



Chapter Two

Churches Reach Across Borders: “Emigration Culture” as a Concept to Analyze Religious Aspects of Emigration

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Introduction

Between the late 1940s and early 1960s about 410,000 inhabitants of the Netherlands settled overseas. A large part of this group, 55 percent, went to Canada (147,000) and the United States (76,000), while the other 45 percent settled in countries like Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. A remarkable fact is that 25 - 30 percent of the Dutch postwar immigrants in North America were *gereformeerden* (Calvinists), who were predominantly affiliated with the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN, Reformed Churches in the Netherlands). People from the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (NHK, Dutch Reformed Church), the Catholic Church, or from smaller Calvinist denominations were less eager to cross the ocean, compared to the *gereformeerden* from the GKN: namely, the Gereformeerde Kerken Vrijgemaakt (GKV, Reformed Churches Liberated), de Gereformeerde Gemeenten (Netherlands Reformed Congregations), and the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken (CGK, Free Reformed Churches).

These remarkable differences in emigration behavior—which will be numerically elucidated further on in this article—raise the question of which religious factors stimulated or hampered Dutch overseas migration. To help find an answer to this question, this article employs the concept of “emigration culture.” This term has been used before by scholars in the fields of sociology and history, but by providing an original definition and new interpretation this strategy could lead to a better understanding of emigration.¹ It becomes possible to examine emigration on two comparative levels: temporal (comparing throughout different periods) and categorical (comparing different cultural or religious groups).

The first paragraph introduces the short history of the term, a workable definition, and a proposal as to how this method could be used to analyze emigration processes. The next part summarizes the main added values of the concept. The following three paragraphs provide implementation of the concept by presenting the most important

¹ In the introduction of my PhD dissertation I have worked out this method extensively. This dissertation will be published in the spring of 2010 by publisher Verloren in Hilversum, the Netherlands, under the (Dutch) working title “De dynamiek van een emigratiecultuur. De emigratie van gereformeerden, hervormden en katholieken naar Noord-Amerika in vergelijkend perspectief (1947-1963).”

conclusions of my PhD dissertation. Finally, suggestions are made as to how scholars could use “emigration culture” as a method for their studies.

Emigration culture

Most contemporary scholars agree that emigration is foremost a cultural phenomenon and not just a physical movement from point A to point B. About one decade ago, for instance, prominent scholars argued that “migration events relate to an individual’s whole life—both past experiences and projected future expectations—and tend to have a wide variety of causes. . . . This sense of embeddedness makes migration a very cultural event: migration is both a reflection of culture and a constitutive element of culture.”² The historians Cornelis van Minnen and Sylvia Hilton have stated that mobility and migration cannot be understood properly without taking into account their cultural aspects.³

Although most sociologists and historians agree about the importance of the cultural character of emigration, and even have used the term “emigration culture” (or variations on it) for their research, they have not defined a workable method nor utilized the concept. The American sociologist David A. Gerber uses the term only in an incidental way in his book *Authors and Their Lives*.⁴ The same is true for the Dutch sociologist J. H. Elich in his standard work about Dutch post-war immigration to Australia.⁵ Just recently, two American sociologists have proposed to use the term “culture of emigration” to analyze short periods of migration on a quantitative level, with an emphasis on gender relations. These scholars, however, likewise developed neither an analytic method which could be used by historians to examine migration from a long-term perspective, nor a system that could be utilized to understand the cultural and religious aspects of emigration processes.⁶ “Emigration culture” could be defined as “the presence of experiences and stories about emigration within a cultural group and the transformation of those aspects into positive or negative action.” In other words, an emigration culture is embedded in past experiences of group members,

² P. Boyle, K. Halfacree, and V. Robinson, *Exploring Temporary Migration* (New York: Longman, 1998), 207.

³ Cornelis A. van Minnen and Sylvia L. Hilton, “The Rocky Road to Greener Grass. Mobility in U.S. History. An Introduction,” in *Mobility in U.S. History. Nation on the Move*, ed. Cornelis van Minnen and Sylvia L. Hilton (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2002), 2.

⁴ David A. Gerber, *Authors and Their Lives. The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 92.

⁵ J. H. Elich, *Aan de ene kant, aan de andere kant. De emigratie van Nederlanders naar Australië 1946-1986* (Delft: Eburon, 1987), 31, 85.

