



Religious Autobiographies in the Netherlands: Authors, Publishers and Readers, 1750–1950¹

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ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

In this article more than 200 religious autobiographies written by Dutch orthodox pietist men and women are analyzed. Although hardly studied so far, these texts were a substantial part of all printed Dutch egodocuments, especially in the period 1850–1950. The authors are nearly all from the lowest ranks of Dutch society, and therefore their texts offer unique information about life in villages and small towns in the Netherlands. This form of autobiographical writing goes back to the seventeenth century, and transformed from an oral culture to a written and printed culture as, from around 1800, the number of local publishers and printers grew. The role of middlemen, such as Reformed ministers, is also studied, as many of the authors were semi-literate. Information about editions and print runs show how popular some of these books were, and still are. Traces left by readers give additional information about ownership and circulation.

ABSTRACT IN DUTCH

In dit artikel worden ruim 200 bekeringsgeschiedenissen of religieuze autobiografieën van orthodox-piëtistische Nederlandse mannen en vrouwen geanalyseerd. Hoewel nog nauwelijks bestudeerd, vormt deze groep teksten een substantieel deel van de gedrukte egodocumenten, met name in de periode 1850–1950. De schrijvers komen bijna allen uit de onderste lagen van de samenleving en daardoor vormen ze een unieke bron voor het dagelijks

leven, met name op het platteland en in kleine steden. Deze vorm van autobiografisch schrijven staat in een traditie die teruggaat tot de 17^{de} eeuw, en ging in de 19^{de} eeuw over van een orale naar een schriftelijke cultuur, bevorderd door de opkomst van kleine lokale uitgevers en drukkers. Er wordt ingegaan op de rol van bemiddelaars bij de totstandkoming, zoals predikanten. Informatie over verspreiding, oplages en herdrukken laat zien dat sommige werken zeer populair waren. Sporen van lezers geven informatie over eigendom en circulatie.

Keywords: Netherlands, Pietism, egodocuments, conversion narratives, labouring poor, social mobility, book history

In our recent article ‘Egodocuments and history’, written with Michael Mascuch, we gave an historiographic overview of the field and then focused on a few topics which are so far neglected but deserving—and indeed in recent years receiving—more attention from scholars (Maschuch, Dekker and Baggerman, 29–32). One of the topics mentioned there is autobiographic writing by the poor, the lower classes, or the ‘non-privileged’ people, discussing both theoretical literature and case studies. In this article we will further examine this particular type of texts by analysing religious autobiographies and conversion stories written by Orthodox Protestant Dutch men and women of a humble background, including peasants, fishermen and labourers. This article is the first to explore this type of texts outside theological studies, and within the context of life writing. We will not only show the wealth of information these neglected books offer about these social groups which are otherwise hardly documented. We will discuss the genesis of these books, the help Reformed ministers offered in writing life stories, the role of local printers and bookshops, the way peddlars distributed these books, and the background of the authors. This gives insight in the daily life of poor people living in rural areas, in villages and small towns. We will also discuss the important contribution of female authors to the genre of conversion narratives. Besides social and economic aspects this article also fills gaps in book history, family history and women’s history, and tells a story that should in due time be integrated into the history of life writing in the Netherlands.

Until recently the Dutch people saw itself as not much inclined to introspection and life writing in the form of autobiographies and diaries. More recent research has shown that the development and production of egodocuments like these did not differ very much from those in England, France and Germany. However, the idea that the lower classes of society

did not participate in this development persisted. Indeed, there are hardly any examples of socialist inspired working-class autobiographies published before around 1970, when oral history became in vogue and social historians started to interview elderly workers. In a study about the life of workers in the mid-nineteenth century, only one worker's autobiography was used (Giele).

This image needs to be corrected, because one group of autobiographies has so far been neglected, the life stories or conversion narratives written by orthodox Calvinist Dutch men and women of humble origin. We have collected 222 of such books, booklets and brochures. Most of them were published between 1850 and 1950; see the following table, ordered by the year of the first known edition (in some cases earlier editions have not survived).

| | |
|------------|----|
| 1651–1700: | 1 |
| 1701–1750: | 3 |
| 1751–1800: | 7 |
| 1801–1850: | 22 |
| 1851–1900: | 68 |
| 1901–1950: | 86 |
| 1951–2000: | 28 |

During the nineteenth century these authors produced nearly a quarter of all printed autobiographies in the Netherlands. Nevertheless this source has been neglected by social historians, and is so far only studied by historians of religion, first and foremost Fred van Lieburg. This type of books was never bought by the national Royal Library, university libraries or other public libraries. Only the Vrije Universiteit, a Calvinist university founded in 1880, and some Reformed theological colleges have collections, but these are all far from complete. For this article we have used our own nearly complete collection of religious autobiographies, including about a dozen books which are not found in public libraries. Some books in our collection have owner's and reader's notes which are an additional value for our research.

In his autobiography Thijs Alberti (1853–1923), born in the village of Veenendaal, wrote about an experience he had at the age of thirteen when he was working in the local cotton factory: 'looking up from work, I saw a mason climbing a ladder. [...] I turned around and a moment later I saw this man caught by the axle of the machine, and at once pieces of his legs flung all around in the factory'. This accident confirmed the young Alberti in his religious beliefs. 'Our days on earth are like grass', he commented.

