

**buildings and bibles  
between profanization  
and sacralization: semiotic  
ambivalence in the  
protestant dutch bible belt  
anneke pons-de wit<sup>a</sup>, dick  
houtman<sup>a</sup>, john exalto<sup>b</sup>,  
fred van lieburg<sup>b</sup>, johan  
roeland<sup>b,c</sup> and maarten  
wisse<sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup>university of leuven, belgium; <sup>b</sup>vu amsterdam, the netherlands; <sup>c</sup>university of the free state, bloemfontein, south africa; <sup>d</sup>protestant theological university, amsterdam, the netherlands

Anneke Pons- de Wit is a PhD student in cultural sociology at the Centre for Sociological Research, Leuven, researching into the formation of contemporary atheist, fundamentalist religious, and relativist religious identities. She has previously published in *Social Compass* on the religious use of new media (2015).

Dick Houtman is Professor of Sociology of Culture and Religion at the Centre for Sociological Research, Leuven. His principal research interests are religious and political culture in the West (for details and publications, see [www.dickhoutman.nl](http://www.dickhoutman.nl)).

John Exalto is Assistant Professor in the History of Education at the Faculty of Behavioral and Movement Sciences, VU Amsterdam. His research focuses on the relationship between education and religion.

Fred van Lieburg is Professor of Religious History in the Faculty of Humanities, VU Amsterdam. He coordinates the Dutch Bible Belt Network and is specialized in the cultural history of transatlantic Pietism and Revivalism.

Johan Roeland is Assistant Professor in Media, Religion and Culture in the Faculty of Theology, VU Amsterdam, the Netherlands and the Department of Practical Theology, University of Free State, South Africa. He has published on the intersections between media, religion and popular culture in several journals, for example *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *Social Compass*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, and the *International Journal of Practical Theology*.

Maarten Wisse is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam. He has published in the field of philosophy of religion, contemporary theology and the history of dogma. [Anneke.PonsdeWit@kuleuven.be](mailto:Anneke.PonsdeWit@kuleuven.be)

## ABSTRACT

Based on an ethnographic case study of three recently erected church buildings in the Dutch Bible Belt, this article demonstrates how orthodox Reformed congregations in the Netherlands define church buildings—especially the auditoria—and bibles as simultaneously profane and mediating the sacred. These at first glance ambivalent discourses are informed by a particular semiotic ideology, which maintains that material spaces and objects like these are sacralized if, and only if, individual believers can meaningfully relate them to their personal spiritual experiences. This ideology makes a primary attitude of profanization of material forms indispensable, because any preexistent sacredness of matter would precisely rule out these personal spiritual experiences.

**Keywords:** church buildings, material religion, mediation, Protestantism, semiotic ideology

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Those who ... approach Barneveld by car will be very surprised ... when they see an enormous building rising out of the pastureland—and then another one, just after the fork in the road. Under construction: two huge churches, right next to each other. (*Volkskrant* 2008)

The two new churches mentioned in this quotation from a Dutch newspaper were built in 2008 by the Reformed Congregations (Gereformeerde Gemeenten) and the Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands (Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland), two orthodox Reformed denominations that form part of what is known as the Dutch “Bible Belt”—a popular label for the geographical concentration of the orthodox wing of Protestantism in the Netherlands. In 2011 the local congregation of the Restored Reformed Church (Hersteld Hervormde Kerk), another orthodox Reformed denomination, built a third church in the same small town of Barneveld, with its population of just 30,000. These construction projects attracted much attention from Dutch national media and blogs. The media were surprised, not only by this manifestation of religious vitality in their country where “many churches are being demolished” (*Volkskrant* 2008), but perhaps even more so, as blogger Piet puts it, by the “impressiveness and assertiveness” of the new church buildings (*Worldpress* 2011). Their self-assured presence is indeed remarkable, given the orthodox Reformed contempt for religious materiality, as exemplified by architect Teerds’ observation that in these circles “soberness is central [in church design] ... as is the conviction that the space actually should not be important” (*Reformatorisch Dagblad* 2014).