⁶ William Kandel and Douglas S. Massey, “The Culture of Mexican Migration: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis,” *Social Forces* 80.3 (March 2002): 981; Liesbeth Heering, Rob van der Erf and Leo van Wissen, “The Role of Family Networks and Migration Culture in the Continuation of Moroccan Emigration: A Gender Perspective,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30:2 (March 2004): 323-337.

survives through stories within that group, and leads—or does not lead—to action, organization, and, as a final result, emigration or staying at home.

I discern four building blocks to measure the strength or weakness of an emigration culture: emigration tradition (experiences with emigration in the past), public opinion (positive or negative stories about emigration that circulate within a group and are based on a certain world view), organization (action or not), and—as a final result of these factors—the total size of emigration from a specific group or culture. Besides these factors, the growth of “emigration cultures” is fed or hampered by what could be referred to as “general conditions.” These conditions cannot explain the differences among the emigration cultures of the various cultural or religious groups, but they help to outline the broader framework which is necessary to understand why emigration in general occurred. Push and pull factors are part of these “general conditions”: for instance, as related to post-war Europe, bleak economic prospects in the homeland, the attraction of the receiving countries, government laws, an active emigration or immigration policy, the threat of a third world war, etc. Without these general conditions, emigration would not have taken place at all.

Two levels of emigration

The concept of “emigration culture” makes it possible to study processes of emigration on two levels. The first is the possibility of looking at the long-term perspective of migration. The strength or weakness of an emigration tradition draws attention to past experiences of cultural groups and thus makes present migration better understandable. It throws light on patterns of continuity and discontinuity. Migration can thus be studied on a total level. “Total” here means that immigration should be examined from the birth of the first idea in the country of origin, via the experience of emigration, to the final integration into the receiving country. This means that earlier migration experiences could be incorporated in the analysis.

Secondly, with this method subtle differences could be traced within or between religious and social groups in the sending as well as receiving countries. By examining group cultures, the concept makes it possible to compare emigration cultures of different, smaller or larger groups.

Long-term developments

Based on the strategy explained above, my dissertation draws at least three interesting conclusions.

In the first part of my dissertation, I have used the concept of “emigration culture” to analyze Dutch immigration to the United States and Canada from the mid-nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century, to measure the strength or weakness of some clearly discernible emigration cultures. This part makes clear that Dutch immigration to Canada cannot be understood without taking into account earlier Dutch immigration to the United States. For example, many American ministers, better known as domestic missionaries, supported the young Christian Reformed Church in Canada in the early decades of the twentieth century. These ministers helped

to build a small but important church infrastructure in that country. After the Second World War, these churches and the enclaves around them turned out to be stepping stones for newcomers.⁷ The Dutch-Canadian immigrants also profited from earlier experiences of fellow immigrants in the United States. They had learned, for instance, that immigration churches should make the language turn quickly to prevent the loss of the second and third generation. In conclusion, it can be stated that there was a lot of continuity between the experiences and strategies of Dutch immigrants in the United States and Canada.

During the inter-war years (1918-1939), Canada also had an important function by guaranteeing the survival of the emigration culture in the Netherlands. During these decades the United States closed their borders more and more to newcomers; whereas Canada received and measured in absolute numbers, more Dutch immigrants. At the same time several immigration and emigration organizations in Canada and the Netherlands were founded, which guaranteed the continuity of the Dutch emigration culture from an organizational perspective, such as the Roomsche-Katholieke Emigratie Vereniging (RKEV, 1925), the Gereformeerde Emigratie Vereniging (1927), and the Stichting Landverhuizing Nederland (SLN, 1931).⁸

Both examples show that the concept of “emigration culture” makes the analysis of synchronic events possible, by comparing experiences of Dutch immigrants in different countries and, eventually, the mutual relations between the immigrant groups in those countries.

Different cultures and emigration patterns

Another important conclusion deals with the cultural differences between religious groups, which resulted in different migration patterns. In 2006 the Dutch journalist Agnes Amelink published *Gereformeerden Overzee (Reformed Overseas)*.⁹ On the one hand this is a valuable and well-written book, but on the other hand it treats the Calvinists as a homogeneous group regarding their extensive immigration to North America after the Second World War. Amelink makes no distinction, for instance, between denominations like the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland and the Gereformeerde Kerken Vrijgemaakt. In my dissertation, I have tried to fill this gap by using the concept of “emigration culture,” which gives the opportunity to compare different denominations on the level of world view, organization, and the willingness to emigrate. This approach makes clear that there were notable differences between the “emigration cultures” within Dutch churches.