Thijs Alberti is one of dozens of Dutchmen who wrote a religious autobiography or conversion narrative in the period between 1850 and 1950. These authors were mainly men and women from villages like Veenendaal, situated in the Dutch Bible Belt, also more politely called the Silver Ribbon. This stretches from the province of Zeeland on the south-Western coast through the provinces of Utrecht and Gelderland in the middle of the country to Overijssel in the north-east. Some historians believe that orthodox Protestantism was most deeply rooted along the frontline where four centuries ago the Eighty Years War with Spain was fought. Geography may also have played a role. The Silver Ribbon is also the region of the Netherlands where the Rhine and other great rivers flow through the country, facilitating contacts between groups of orthodox Calvinists. The Dutch Bible Belt, which still exists, is more likely a product of the nineteenth century and a reaction to the modern, rational theology adopted by the official *Hervormde Kerk*, the Dutch Reformed Church. In this region the strictest ministers were appointed by church councils while in other places independent orthodox churches were established. Since the seventeenth century conventicles too sprang up, where believers came together for prayer and discussion. The participants adhered to a pietist belief that they should individually find their way to God hoping to be counted among the few who were chosen to enter Heaven. The members of these conventicles exchanged their religious experiences, inspired by writings of orthodox theologians of the seventeenth century. They talked in their own form of speech, a solemn jargon which was based on the sacred language of the Bible in the Dutch translation, first published in 1637, which was authorized by the States-General. In dress they also developed their own rules, and ‘black stockings’ became a somewhat insulting designation for this section of the population. In the nineteenth century this pietist movement regained momentum, looking back to the theologians of the Dutch Golden Age, instead of following the modern, more enlightened theology which had developed since the late eighteenth century. To the participants, the sermons of modern theologians were of less importance than their personal religious experiences. Nearly all members of these religious groups were, like Thijs Alberti, of a modest if not poor social background.²

NARRATIVES OF CONVERSION

The ultimate goal of these pietists was to be reborn as a true Christian. In these circles a standard conversion discourse had developed. New members of conventicles told the others about their ‘road to God’, which then was discussed and scrutinized by more experienced members, those who

had already received signs of God's grace. Recurrent elements in these stories are the years of childhood, often with parents who were not religious or only superficially so, growing up in poverty, the loss of parents and siblings, then, around the age of six, receiving an awareness of eternity and the inevitability of death, while forming a still simple idea of God. Then in most cases a period of living 'in the world', as they called it, starts, including visiting fairs, pubs and sometimes heavy drinking. After some years—and occasionally many years—the first pangs of conscience are felt. Sooner or later the moment arrives when God speaks directly to the sinner, often accompanied by thunder and lightning, and that not only metaphorically.

This experience is usually the moment to join a conventicle. Being now one of the chosen people is a relief, but also causes a certain measure of exclusion from the rest of society. The pietists are often called 'hypocrites' and 'holier-than-thou'. However, they wear these humiliations proudly. After having received God's grace life is for these blessed pietists only a matter of waiting to die. Death is a moment of joy in the confidence of being among the chosen few who will enter Heaven. These religious autobiographies have a recurrent pattern, but their content can differ. Some are very personal and candid, and have many details from daily life, while others resemble a religious tract with only an occasional personal note.³

The development of religious autobiographical writing can be compared with America. In her book *Interpreting the Self*, covering two centuries of American autobiography, Diane Bjorklund concluded that conversion narratives and the life stories of Protestant clergymen compose the largest single category of autobiographies from 1800 to the 1930s. This development started during what is called the Second Great Awakening in 1800 to 1835 with the growth of Methodism which accounted for more than one-third of all American church members. During the nineteenth century, the number of religious autobiographies increased from a little more than a dozen published during the first decade of the 1800s to more than ten times that number published in 1890s. The difference from the Netherlands is that Methodism and related forms of religion belonged to the mainstream, while in the Netherlands Reformed pietism remained marginal. There are many differences between evangelical Arminianism in America and orthodox Calvinism in Dutch pietist communities, but there are many similarities in the conversion narratives. Bjorklund, for instance, found as a recurring theme that religious transformation is wrought by God, not by the author. Also the themes not addressed by the authors are similar. They have no interest in society, social problems or even schooling. The focus of the authors is always on themselves and their

lack of interest in the outside world, even their own families, is striking, and some authors show an extreme self-centeredness.⁴

A little more than a quarter of the Dutch pietist authors are female, which is above the average of ten percent of all authors of egdocuments in the nineteenth century. This is in line with the percentages of female authors in English puritan and German pietist religious autobiographies. Within Dutch pietist religious groups there was less hierarchy than in the official Dutch Reformed Church, and this allowed women to play a greater role in these communities. Some of their religious autobiographies are among the most popular, such as those written by Grietje Hendriks (c.1610–1702), seven times reprinted, Geesje Pamans (c.1727–1821), seven times reprinted, Eva van der Groe (1704–1770), with eight reprints, Christina van den Brink (1747–1817) with at least ten reprints, and Cristjane Carolina Coeland (1813–1876), with five reprints.