This received notion of Protestantism as anti-material or even iconoclastic is a central theme in what has been called the “material turn” in religious studies (e.g. Keane 2007, 60; Meyer and Houtman 2012, 9–13; Van Asselt, Van Geest, and Muller 2007). Aiming to correct the scholarly neglect of the material side of religion, and tracing back this modern bias to the Protestant religious heritage, the “material turn” has recently sparked interest in “Protestants’ own peculiar materialities” (Wharton 2014, 414). In what follows we aim to contribute to this literature in two ways. Firstly, we aim to explore the discourses and practices on materiality as well as the underlying semiotic ideology<sup>1</sup> of Dutch orthodox Protestant groups—an ideology that is often regarded as exemplifying Protestant anti-materialism (Wisse 2007, 188–191). Our focus is on the understandings of church buildings and bibles, religious forms that are quintessential to the religious lives of orthodox Protestants (Brenneman and Miller 2016; Crapanzano 2000). Secondly, we will explore the relationship between two different discourses on materiality that we encountered in our research: one discourse defined by aspirations of profanization, and the other by tendencies of sacralization. By studying these discourses, we aim to deepen the knowledge about what has often been described as the “ambivalence” of Protestant semiotic ideologies. Before moving

to our findings, however, we elaborate on our theoretical point of departure and discuss our case study in more detail.

### **Material Religion and Protestantism**

Whereas religion has long been defined as “a set of beliefs” (Plate 2014, 6), the disciplines that share religion as their object of study have increasingly paid attention to the material side of religion (Arweck and Keenan 2006; Chidester 2000; Keane 2008a; Kieckhefer 2004; McDannell 1995; Meyer and Houtman 2012; Molendijk 2003; Plate 2014; Vásquez 2011). This is not to deny the importance of religious beliefs, for religious materiality is regarded to be inextricably intertwined with these. Beliefs are expressed in material forms, yet the resulting objects are “in their materiality relatively autonomous” (Keane 2008b, s124) in encounters with believing subjects, because of their inexorably restrictive forms and historically situated thingness (Brown 2001). Therefore, Keane (2008b, s124) concludes that “to try to eliminate the materiality of religion by treating it as, above all, evidence for something immaterial, such as beliefs or prior experiences, risks denying the very conditions of sociality, and even time itself.” The resulting material approach thus holds that religion can only be understood by giving this intertwining of beliefs and materiality its due weight.

Emphasizing the agency of matter, the “material turn” positions itself against the “modern fear of matter” (Pels 2012, 27; Keane 2007). In an attempt to escape premodern religious cultures in which people worshipped things and assigned agency to matter, modern intellectualistic approaches drew a distinction between objects and human subjects, and construed objects as being deprived of agency, created by subjects, and firmly subordinated to them. These notions permeated studies of religious evolution, as can be seen from the once widely held assumption that in the course of modernization religion developed into higher, more purified, and less materialized beliefs, and the equally widespread notion that religion would eventually even disappear altogether (e.g. Berger 1990 [1967], 105–125; Weber 1993 [1922]). The material approach critiques these modes of distinguishing religious subjects from subordinated religious objects and the resulting characterizing of religious change (Keane 2007, 67; Meyer and Houtman 2012, 9–13; Pels 2012, 31–33).

Protestantism has received a lot of attention in the material approach to the study of religion (Engelke 2012; Keane 2007; McDannell 1995; Meyer 1999; Morgan 1999; Van Asselt et al. 2007). In modern, intellectualistic approaches, Protestantism has been understood as the ultimate step towards the spiritualization of religion and the profanization of religious objects. As exemplified by Max Weber’s classical analysis (Weber 2008 [1905], 61–62), Protestantism has been portrayed as the ultimate iconoclastic religion, characterized by a disenchantment and instrumentalization of the physical world, the ambition to rationally master it, and the concomitant rejection of a material