⁷ See also Janet Sjaarda Sheeres’s article, “The Role of Emigration Deputies and Immigration Committees in the transfer of CRC Membership Papers from 1946 to 1960,” in this volume (chapter three). *Ed.*

⁸ The SLN came into being after a fusion between the Nederlandsche Vereniging Landverhuizing (NVL, 1913) and the Emigratie Centrale Holland (ECH, 1923).

⁹ Agnes Amelink, *Gereformeerden overzee. Protestants-christelijke landverhuizers in Noord-Amerika* (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2006).

Three examples about the relation between world view and the relative numbers of immigrants from specific denominations will be given here to clarify this point: the Neocalvinist vision (dominant within the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland), the cultural vision of *vrijgemaakt-gereformeerden* (the Reformed Liberated)—and the opinion-forming vision among the pietist members of the Gereformeerde Gemeenten (the Dutch sister church of the Netherlands Reformed Congregations) and (at least part of) the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken.

The Neocalvinists were in fact the only Reformed group that interpreted emigration and North America in a predominantly positive way. The philosophy of Neocalvinism accentuated the worldwide potential of Protestantism and had an active and optimistic character. Their spokesman, Abraham Kuyper, had reflected on Europe as the “old lady,” while America was a young and promising continent. A typical quotation from Kuyper, derived from his Stone Lectures held in 1899 in Princeton, was, “It is beyond all doubt that America, compared to Europe, is leading on the social level and has more potential to lift human life to a higher quality.”¹⁰ After the Second World War, Neocalvinist opinion-makers—church leaders as well as the majority of the clergy—translated this world view in their own language by repeating messages such as “the whole world is God’s own country.”¹¹ And Reformed writers like P. J. Risseeuw and Klaas Norel published several positive novels about North America. Even the minds of the juvenile were “infiltrated” with this way of thinking, through optimistic children’s literature like Norel’s *Jan en Janneke in Canada* (1951), his *Hollanders in Canada* (1952), and the more practical children’s book *Jan Pakaan, de emigrant* (1953), written by Pieter Lagaay.¹²

In other Reformed churches the opinions of Kuyper were less influential. The pietists (the members of the Gereformeerde Gemeenten), as well as the Reformed Liberated, had a more antithetical world view. They held a defensive attitude and were more concerned with the development of their churches in the Netherlands than with the promotion of emigration. It was important, for example, that the Reformed Churches Liberated needed the flock to build up their newly started church and the church-related organizations. Their most important leader, Klaas Schilder, wrote explicitly (more than once) that emigration “was draining the best blood away” from the Liberated Churches.¹³ In other words: the best people left, people the church needed. Furthermore, the Reformed Liberated didn’t have many sister churches in Canada and the United States, whereas “the true church” was one of the central themes of their theology.

¹⁰ Abraham Kuyper, *Varia Americana* (Amsterdam: Höveker and Wormser, 1899), 1.

¹¹ Pieter Prins, *Geloof en emigratie* (Delft: Van Keulen, 1954), 63–66.

¹² See Hans Krabbendam’s article “Emigration to North America in Dutch Juvenile Literature,” in this volume (chapter nine). *Ed.*

¹³ Klaas Schilder, “Jaaroverzicht 1949/1950,” in *Handboek ten dienste van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (onderhoudende artikel 31 K.O.)*, ed. Klaas Schilder (Goes: Oosterbaan and Le Cointre, 1950), 123.

Within the Gereformeerde Gemeenten and (parts of) the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken there were—besides a defensive world view—other factors that hindered the growth of a strong emigration culture. For instance, many pietists in the Netherlands were opposed to vaccination because, in their opinion, that clashed with the doctrine of God's sovereign authority. However, before one boarded an emigration ship to North America, it was mandatory to be vaccinated against contagious diseases. The emigration organization of the Gereformeerde Gemeenten, the Synodale Commissie voor Emigratie naar Canada (the Synodical Commission for Emigration to Canada) had found a smart solution for this problem: they hired a doctor from Barneveld who illegally vaccinated his “patients”—the would-be emigrants—with placebos of water. Dutch authorities soon discovered this trick, and no longer accepted the vaccination documents of this doctor.¹⁴

Statistics

In the third place, the size of post-war overseas emigration from various Reformed denominations proves that there were different “emigration cultures” among Protestants. Table 2.1 shows, in the second column, the share of each denomination among the total number of Reformed people in the Netherlands. The third column presents the share of each church in the total Dutch overseas trek in 1950.