CONTOURS OF THE GENRE AND EARLY INFLUENCES

The earliest of these religious conversion stories were published in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. Some of the texts were autobiographical and written in the first-person. Other texts were biographies, often written by someone close to the protagonist, a parent or a child or a fellow member of a conventicle. Up to the year 2000 more than 200 printed religious autobiographies were published, most of these between 1850 and 1950. There are also some 150 biographies with a strongly autobiographical character, especially those written by a parent about a deceased child. The line between biography and autobiography was, especially before the nineteenth century, not fixed in the mind of writers and readers and stayed blurred thereafter. For example, the life story of Grietje Hendriks has the form of a biography, but it is clearly stated that her conversion narrative is based ‘on her own words’.

Many authors write about the religious books that set them on the track to conversion. Often these were theological works dating from the seventeenth century, which were still being reprinted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some seventeenth-century authors were indeed venerated in these circles. Several English authors of such theological works were influential in the Netherlands and had appeared in translation. Early religious autobiographies were also a source of inspiration. Anna Schot (1904–1991) writes:

Once there was a booklet of Bunyan, *Eens Christen reize naar de eeuwigheid* (Pilgrim’s Progress). A very old little book, and a very old print, in which I have read rather a lot in stolen moments. This was during my school days,

but I had remembered enough at the age of 16 years, and then saved some money to buy that book. Oh, how often I have read in it. In the evening I silently took it upstairs in the attic with a very small paraffin lamp, enjoying it until my mother shouted if I had not gone to bed yet.

Various authors confess that they had read before their conversion worldly reading matter like novels and newspapers. Pieter Schouten (1871-after 1940) tells that in his youth he even refused to read religious books:

My mother [...] took a little book from under her skirt and said: “Pieter, you are sitting here so alone, I have a booklet which you should read, you will enjoy it.” And although I did not know what this book was about, I was convinced that this was not what I would have chosen. Later on I learned that it was titled “Christina van den Brink”.

Pieter refers to the conversion story of this woman, born in 1747, which in the nineteenth century was one of the most popular examples of the genre.

Biographies of English pietists were since the seventeenth century popular reading in the Netherlands. There are also Dutch examples, like the biography of the orthodox minister Bernardus Smytegelt, *Historisch verhaal van het leven en sterven van D. Smytegelt* (Historical story of the life and death of Minister Smytegelt), which appeared in 1739, the year of his death. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries several new editions were published, the most recent in 1985.⁵

MOTIVES FOR WRITING

Some authors wrote in their introduction that they had spoken about their life and conversion in conventicles before writing their religious autobiography.⁶ Pieter Schouten wrote:

A few years ago I was invited to participate in a conventicle and it was my turn to speak with full frankness about the ways the Lord had steered me, utterly unworthy servant. After I had finished speaking, a man in this meeting asked me insistently if I was willing to write down some of this, as he supposed that this could be very useful for those with a stricken heart, while it could also serve to scare all those who despise Zion. However, my friends, I answered at once with a rejection. Not out of indifference, but because I am a unlettered man and did not think I would be capable. [...] However, being aware of these dangerous times [...] my heart was moved to leave some signs of my spiritual pilgrimage to you [...] in order that you can see what is needed to be blessed.

The authors often mention their motives for writing. Jannes den Besten (1797–1868) wrote in his preface:

These are the main outlines of my experiences, which I offer to the reader, a short description of the road along which the Lord has guided me. Although I have more often at appropriate occasions spoken by mouth about the essentials to many of the Lord's sweet children, I lived with a bad conscience for ten years, because I had not communicated this in writing to a larger public. I was very reluctant to do so. My haughty heart always stood in the way and told me I should abandon this, because writing for a public is the work of learned men, and my writing would be a distrusted torch.

One of the many *topoi* in these stories is the urge felt by the authors to tell their life story while being restrained by fear of accusations of vanity. Authors nearly always stress their lack of writing skills and limited theological knowledge. Usually they stress that they wrote the texts in the first place for their children, as an example, and often also as a warning, especially when they write about their sinful life before their conversion. Sometimes the authors see writing their conversion story as a sacred duty and its publication as missionary work. The circulating of handwritten copies is often the first step to publication in print.

In some cases in a foreword or afterword the genesis of such books is revealed. Sometimes this is written by the author himself, sometimes by the publisher or editor. In the case of J.O. Kooijstra (1793–1872) these details are given: 'The bookseller G.J. Reits in Groningen, mainly at the request of a few Christians, decided to make a dead man speak after his death, a God-fearing man, who had died quietly and blessed...' Speaking after his death through the written word is in these circles a popular expression.

The initiative to have a text printed came often from the family of the authors, their conventicles or a local minister. Elbert van de Berekamp (1821–1904) wrote in his preface: 'My readers should know that I did not start writing with the intention to have this printed, but only to leave a remembrance to my children. However, as I spoke about it and read it aloud, people started to ask me if I had this text in print.' Several authors wished to have their manuscript printed, but only after their death. This is for instance clear from the afterword to the conversion story of Anthonie Kooij (1818–1898): 'According to the wish of the deceased this work is published after his death by his children'. The *Levensschets* (Sketch of my life) by Jacobus Overduin (1851–1928) was published by his son Hendrik, 'at the repeated request of some friends'. In his foreword Hendrik had to explain that the text finishes abruptly, because 'the rest unfortunately has been lost'.

The next of kin of Hendrik Terlouw (1853–1931) went in 1931 to a well-known minister, Marinus Hofman, to ask him to help them with publishing his manuscript. Hofman added an introduction:

The family Terlouw asked me to prepare for the press a manuscript of their father. Well, this was a lot of work, the more so because their father wrote this while experiencing a crushing spiritual struggle. We had to correct many sentences and ask for some clarifications from the family, which they willingly provided.

