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Éléments pour une typologie

« Close to God and close to people ».

The Case of the Dutch Evangelical Broadcasting Organisation

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1. Introduction

« Believing is fun ! It's not boring, stupid, or old-fashioned ». This is the simple message that the Dutch Evangelical Broadcasting Organisation (Evangelische Omroep or EO), which was founded in 1967, wants to spread. For over thirty years now, the EO has been a very remarkable phenomenon in Dutch society. In the face of all the forces of secularisation and liberalisation, the EO has remained loyal to the beliefs and values of Evangelical Christianity. Moreover, the organisation has been quite successful in mobilising Christians for their edifying, evangelistic, and sometimes political activities. It has gained a certain measure of respect in Dutch society, after having long been ridiculed and ignored. While its impact on Dutch society as a whole may be rather limited, within the Protestant realm, the EO has contributed to the « Evangelicalisation » of Calvinist churches and to greater co-operation between Christians from different denominational backgrounds. Today, the EO is the only religious organisation in the Netherlands that can mobilise great masses of youth. This article describes the development of the Evangelical Broadcasting Organisation and tries to analyse the backgrounds of its relative success in Dutch society.

2. Dutch Evangelicalism

Evangelicalism is hard to define, at least within the Dutch context. One could contrast it with Calvinism, which has been the dominant form of Protestantism since the time of the Reformation. In that case, we would consider only what is referred to as « free » churches and their members as Evangelical (the Baptists, the Salvation Army, the Brethren, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations fall into this category). According to that definition, there are an estimated 150'000 Evangelicals in Dutch society. I prefer a more inclusive definition, which would classify all those who sympathise with Evangelical para-church organisations as Evangelical (examples include the Evangelical Alliance, Youth for Christ, the Navigators, Agape, Youth with a Mission, and the Evangelical Broadcasting Organisation)¹. These Evangelicals can belong to any of the free churches, but also to the Orthodox Calvinist churches, the mainline Reformed churches, and even the Roman Catholic Church. In that case, I would estimate the number of Dutch Christians who can be considered Evangelicals at some 800'000, or even more.

¹ The annual *Gele Gids* (Yellow Pages), Stichting Opwekking, Putten, contains several thousand addresses of Evangelical churches and organisations in Holland and Belgium.

This is a rather formal approach to defining Evangelicalism. A more substantial definition of Evangelicalism would refer to the belief that an instantaneous experience of God (Jesus, Holy Spirit) is available here and now for all those who commit themselves personally to Jesus Christ : « God's in the house », « Jesus is here », « Spirit at work ».

Dutch Evangelicalism is heavily influenced by American Evangelical organisations. After the Second World War, when the Netherlands was liberated by American and Canadian troops, Youth for Christ rallies were held with American evangelists and music bands. They called it the « gospel of jazz ». In the fifties, Billy Graham and Pentecostal faith healer, Tommy Lee Osborne, visited the Netherlands and drew tens of thousands of curious people to their rallies.

The sixties were a period of rapid change and turmoil in the Netherlands. Forces of modernisation and secularisation were strong during those days. A sudden increase in income per head of the population brought cars, television sets and refrigerators within the reach of the masses. The old system, in which Dutch society was divided in closed subcultures, based on religious or secular worldviews, started to crumble. Churches no longer wanted to prescribe to their members what to believe and how to act. The Roman Catholic bishop Bekkers, inspired by the renewal of the Second Vatican Council, declared in 1963 on television that individual conscience was more important than the laws of the Church in the matter of birth-control. The percentage of Dutch people raised with few, if any, ties to the church rose from 24% in 1958 to 39% in 1970. At the same time, the country was invaded by American Evangelical youth groups, such as Youth with a Mission, Campus Crusade for Christ, Jesus People, and the more sectarian Children of God.