mediation of the sacred (see also Berger 1990 [1967], 105–125; Campbell 2007, 57–62). Although proponents of the material approach accept the idea that especially “Calvinism played a critical historical role” (Keane 2007, 39) in installing the intellectualistic bias in modern thinking about religion, and agree that historically Protestants were indeed involved in iconoclastic practices, they criticize approaches such as Weber’s for taking for granted that Protestantism is a quintessentially anti-material religion (Meyer and Houtman 2012, 9–13; Pels 2012, 34–38; Vásquez 2011, 32). Instead, the material turn’s central notion that “religion cannot do without material culture” (Engelke 2012, 40) has prompted research into the materiality of Protestantism itself, with attention for bodily sensations (Klaver 2012; Roeland 2009; Roeland et al. 2012), pictures (Exalto 2016; Meyer 2012; Morgan 1993, 2004), church buildings and rituals taking place therein (Buggeln 2003; Coleman and Collins 2006; Martin 2006; Molendijk 2003), and traditions (Crapanzano 2000). Studies like these focus on Protestants’ material practices, and raise the pivotal question of how these practices are related to religious beliefs among various Protestant groups. Thus, most scholars nowadays agree that materiality matters, also for Protestants whose stance towards materiality, and especially the stance towards the spiritual value of things and objects, is very critical.

Regarding the different stances religions take towards objects, the following spectrum can be sketched (Manning and Meneley 2008). On one end of the spectrum are those religions that presume a close link between the material and spiritual realms. Subject and object merge into each other, and a numinous spirit is assigned to an object which is therefore regarded as mediating the divine. On the other end of the spectrum are those religions that perceive objects to be strongly separated from subjects, resulting in a profanization of religious things. Here, sacredness is perceived to be strictly spiritual and unmediated. A third position regards subjects and objects as neither strictly separated nor merged with each other, defining the sacred meaning of the sign as irreducible to its material features without however being completely absent from the latter. Because of these differences, Webb Keane is correct when he argues that it is essential to study the so-called “semiotic ideology” of a particular religious group to understand the meaning of objects and practices properly (Keane 2007, 59; Meyer 2012, 302). The semiotic ideology prescribes which things are allowed to be involved in religious practices, what they mean, and what role—if any—they play in mediating the divine.

Most scholars working on the semiotic ideology of Protestant groups agree that Protestantism is characterized by an ambivalent attitude towards material forms of religion (Smit 2009, 193–194; Hovland 2018, 427). The Protestant foregrounding of the individual, spiritual relationship with God turns out to be accompanied by a negative, iconoclastic stance towards material mediation. This is the point that Mellor and Shilling

(1997) make in their historical account of Protestant and Catholic body regimes: while medieval Catholics perceived God as present in the body, Protestants downplayed the role of material bodies in favor of spiritual mediation. Others, looking at the meaning of objects in Protestant religious practices, point at the Protestant efforts to “dematerialize the sign’s essence” (Keane 2007, 64) by stripping religious objects of their spiritual meaning (Meyer 2012, 304). Protestants, it is argued, tend to be suspicious in dealing with religious objects, since in their eyes such practices easily evolve into idolatry or even fetishism (Keane 2007, 64; Meyer 2012, 304; Morgan 1993, 34). This attitude of suspicion and fear becomes probably most visible in the overt condemnation of religious practices of thing-friendly religions and even violence against religious objects. Sixteenth-century Europe witnessed such violence in the iconoclastic riots that took place in many cities, yet destruction of objects of indigenous religions is also present in missionary contexts nowadays (Meyer 2012, 304; Engelke 2012, 43).

At the same time, religious materiality plays an important role in the religious practices of Protestant groups. Historians have demonstrated how this applies to Protestant church buildings (Buggeln 2003; Kilde 2002; Price 2013; Torgerson 2007). A telling example is provided in a study by Smit (2009) about two Protestant groups in Rotterdam (a local Presbyterian and a migrant Pentecostal) which share one church building. The relationship between both came under serious pressure because of a conflict about the proper use of the church building. While the Presbyterian congregation requested a respectful attitude towards the building because it represented God for them, the Pentecostals treated it just as a utensil for dancing and leaving the garbage from eating together because they perceived God to be represented in the gathering of believers. Also, Engelke (2012, 49–51, 53–55) describes how, despite a strong rejection of pagan objects, members of the Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe venerate prayer pebbles, and Klaver explains how the movie *The Passion of the Christ* assists the experience of the healing power of the blood of Christ among Dutch Pentecostals (Klaver 2012, 253–259). These studies confirm Keane’s thesis that “the reformers could not help but produce new forms—creeds, sermons, hymns, houses of worship, even clerical garb—[which] could never be fully confined to their original contexts or definitively subordinated to their ‘true’ immaterial meanings” (Keane 2007, 79; see also Engelke 2012, 43–44; Martin 2006, 143; McDannell 1995, 8; Smit 2009, 193).