At the end of his life Marinus Hofman (1873–1945) wrote his own conversion story, posthumously published in 1946. The simplicity and artlessness, including grammatical and spelling mistakes, were not seen as annoying errors of the authors, but were proof of the authenticity of their conversion narratives.

In a few cases the authors had their texts printed during their life time. In some cases they published their texts at their own expense. An example is Doetje Reinsburg (1840–1900), who in 1898 published her conversion story in a book of 460 pages.⁷ This spiritual autobiography is longer than most and contains ample information about Doetje's personal life. Doetje Reinsberg had lost her parents when she was seventeen and was then sent to an uncle, where she 'had to eat the tough bread of charity'. Afterwards she went to Amsterdam to serve as a maid. Here she married a waiter with whom she started a restaurant and a hotel. At a later stage of her life she experienced a mental crisis and she spent two years in the Reformed Psychiatric Hospital 'Veldwijk', an institution founded a few years before in the village of Ermelo. After her recovery she wrote her life story, in which she interpreted her period of illness as possession by the Devil, and her recovery as a divine miracle. At that stage of her life she was, in contrast to most authors of conversion stories, a wealthy woman. On the title page she made clear that the book was printed 'at the expense of the author'. The revenues, as also stated on the title page, were 'for the benefit of Veldwijk and its poor sufferers'. She did her best to promote her book and even placed advertisements in newspapers.

PRINTING, PUBLISHING AND SELLING

Printers and publishers played an important role in the growth of this genre in the nineteenth century, if only because of its profits. Some religious autobiographies even became bestsellers. One early example is the life story of Hermanus Hermsen (1696–1786). The first edition appeared during his lifetime in 1757 from a publisher in Rotterdam, who in the

following years brought out five further editions. Thereafter new editions were published again and again by different publishers.⁸ Other early best-sellers are *Bekeeringsweg* (Path of conversion) by Eva van der Groe, published by a small company in Rotterdam in 1838 and later successfully reprinted by several big publishers of religious works, like Van Golverdinge and Gebroeders Hüge. W.M. den Hertog brought out a new edition in 1989. Equally successful was the life story of the maid Christina van den Brink, mentioned as a source of inspiration by Pieter Schouten. The oldest surviving edition is the fourth, dating from 1840 and published in Zutphen. The three earlier editions have left no trace. Up to 1920 about ten new editions appeared at several publishers. The last edition dates from 1976.

Three books of eighteenth-century authors became real bestsellers. Of *Gods vrijmachtige genade aan eenen zondaar verheerlijk* (God's all-powerful grace to a sinner glorified) by Dirk Adrianus Detmar (1774–1844) the first two editions have not survived; thereafter dozens more have appeared, the oldest dating from 1845, the most recent one published in 1997. Michiel Christiaan Vos (1759–1825) was a minister in South Africa and of Dutch-Indian parentage. His life story was published in 1825, and reprinted at least eight times, the last dating from 1999. The most successful conversion story was published by Salomon Duijtsch (1734–1795), a former Jewish rabbi born in Hungary, who converted to Christianity in Amsterdam in 1767 and changed his name to Christian. In 1768 he published his bulky book at the young age of 34. The Amsterdam publisher Dirk Swart brought out a new edition the next year, with several additions, and thereafter the book was frequently reprinted, most recently in 2012.⁹ Without doubt Duijtsch's conversion story was the most popular religious autobiography in the Netherlands. This is confirmed by the large numbers in which this book is offered by second-hand bookshops on the Internet.¹⁰

Only a few authors decided to have their life stories printed not only to circulate them within the circle of their family and members of their congregation, but to sell them to an anonymous reading public. In this way the spiritual benefit for the readers was combined with the worldly benefit of the author. Leendert Capelle (1831–1905) tells about his development into a self-publishing author: 'At a certain time I sat down to write something, because I cannot be idle [...]. I wrote something about my own conversion. [...] I gave these leaves to my friends to read and one gave it to the other. As I was unemployed at that time, they proposed that I should have these leaves printed'. After a period of hesitation Capelle agreed, especially since a friend offered to pay the costs of printing. 'I had 1000 copies of each of these printed. After a few days I received 2000 printed leaflets. When I saw them at home, I thought, boy, they are rather beautiful'. During his first sales round he had sold in one day 100 copies

for two cents each. This autobiography found its way to readers as is clear from the conversion story of Reindert Baars (1871-?). He wrote that reading the life story of Leendert Capelle was the decisive moment in his conversion, and reading that book was ‘as if the Lord had shot an arrow in his heart’. Capelle’s book was frequently reprinted, and in 1998 a tenth edition appeared.

Johannes W. van der Reijden (1837-?) was an assistant schoolteacher, but lost his job. A local minister proposed that he should publish his life story as a source of income. The minister made a round in his community with a subscription list ‘for a guarantee sum for printing my life story’. The considerable sum of 160 gulden was collected. Van der Reijden went to a well-known printer and publisher of religious books, J.J. Groen in Leiden. Groen, however, told Van der Heijden that an author who printed and sold his own conversion story committed an act of pride. Instead, he advised Van der Reijden to invest the money to start a trade in fancy goods. Van der Reijden did not want to disappoint his subscribers and finally Groen twice printed 2000 copies. In June 1888 he started ‘travelling with my life story’. It turned out to be not so easy. During his travels in the province of Friesland he was very unsuccessful: ‘thus I came back with nearly all copies of my life story’.