Older Evangelicals and Calvinists, apprehensive about the liberalisation of morals, modern theology, and the lack of evangelistic zeal in Dutch churches, founded the Evangelical Broadcasting Organisation in 1967. Dutch journalists and politicians viewed the EO as an anachronism, soon to disappear. In 1970, a sociologist predicted that the EO would never have more than 30'000 members, due to the limited segment of Evangelicals and conservative Calvinists amongst the population open to recruitment. In 1999, however, the EO became the biggest public broadcasting organisation in the Netherlands with over 600'000 members². By far, it is also the biggest Dutch organisation with an Evangelical identity.

3. Development of the Evangelical Broadcasting Organisation

The EO started broadcasting in 1970. In the beginning, the organisation had no clear idea of how to make proper use of the medium of television. Aside from nature

² To receive permission to broadcast on *public* television or radio in the Netherlands, an organisation must prove that it represents a substantial religious or ideological group in society. A minimum of 100'000 members is required for a regular, though limited, share of the airplay. More time is available to organisations with over 300'000 members. Maximum airplay is guaranteed to those organisations whose membership exceeds 500'000. Public broadcasters, such as the EO, are predominantly paid from general radio and TV license fees. Another important source of income is member contribution.

documentaries, the emphasis was on speech, rather than on image. Pastors and preachers used the TV-screen as an annexe to their pulpit. Creationism and eschatological beliefs were popular in the early days. Drama, entertainment, and sports were taboo. In the eighties, the slogan became « More message in the media ». Almost all programmes on radio and TV referred to God, the gospel, and the Christian belief, thus creating a strong Evangelical identity both for friends and foes. The big problem, however, was that almost no one watched or listened to these programs, not even the majority of the EO's own rank and file. Many EO members supported the organisation more because of their sympathy with its mission, than out of enthusiasm about its programmes. One exception was the very popular radio programme, « The Musical Fruit Basket », in which well-known, traditional religious hymns and songs were played on request. The programme still exists. Harmless American series, which featured no sex, extreme violence or improper language, such as « Little House on the Prairie » and « Dr. Quinn », also fared quite well. The past fifteen years have witnessed a trend towards a more creative and professional use of the medium of television. Today, some EO programmes, especially those targeting young people, use highly sophisticated and even « post-modern » forms and techniques.

The Evangelical message is still very important, but often conveyed more implicitly than explicitly. This is not because the EO is ashamed of it, but because it now aims to attract more watchers and listeners³. The present mission statement states that :

« The EO is a broadcasting co-operation, part of the Dutch public broadcasting system. We seek to reach people with the gospel of Jesus Christ and want to be close to God and society. We use a variety of tools, such as radio, television, new media, magazines and meetings in our efforts to achieve this goal. The EO is a movement of Christians who find their unity not in one church, but in Jesus Christ, and want to equip each other for Christian work in this world. Today, our staff numbers some 300 members and we air 65 hours of radio and 30 hours of television per week nationwide. The EO strives for high quality programming in both content and style and aims to offer the public life-changing, inspiring and family-friendly programmes. »⁴

Recently, typical EO programmes with an explicit message have been moved from their prime time slots to the late hours. The title of one of the best-known programmes « God changes people » was replaced after many years by « The Change ». In 2001, the average week of EO television consists of a wide variety of programmes. Among these are medical programmes (about bloody surgeries, cancer, etc.) and « The Eleventh Hour », a highly respected talk show. In it, host Andries Knevel, confronts his guests (politicians, writers, artists, scientists, opinion experts) with challenging questions. One guest is always a devout Christian, while others may represent different faiths or worldviews. The list also includes : music programmes (church choirs, praise music, gospel rock bands, etc.) ; geloven.tv (believing.tv), a programme devoted to signs,

³ Public broadcasting in the Netherlands has three television channels and five radio transmitters, used by a great variety of broadcasting organisations. The person who « zaps » into a program is not always aware of the identity of the broadcaster.