Remarkable about the data in table 2.1 is that actually only one church was overrepresented in the overseas emigration wave from the Netherlands, namely the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN). In my dissertation I explain this situation at length, but here I can only touch upon the most important causes. The fact that only the Reformed Churches saw so many members crossing the ocean had to do: 1) with their positive Kuyperian vision on culture and emigration; 2) with the existence of sister churches in North America (the other Reformed churches had fewer contacts and less experience with North America); and 3) with the negative self-perception after World War II. These people, the members of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, had suffered from decades of internal church struggles, which resulted in the “Vrijmaking,” the church split of 1944 that gave birth to the Gereformeerde Kerken Vrijgemaakt. The last-mentioned church made a new, optimistic start after the Second World War and needed people to staff their new organizations. Another church, the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, also made an optimistic new start after the war. This denomination adopted a new church order in 1951 and aimed to become more influential in Dutch society by operating as a *Christusbelijdende volkskerk* (“a Christ-confessing church for the people”).

¹⁴ Stallinga-Ganzevoort Holland Canada Emigration Collection (SGHCEC), Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands, reel nine, folder 130: “Afschrift Holland-Amerika Lijn (13 April 1951)”; Laurens Vogelaar, *In verafgelegen streken: schetsen uit het kerkelijk leven van de Nederlandse emigranten in Noord-Amerika* (Barneveld: Koster, 2003), 101; Betsy Biemond-Boer, *‘Die Hollanders zijn gek!’ Identiteit en integratie van bevindende gereformeerde emigranten in Canada* (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2008), 33-34.

Denomination	Share in Dutch population, 1947		Share in total Dutch emigration, 1950		% Reformed population, 1947	% all Reformed
	In numbers	In percentage	In numbers	In percentage		
GKN	673,670	7.00%	4,240	19.88%	72.00%	85.40%
GKV	89,040	0.93%	165	0.77%	9.50%	3.30%
(Oud-)Ger. Gem	105,297	1.09%	380	1.78%	11.30%	7.60%
CGK	67,949	0.71%	172	0.81%	7.20%	3.50%
Unknown	0	0.00%	10	0.05%	0.00%	0.20%
Total	935,956	9.73%	4,965	23.29%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 2.1 Share of Reformed denominations in Dutch overseas migration (1950)¹⁵

Departure date	Name of ship	GKN	GKV	CGK	(Oud-) Ger. Gem	Reformed passengers (total)
6 June 1953	“Waterman”	83.10%	7.60%	6.80%	2.50%	118
24 March 1954	“Waterman”	92.40%	1.80%	2.90%	2.90%	171
30 March 1954	“Groote Beer”	80.70%	12.40%	6.90%	0.00%	249
12 April 1954	“Zuiderkruis”	81.00%	10.00%	5.80%	3.20%	189
20 April 1954	“Groote Beer”	79.70%	16.90%	3.40%	0.00%	207
4 May 1954	“Zuiderkruis”	93.00%	4.60%	1.90%	0.50%	215
5 May 1954	“Sibajak”	91.00%	6.60%	1.60%	0.80%	122
10 May 1954	“Groote Beer”	62.20%	29.70%	4.70%	3.40%	148
Total passengers						
	In numbers	1,181	159	61	18	1,419
	In percentage	83.20%	11.20%	4.30%	1.30%	100.00%

Table 2.2 Ship lists with Calvinist passengers per denomination (1953-1954)

A selection of available passenger lists from the archives of the Hervormde Emigratie Commissie in Wierden, the Netherlands (see table 2.2) supports the conclusion that

¹⁵ W. van der Mast, *Verantwoorde emigratie. Waarom?–Hoe–Waarheen?* (Franeker: Wever, 1951), 35; Hans Knippenberg, *De religieuze kaart van Nederland. Omvang en geografische spreiding van de godsdienstige gezindten vanaf de Reformatie tot heden* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1992), 266-268.

only members from the GKN were significantly overrepresented in the overseas exodus from the Netherlands between 1947 and 1963.

Conclusion

This article deals with an historical method—which scholars have formerly used only in an incidental way—called “emigration culture.” This method has been utilized to answer the question of which religious factors stimulated or hampered Dutch overseas migration after World War II. There is enough evidence that aspects like migration tradition and world view explain the different patterns of emigration behaviour of Dutch Reformed people. Of course, the themes could be discussed only briefly in this paper. For further argumentation, my dissertation could be consulted. It is likely that other scholars in the field of emigration studies could also benefit from the strategy introduced in this article. The validity of this assumption will be demonstrated in the years ahead.