J.W. Kieboom (1895-after 1968) was a bargeman, but also became an ambulant bookseller: ‘It came into my heart to try to earn something with selling books’. He went to a well-known publisher of religious books, Romijn and Van der Hoff in Gorinchem. He was told that more people earned their living this way. He was advised to start in his own village among his own people and was given books on a commission basis. Later on he started to published books himself, including a conversion story, Adriaan Bergers (1809–1876), *Eenvoudig verhaal van het leven en de bekeering van Adriaan Bergers* (Plain story of the life and conversion of Adriaan Bergers).¹¹ Finally Kieboom published around 1960 his own spiritual autobiography, *De wondervolle gangen en wegen, die de Heere gehouden heeft met J.W. Kieboom, boekverkoper te Werkendam* (The wondrous ways and courses the Lord has kept with J.W. Kieboom, bookseller in Werkendam).

CIRCULATION, READERSHIP AND PRESERVATION

Most of the printed autobiographies have only one edition, or were at the most reprinted once or twice. Their length varies widely. Some amount to hundreds of pages, but most are cheaply produced booklets of only 16 or 32 pages. Some have a portrait, an engraving or a woodcut, later a photograph of the author. They were published by small publishers

or booksellers in villages like Sommelsdijk, Bruinisse, Puttershoek and Opheusden. Dozens of these books never found their way into public libraries. Several of these books were only preserved by a few private collectors. Some are extremely scarce, especially early editions, even of popular conversion stories, which were often reprinted. These were books that were read again and again until they crumbled in the hands of the last owner. Surviving booklets often have the names of several owners inscribed on the title page. Often these books had a home-made wrapper, a sign of intensive use. Sometimes an address is added, a sign that these books were also lent out. Some of the books were printed or sponsored by religious organizations and intended to circulate, as was indicated on the title page with words like 'Please pass on after reading'. Conversion stories are today still being published and republished, but they are only sold in bookshops which present themselves as Christian, situated within the Bible Belt.

Like their authors, the readers of these books were usually uneducated people. The way the owners scribbled their names on the title pages shows that they were not used to writing. The conversion story of Christiaan Meeuwse (b. 1764) was published in 1840 in Middelburg with a list of subscribers. Three were day labourers, besides a maid, a work-woman ('werkvrouw'), a bargeman, two carpenters and a baker. This list gives, exceptionally, a more exact indication of the reading public of a book of this type.

THE AUTHORS: BACKGROUND AND PROFESSIONS

The authors of conversion stories nearly all have a simple background which is explicitly mentioned in their texts. A few, however, tell that their parents were well-to-do. The father of Daniel Bakker (1821–1885) was a farmer: 'Thus God had destined me to be born in the fat of the earth, without suffering from poverty or want'. Another exception is Daniël Johannes Parmentier (1826–1901) who was the son of a textile manufacturer in the town of Leiden, and who succeeded his father as director of the factory. Usually the parents of the authors were at best peasants or journeymen. The father of J. van Beveren was a mason (1893-in or after 1975), of Willem Bijl (1760–1835) a smith. Several writers came from families of bargemen, like Jan Geense (1848–1933) and Reindert Baars. The Dutch Bible Belt is the region in the middle of the country where the rivers Rhine, Waal and Maas flow with much shipping traffic. Other authors had also a background in jobs linked to this waterland, like the father of Pieter de Boer (1894–1971), who was labourer in the

withy grounds in the Biesbosch marshland. He collected osiers and reed. The father of Adriaan Pieter Lukas (1884–1971) was a dealer in reed, wicker and rushes, who owned a little ship and thus was a little wealthier than the poor marshland labourers. Other authors are less specific and simply write of being born in ‘a low station’, as Daniël Meijer (1851–1910) called it.

Grietje Verschoor-Dekker (?–1942?) was born in the late nineteenth century in a poor family: ‘On a Saturday morning we had no money or food. We said that we would bear this together. However, [...] before the evening came, the postman brought a letter and money. I was very happy.’ This proof of Divine Providence, however, did not bring a change. She continues: ‘The winter came and we had want of everything.’ Maria Pieterella den Doelder (1875–1960) had ‘parents of poor standing’. Jacobus Overduin writes: ‘I was born of parents who were very poor and low in worldly matters.’

Marinus Hofman described growing up in a village in the Veluwe, a rather barren region in the province of Gelderland: ‘My father was a day labourer and earning a living for a family of eight, and my mother could only with great effort and consideration cook a miserly meal for us. [...] My father had earned a lot if he brought home four to five guilders in a week.’ As a child Marinus once had a job as track sweeper for skaters. This was, he writes, ‘a job for the dregs of society’. The earnings were the tips from the skaters, and the job was close to begging.

Many children had to work from an early age with their parents. Christiaan Meeuse (1764–1838) tells that his father took him fishing at sea from the age of ten. Boys often followed in the steps of their fathers. Johannes Arnoldus Schalekamp (1859–1944) writes that he learned the trades of his father and became a painter and basket maker. This was a logical combination: when there was no work as painter one could turn to making baskets at home. Pieter Schouten writes: ‘My father was a clog maker, in which trade I started at the age of eleven. And those who know something about this trade, are aware that this means heavy labour and little earnings.’ Johan Cornelis Taake (1872–?) wrote: ‘My father was a simple clog maker [...]. I was the eldest son and thus it was the intention of my parents that I would follow my father. Already at the age of ten I joined him in the clog workshop.’ When his father soon thereafter died, the family fell into great poverty, and Taake started working in a factory.