⁴ <http://www.eo.nl/home/html/home.jsp>

miracles, and other supernatural phenomena ; wildlife programmes ; news programmes ; quiz shows ; Bible stories for children ; and the occasional film (e.g. « The Longest Day », « Chariots of Fire », and « Ben Hur »). « Jong' » (Young) is a programme for teenagers, which shows what faith can do in the lives of young people. Although the EO still devotes little airtime to sports, it does cover such events as the Paralympics and wheelchair races. Many EO's programmes are « human touch » programmes (emotion TV), which portray an individual who led a successful life, but was suddenly confronted by a severe setback (e.g. an accident or terminal disease). These programmes focus in on God's role in that person's mental, and sometimes physical, recovery. Typically, the EO's discussion programmes are a forum where Christians talk about education problems or marriage problems. Even sexual problems are no longer taboo in the EO's current programming.

4. Supporting Christians and reaching out to others

The EO has always had a two-fold strategy : 1) building strong relations with devout Christians, who sympathise with the organisation ; and 2) reaching out to those outside the Christian domain. The EO organises mass national or regional meetings to maintain a strong sense of commitment among its own rank and file. The annual EO Family Day, for instance, draws 20'000 to 30'000 visitors. Children, teenagers, and adult men and women comprise the EO's four different target groups, each with its own activities and magazines. The annual EO Youth Rally can draw anywhere from 30'000 to 55'000 young people. The EO's youth club *Ronduit* (Straightforward) counts over 90'000 members. These members receive a magazine, can visit praise meetings in their home areas, and can participate in Bible study weekends. The EO's youth club has grown so remarkably, that the Dutch Labour Party organised a special workshop a couple of years ago, in which they asked EO staff members to unveil the secrets of their success.

Inspired by the example of the American Promise Keepers, the EO supports special activities for male members. This year's agenda for men includes an opportunity to attend a special conference entitled « Man Online » (« How to get online with God »). The magazine, *Eva*, was established for female EO members. The « Just Married » weekend was set up for young couples.

On a more personal level, pastoral care is given to those who ask for it. The EO claims that they receive some 30'000 responses every year to their programmes in the form of letters, phone calls and e-mails. Most of these are from people without a strong Christian background. Reportedly, over 700 people dedicated their lives to Jesus Christ in 1997⁵.

The EO recruits its members primarily from the Protestant domain. Approximately 90% of all members belong to one of the Protestant Churches (see Table 1)⁶. Over 40% of EO members have switched denominations at some point in their lives, though the overwhelming majority (85%) grew up in Protestant churches. These figures suggest

⁵ Evangelische Omroep, *Jaarverslag 1997* (Annual Report 1997), p. 43.

⁶ The diversity in denominational background is also reflected in the composition of the General Council and the staff.

that the EO's growth cannot be due to a substantial extension of the recruitment field outside the Protestant domain. However, the Protestant domain in the Netherlands itself shrunk from 33% of the population in 1966 to 17% in 1999 (Becker and De Wit 2000, p. 24). The conclusion must be that the EO has reached a greater percentage of Dutch Protestants ; consequently, Dutch Protestantism is becoming « Evangelicalised ». While the ultra-orthodox Calvinist churches fear and resist this development, many other Protestant churches welcome Evangelical influences, especially among the youth. Gospel choirs, Evangelical songbooks, and Evangelical training programmes are quite popular. More generally, a visible shift has occurred from institutional dogma to personal experience, from rationalism to emotion, and from objectivism to subjectivism.

Table 1. Religious background of EO members (1997)⁷

	<i>born in</i>	<i>present church</i>
Dutch Reformed Church	33%	32%
Other Reformed Churches	41%	33%
Various Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches	8%	20%
Other Protestant Churches	4%	4%
Roman Catholic Church	8%	4%
No affiliation	7%	6%

The EO's impact on Dutch society at large is more difficult to establish. Viewer figures and valuations are among the lowest among public broadcasters. The market share in 2001 is 2,5%, indicating that EO television programmes are watched on average by only one out of every forty Dutch viewers. General acceptance of the EO, however, has grown. Between 1983 and 1996, the percentage of people who were of the opinion that the EO should remain, increased from 32% to 48%. This may be attributable to the EO's shift from its fundamentalist approach of fighting all evils of modern society, to a more open, current-culture approach. In the seventies and eighties, the fear that Christians would soon be suffering oppression was strong amongst Dutch Evangelicals. Domsday prophecies by people, such as Hal Lindsey (« Late Great Planet Earth ») were popular. The EO participated in the battles against legalising abortion and euthanasia, and fought to prevent the Equal Rights Law. All these battles were lost. Today, the organisation has adopted the motto « Close to God and close to people », which emphasises the joy and comfort of faith and on the exciting advantages that faith can add to one's life. EO staff members refer to this in terms of a shift from a « paradigm of defence » to a « paradigm of discovery ».

