious life in their communities. Furthermore, the conflicts portray the complexity of religious life in small communities, where identities were multifaceted and relationships were interconnected. Also challenged is the caricature of religious elites dictating religious life since the case studies present local communities claiming and enacting their own agency as local Reformed communities.

The final chapter, chapter 5, focuses on the role of the Sabbath as a means of identity formation and piety within the religiously plural setting of the Low Countries. Like the first and second chapters, this chapter begins with a theological exploration of how various Dutch Reformed voices understood the Sabbath. From there, the chapter examines complaints about Sabbath observance at the levels of the *classis* and consistory and explores how expectations and practices surrounding Sabbath observance functioned at local and regional levels. Thus, the chapter addresses questions about the relationship between theology and practice, in addition to the similarities and variances of religious expectations in small, local communities versus larger ecclesiastical bodies; here, size is defined in terms of both geography and representation.

Together, these chapters argue for the importance of examining the religious lives of Reformed Christians in rural communities. Some challenges



faced in these rural churches were likely unique to life in small religious communities; in other instances, however, the religious life in rural churches seems to have been comparable to that in urban Reformed churches. Because of these two scenarios, this book argues, research into rural communities provides a broader, more complete understanding of the complex and varied religious life of Reformed communities across the early modern Low Countries.

A second overall argument presented here focuses on the relationship between theology and practice. This relationship has been a driving interest in my previous research, and the argument here attempts to synthesize theology and practice into a more cohesive portrait that stresses how religious belief and practice were not dichotomous but always interrelated. In structuring the book, the binary nature of theology and practice was stubborn and difficult to overcome. Some chapters, especially the first, second, and fifth, and the sections within those chapters might appear to treat theology and practice separately. That appearance is only due to an inability to overcome the practical issues of structuring a chapter; hopefully, the presence of theology and practice within not just one book but also within individual chapters indicates their interrelatedness. To that end, various points throughout the book highlight instances where theological doctrines were adapted or even rejected in practice because of the needs and preferences of the immediate community. At other points, religious practices aligned with or even were driven by theological understandings.

The third argument pursued here is that lay religious agency persistently challenged religious authority. Religious authorities certainly did try to regulate ecclesiastical practices, moral life, and theological belief, as I will demonstrate. These authorities were in positions of power that provided them with various means by which they could seek to enact, severely at times, this power. However, religious authorities did not simply get their way. In numerous examples, church orders were not simply accepted in local churches, and Sabbath observance was never what religious authorities envisioned. Moreover, confessional conflicts did not result in the accused relinquishing their Anabaptist or Catholic beliefs and practices. Across all of these instances, Reformed and non-Reformed Christians claimed and enacted agency in defining their religious identities and contested the ability of religious authorities to force religious identity on them.

Related to this third argument of the book, the very distinction between lay and elite religion is challenged in the following chapters. The difficulty

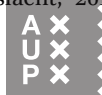
questioning this distinction is obvious since some language is needed to describe differences between, for example, theologically educated pastors or professors and church members who were illiterate. Nonetheless, the distinction proves artificial and fluid. In reality, lay members could wield significant power in how they practiced their religion, could be well versed in their theological views, and could participate in the official life of the Reformed churches in much the same ways as religious “elites.” With a variety of examples, I illustrate how the division between laity and elites was often ignored, challenged, and transgressed.

In sum, this book aims to build on exciting trends in Reformation scholarship to provide a more thorough account of the religious lives of Reformed Christians in rural communities across the Low Countries. It is hoped that the unique challenges and opportunities facing rural churches as well as the means utilized by small Reformed communities to navigate individual and communal religious life will be better understood. Particular attention is given here to the ways in which Reformed Christians sought to define Reformed religion in the face of a range of cultural and religious challenges. However, this book will also demonstrate that such processes were challenged and negotiated within the particular context of life in small, rural communities. In a sense, then, what follows is about recognizing the complexity of the human experience especially as it pertains to religion. To that end, appreciating the religious complexity of rural Reformed communities in the early modern Low Countries might promote a more serious reckoning with the lives of people who have been ignored and, sometimes literally, written out of history. A reckoning of that sort, for both then and now, is surely a worthwhile endeavor.

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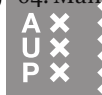
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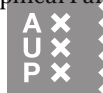
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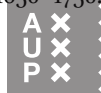
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