Some children were hired out by their parents and went to live elsewhere to earn their living, often also helping to support their families. Leendert Capelle was sent at the age of twelve to a shipbuilder. At the age of sixteen he switched to work for a builder of windmills. The parents of Christiaan van Dam (1893–1976) were ‘simple people with a farm’. As

there was no work for him at the farm, it was decided at the age of twelve that he should become a butcher. Anthonie Veldhuizen (1836–1895) writes: ‘Already at the age of fifteen I had to start learning a trade [...]. I had to become a plasterer.’ He tells that one day, at the age of seventeen, he did not dare to climb the scaffold, and was afraid of falling to his death. Johannes Gonlag (1882–1960) had, ‘being still very young’, a job in glassworks in Delft, later he went to sea.

Jacobus Overduin writes: ‘As I have told before, my parents were very poor. [...] We, children of seven to eight years, were working’. Cornelis Pieneman (1863–1912) writes that his parents had become ‘destitute’ and that they had to earn a living for eight children by manual labour. Soon he had to help them and contribute to the family income. The result was that he could only go to school intermittently and had to leave school altogether at the age of nine. ‘My father, to my joy, then hired me out at a farm to milk and to learn everything which is needed on a farm.’ Gerrit Jan Raidt (1788–1877) writes: ‘I had to work at an early age and could only go to school for a short period, and when I was twelve I could already make my own shoes.’

Girls often had to go into service as maids, which in most cases meant that they had to move from the countryside to a city. Christina van den Brink was born in a village, Vaassen, and went to Amsterdam. Wille-mijntje Boogaard-Dekker (1870–1960) writes that at the age of fourteen she had to earn her own living as a maid. Jantje van Bruxvoort (1867–1918) went into service aged fifteen years: ‘There I had to do heavy labour and suffer much cold, for which I was too young, while my body was too weak’. The father of Maartje Meijburg (1756-?) was a schoolmaster, a respected position, but after his death, when she was thirteen, the family fell into poverty and she had to leave her home to serve as a maid.

Many authors described the poor circumstances in which they still were living after they had married and had founded a family. Gerrit Baardwijk (1838–1901) worked as ‘seller of cakes, travelling the fairs’ among other jobs. Pieter de Boer was a day labourer and worked at construction works in the province of Zeeland. He married and had five children, but when he fell ill in 1931 he was ‘again very poor’. Teunis van Oort (1907–1979) wrote: ‘My father had to work very hard for meagre wages. He owned a small tree nursery, with which nothing could be earned during the summer, and in that period he went in the service of other people to earn some money.’

Willem Hendriks (1801-?) gives a rather lengthy description of his poor living circumstances: ‘I was born from an unlucky widow with five children and I was the sixth. My father was six weeks dead when my mother

gave birth to me. She was a poor widow'. After his marriage he farmed a small piece of ground:

I had some land with potatoes and corn, and it was smaller than any other in the area; it was like I was completely forsaken, which made me say, Lord, why do you impose this to me, I am unworthy, and my wife sometimes said to me, what will become of us during the coming winter, suffering from hunger or applying to the community for poor relief [...]. And, oh, my wife said once to me, I am so embarrassed, everything is finished and it is nearly winter, in other years we fattened up two pigs, one for my household and one to sell to pay back some of our debts, and then we could not feed one, thus they stayed thin [...]. One evening we and our children were sitting drinking a cup of coffee and my wife said, now everything is finished, there is no butter, no coffee, no salt, no soap while I have to wash clothes, and no money. I said, oh, dear wife, God will not tempt us more than we can bear, and see, there comes a little boy with a parcel of children's clothing, which people had cast-off. After giving thanks I went to work again, and my wife opened the parcel, and there was a paper with twenty-eight [guilders].

This little miracle, however, did not bring a fundamental change in their lives, and meanwhile his wife had given birth to their eighth child.

Laurens Boone (1860–1935) started to work as a coachman, but then his father decided that he should learn a trade and 'hired' him out to a blacksmith, where he was put up as a boarder and received 25 cents a week. Boone married when he was 19, but then was fired and out of a job: 'We were very poor, so poor that we did not have chairs, a table, a bed, in short nothing but what friends gave us. At night we slept at my wife's uncle's place'. During the summer Boone was hired as a reaper at 7,70 guilders a week, 'but when winter came, I had no job, no coals, no potatoes, thus great poverty again, and I was early on destitute and we did not have money to buy anything, five loaves of bread we received from someone else.' Finally he went 'cutting hay from under the snow, which was unbearable, I do not know how I went through this.'

The story of Pleun van der Hoek (1886-?) is also drenched in poverty. After his marriage he could hardly earn enough to feed his family:

I had become a beggar, daily I went begging with my wife and children; I had one child on my arm on one side of the street, and my wife on the other side, until late at night, and then I tore my coat to stow everywhere the bread I received. The money I got was laid aside and thus I could count on an income of eight to ten guilders a day at top of the food. [...] I was so much in a fix, that at the end things went wrong and I was sent to jail for a month. [...] When I came home [...] I started to work as a flax worker. When I was also evicted from my house, we decided to live in a caravan. I travelled

for eight months, and then in Rijnsburg I stayed with my caravan, and at the moment I am living there in a house. [...]