5. The « success » of the Evangelical Broadcasting Organisation

What is success ? How can we assess the success of a religious movement ? Rodney Stark has proposed defining success as « a continuous variable based on the *degree to which a religious movement is able to dominate one or more societies* » (Stark 1987, p. 12). By that criterion, the Evangelical Broadcasting Organisation's success has been very limited. Although a mass organisation, the EO represents only about 5% or 6% of the Dutch population. Political battles, organised or supported by the EO, have been lost. The secularisation and liberalisation of morals has not stopped in Dutch society since the EO was founded in 1967. On the contrary, the percentage of Dutch people

⁷ In 1997, the EO held a survey amongst their members (Stoffels 1997, p. 145).

raised with few, if any, ties to the church rose from 36% in 1966 to 63% in 1999 (Becker and De Wit, 2000, p. 24). Signs of a widespread Christian revival have been absent so far. The acceptance of homosexuals is greater than ever and has even reached the *avant-gardes* within the Evangelical domain. The EO's success in society at large, if we want to talk about success, is predominantly *symbolic*. The sheer presence and size of this organisation is a sign both to Evangelical Christians and the broader public, that Evangelical beliefs can be quite compatible with modern society.

It has only been within the Orthodox Protestant realm that the EO has remained influential as a propagator of Evangelical thoughts and practices and as a cohesive force. The EO never intended to become a church in itself, nor has it ever advocated or criticised a specific church. Its policy has always been to avoid conflicts involving internal differences in beliefs and values (e.g. baptism, charismatic Christianity, church politics), thus creating an image of unity and harmony.

How can the EO's relative success within the Protestant domain be explained? The EO has developed into a highly responsive and alert organisation that tries to keep pace with modernity, and even post-modernity. The EO was the first Dutch broadcasting organisation with a highly sophisticated and user-friendly website. Every year, the staff and the general board organise an internal conference where experts from different domains of society are invited to speak. The youth department has integrated the latest trends in music and lifestyle into their programmes. Young Christians, as well as other young people, should get the impression that the Christian faith is hip and trendy. In 1997, the EO organised a large conference about communicating the Gospel message in post-modern times, inviting the speakers to associate freely on the topic, without feeling hampered by tradition, dogma, or fear. It was at this conference that one of the leading EO exponents, Willem Ouweneel, a former creationist, declared himself to be post-modern, saying that a number of beliefs about the literal truth of the Bible had made place in his mind for uncertainty *and that he did not worry about it very much* (Ouweneel 1997, p. 51).

Compared to the EO, many churches and other Christian organisations have lagged behind in their development. Progressive churches and organisations have tried to accommodate their beliefs to modern, secular thought, but failed to interest younger generations. They have neglected the necessity of using new forms and techniques and have underestimated the power of religion. Liberal Christians, or at least their children, tend to leave the church sooner or later. Traditional churches and organisations still maintain the patterns of long ago, thus alienating younger generations and outsiders from their ways of thought. The Evangelical movement in the Netherlands has presented itself increasingly as an attractive alternative between progressivism and traditionalism. The EO shows that the combination of a clear Evangelical message (« There is a God who loves you and who wants to enter your life. Why resist Him? ») and professional use of highly modern styles and techniques, can be fruitful, even in a secularised country, such as the Netherlands. When I once visited the EO's headquarters in Hilversum, I read a slogan that captured this very eloquently: « We bring the message of yesterday into the world of today with the techniques of tomorrow ».

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<http://www.eo.nl/home/html/home.jsp>