Meanwhile Pleun had converted to the pietist Christian belief, and he was selling 'both the goods in my caravan and the food I had received from my Father in Heaven'. He had thus become a travelling salesman and evangelist.

The parents of Abraham Volaart Wzn. (1842–1922) were 'from the middle class'. Nevertheless, after his marriage at the age of 21, the author fell into poverty. When he lost his job, 'three little bags of seed-potatoes were all we had as winter provision; you will understand that we were in low spirits'. When a visitor asked his wife what she did with those seed-potatoes, she answered: 'We have to eat those this afternoon, I have some mashed cabbage leaves in the kettle, we mix these with a drop of fat and water, and then we eat this heartily.' The visitor pitied the family and proposed that their children would every evening have some bread at his house. He also arranged that the family received poor relief from the community. Volaart was a happy man: 'I received from the poor relief committee a sack of coal, two loaves of bread, five cups of beans, and a good piece of bacon. Oh, dear children, a king's child would not have been as rich as I was then, and I wept from joy. And I could also go twice a week there to receive relief.' Meanwhile Volaart was looking for a new job.

Therefore, that winter we also started to gather mussels and winkles from the mud flats to sell them in Middelharnis, Sommelsdijk, Dirskland and Melissant [nearby villages]. Oh, how we had to struggle to gather some earnings and live honestly. [...] Despite the cold the poor children had to go with us to gather mussels and winkles in the mud flats, and when we came home, they quickly had dry socks on their feet and a slice of bread with something warm to drink, and then the two youngest children had to pull the cart with a rope over their shoulder, and as I walked fast, those poor children nearly always had to trot. When we finally had sold our catch, we were so happy together.

Marinus Ruben (1840–1910) went through a particularly difficult childhood. His parents were not married and his father did not legitimise him.

I remember, when I was about eight or nine years of age, that we had days in which the need was great. I remember that we then lived through an autumn and winter with almost nothing else to eat than rice and cooked turnips or tubers, and that I, being a child, always used the fork to pick the rice between of the turnips to eat. You can judge from this how poor our life was. [...] During the winter I went with my mother begging from farmers, and when we had been away a day, we had something to eat again for

one day. It sometimes happened that mother said: ‘children do not eat too much, otherwise we will have nothing tomorrow’. [...] On such occasions during winter evenings we looked for horse beans to eat, and in this way we supported ourselves. The same with clothing; I was eleven or twelve years, when I had for the first time shoes on my feet, socks and wooden shoes, sometimes I went barefoot, also a smock over a shirt winter and summer, and I was mostly clad with other people’s clothes.

Sometimes he went gleaned ears of wheat with his mother.

When I was ten or eleven, I left my mother and became a cowherd for M. van Dixhoorn, near Axel. [...] As I mentioned in the beginning, the bond of marriage between mother and father was broken before I was born, and God was not willing to restore this breach ever; the result was that during my childhood I was brought up with neglect.

Equally sad is the story of Nicolaas Stroosnijder (c.1780-?). His father was a soldier and had Nicolaas and his brother taken to the barracks of his garrison. Later his father deserted, was caught and imprisoned. After his release he wanted to get rid of his children. Stroosnijder gives a detailed description of what happened:

He took his four children to Arnemuiden. There he put them on the doorstep of the minister. He went inside and tried to convince the minister that his children should be supported by poor relief, but as he was still alive and could work for us, his request was refused. This having failed he went away leaving us, his children, there. When he was some distance away, I ran after him, and he told me that I should go to my sisters and brother, that he had to deliver a letter and that we would go with him to Goes. But look, he never came back, he had abandoned his children. A place for the night was found for us and the next day we were brought to Goes by a deputy of the poor relief committee.

Finally the children were taken care of by the poor relief committee and boarded at various addresses.

Despite such bad starts in life all these pietist autobiographies have an happy ending. In the first place spiritual, with the arrival of a ‘true conversion’. In most cases the authors had ultimately also reached a better life in the material sense. These are therefore also stories of social climbers, although they all stayed within their religious group of pietist believers, and thus on the margin of Dutch society. L. Knuit (1796–1860) became a beer brewer and wrote: ‘Although I am nothing but a peasant boy, at the age of 22 years, I quickly learned the brewery trade’. Thereafter he became a baker and was, he writes, wealthy enough to provide for his wife

and four children. Yet, money did not make him happy until he found his way to God. Many authors were, after their conversion, active as a deacon, evangelist or lay-minister. In pietist circles a study of theology was not a requirement to become a minister, in contrast to the official Reformed Church. Several authors later in life held this office with its small income. Some even earned a great reputation, like Laurens Boone and Marinus Hofman, which could be an additional incentive to write a religious autobiography. In some cases reaching this prestigious office is seen as an important addition to the previous 'true conversion', and is mentioned in the title of the book. Abraham Verheij (1842–1922) published *Hoe lang zijt gij leeraar en hoe zijt hij dit geworden?* (How long have you been a minister and how did you become one?). T. Wakker (1912–1992) wrote a booklet *De bekering van een Urker visser, zijn roeping tot leraar [...]* (The conversion of a fisherman from Urk, his call to be a minister [...]). Most pietist autobiographies are success stories both in a religious and in a material sense. Although written, published and read within a closed sector of society, they followed in this respect one of the main trends in the development of autobiographical writing.

The orthodox pietist Calvinist group within Dutch society was closed and inward looking. Within this group there always was a great pressure to conform to group values. For children it was hard to escape this social pressure. Nevertheless, in the twentieth century more and more young people stepped out of this confined world, and severed the bonds with this form of religion, usually causing a separation from their families. This subject has been studied by historian Hugo Röling.¹² Especially in the second half of the twentieth century these experiences also formed a source of inspiration for autobiographical writing, often disguised in the form of literature. Some of these autobiographical novels, written by well-known authors like Jan Siebelink, were bestsellers and have reached a wide audience.¹³ Both the gap and the link between autobiographical writings of remainers and drop-outs of this religious sub-culture deserve further study.

CONCLUSION

The more than 200 religious autobiographies which were written and published mainly in the period 1850 to 1950 have so far received little or no attention from historians. Nevertheless these texts form a substantial part of all Dutch egodocuments. Pietist autobiographies were written within a rather isolated religious part of the Dutch people living in the Dutch Bible Belt, mainly in little villages. Nearly all authors were of

humble origins, most of them went to school for only a few years and were not used to writing. In several cases their texts were edited by more educated members of this religious group, for instance ministers. The focus of these texts is on the spiritual life of the authors, but in between a lot is written about their daily life. These texts therefore offer insight in the lives of the very poor in Dutch society. The manuscripts were published by publishers within these communities. Some books were bestsellers, reprinted again and again, others were only printed locally in small numbers. Some of the authors became themselves travelling salesmen of religious books and in this way were selling their own lives. The printed texts are often written down versions of oral conversion stories told by the authors to family and friends or in conventicles. In these texts the main goal of the authors was to record the process of their 'true' conversion. They trusted that, once fixed in print, their religious autobiographies would serve them as a passport to Heaven. Surprisingly enough this brings us back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the godfather of modern autobiography, who in the opening paragraph of his *Confessions* wrote: 'Whenever the last trumpet shall sound, I will present myself before the sovereign judge with this book in my hand'.

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NOTES

- 1 An earlier version was presented at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Bielefeld University at the conference “Life stories in motion: Subaltern autobiographical practices in the 18th and 19th centuries” organized by Malte Griesse, November 24–26, 2016.
- 2 Studies on this religious group include Impeta; van der Meide; van Dijk; Hille and Vermeulen; and Houkes.
- 3 Van Lieburg 2006 is the first book-length study on the subject, with a focus on the spiritual aspects discussing eighteenth-century texts written by twenty men and women. A follow-up study for the nineteenth-century is: van Lieburg 1994. On oral traditions in Dutch Protestant culture, see Exalto and van Lieburg. A historiographical survey of studies on egodocuments, including English pietist egodocuments: Maschuch, Dekker and Baggerman. On Pietism, especially in Germany: Gleixner 2016; 2015.
- 4 Bjorklund, ch. 3, ‘The Self as morality play’, 43–66.
- 5 First edition: Middelburg: Willeboord Eling, 1739. Of a second edition of around 1800 no copy is found in a public library; latest edition: Houten: Den Hertog, 1985. On the link between Protestant hagiography and sainthood, see Bergamasco.
- 6 On this aspect see Groenendijk. On conventicles, see Natzeil and van Dijk.
- 7 A psychological analysis of this text is van Belzen 2004; 2008; 2012, esp. ch. 11, ‘Psychopathology and religion’, 181–215.
- 8 The number of editions of this work cannot exactly be determined, but the Amsterdam publisher Høveker presented his edition in or around 1889 as the thirteenth. Around 1950 publisher Van den Tol brought out a shortened edition.
- 9 J. Bloemsmā in Minnertsga in 1837, 1838 and 1847; in Sneek by F. Holtkamp in 1857, an American edition was published in 1862 in Holland MI by J. Binnekant, in 1869, 1870 and 1873 in Nijkerk by H.J. Malga, in Leiden by J.J. Groen in 1869 with a new edition in the early twentieth century; in Doesburg by Van Schenk Brill in 1877 and 1895, in Amsterdam by H.M. Bremer in 1880 and by H.J. Winter in 1883 (both ‘goedkoope volksuitgave’, a cheap, popular edition), in Rotterdam by Bolle in 1915, and by Gebroeders Hùge around the same time, in Barneveld by Van Horssen, 1977; Barneveld: Gebr. Koster, 2012.
- 10 On 3 July 2017 there were sixty copies in various editions on offer, including no less than nine copies of the editions of the first publisher, Dirck Swart (www.boekwinkeltjes.nl).

A shortened version of the book, condensed to 46 pages was published in 1769, and reprinted around 1850.

- 11 This was a reprint of the first impression of 1877, then published by the well-known publisher Van Golverdinge in The Hague.
- 12 Röling 2009. Cf. Röling 2006, a survey and analysis of childhood memories.
- 13 Jan Siebelink, *Knielen op een bed violen* (2005). On the religious background of this novel and the real history of the Siebelink family, see van Lieburg 2016. On the theological content of the novel, see Gerling,. The novel was turned into a film by director Ben Sombogaart (2016). Another successful author of novels and short stories in this religious milieu is Maarten 't Hart, for example *Het vrome volk* (1974).