Though the co-existence of iconoclastic and positive attitudes towards material mediation among Protestant groups is found to be ambivalent, the underlying semiotic ideologies are not per se perceived as inherently contradictory. Morgan (1993), for example, demonstrates how mainstream American Protestants bring into harmony their feelings of divine immediacy through Sallman’s picture of Jesus with the visual restrictions in their semiotic ideology. By buying mass-produced pictures that depict an accurate representation of their spiritual ideas about

Jesus they escape the perceived danger of idolatry of sacrificing a particular, unique object and developing false images of the divine, respectively. Also, the overtly expressed iconoclasm among Protestants in fact reveals the important role of matter in Protestantism. This is what Pollmann (2016) points out with respect to the fury against Catholic images in the early centuries of Dutch Protestantism. She argues that “the people who break images do not do so out of indifference, but precisely because they feel the images’ power” (Pollmann 2016, 174; Meyer 2012, 304–306). It is, in other words, precisely the experience of being affected by religious things that makes the dealing with materiality in a correct way an ultra-sensitive topic for Protestants.

All of this makes it clear that materiality is certainly important for Protestants, and that there is a “symbiotic entanglement” (Meyer 2012, 298) of iconoclastic and materialized discourses. In fact, the ambivalence that many scholars attribute to Protestant semiotic ideologies is merely related to the observed unclearness in the exact relationship between the material and the spiritual realm, and to the diversity of semiotic ideologies within Protestantism. As Hovland (2018, 427) argues, Protestant semiotic ideologies “show some of the *multiplicity* of their material and nonmaterial position in relation to the transcendent” (emphasis added). Here, Hovland not only refers to the variety of ideologies that is so typical for Protestantism, but also to the various ways of dealing with materiality within particular Protestant semiotic ideologies. As she continues,

they used a range of means to set themselves and God in (anti-) relation to each other, including mediation, but also drawing on modes that complicated this mediation such as critique, refusal of materiality, and using the body as a witness, divine absence and immediacy, and using failure as a prompt for repetition and waiting. (Hovland 2018, 427)

Clearly, researchers find it difficult to catch the exact rules of mediation in Protestant semiotic ideologies because they “yield an unstable composite relation between God and humans” (Hovland 2018, 427), and “resort to a theory of signs in which the signifier is unable to signify in a stable manner” (Van den Hemel 2012, 63). Especially in situations of missionary work in which Protestants meet other religious traditions that rely on different semiotic ideologies, such an instability results in a “complex situation” in which fear for “remarkable slippage” of a correct way of dealing with materiality in a devilish way prevails (Meyer 2012, 319).

### **Churches in the Dutch Bible Belt**

In this article we seek to deepen the understanding of the observed ambivalence in the Protestant “struggles with materiality” (Meyer and Houtman 2012, 10) by providing the results of our research on discourses on religious materiality among Calvinist Protestants in the Netherlands. We conducted an ethnographic

case study of the religious meanings and practices related to Bibles and buildings in Barneveld, a town in the heart of the orthodox-Protestant Dutch Bible Belt that runs from the north-east to the southwest of the Netherlands (Snel 2007, 54–61). Three recently built churches were included in our research: the Adullamkerk (Adullam Church, referring to the cave nearby the ancient city in the tribal area of Judah where David hid from Saul according to the biblical book of 1 Samuel), De Hoeksteen (The Corner Stone), and the Pniëlkerk (Peniel Church, referring to the place Peniel, where, according to the book of Genesis, Jacob wrestled with God). The Adullamkerk (2008, 1400 seats, see [figure 1](#)) is the property of the Reformed Congregations (Gereformeerde Gemeenten). This congregation already had a church building in the center of Barneveld, but due to a growing number of believers, a second building was needed. Growth of the local Reformed Congregation in the Netherlands, a denomination that separated from the Reformed Congregations in 1953, was also the main reason for building De Hoeksteen (2008, 2500 seats, see [figure 2](#)). Lastly, the Pniëlkerk (2011, 700 seats, see [figure 3](#)) was built by the Restored Reformed Congregation (Hersteld Hervormde Kerk), an orthodox wing of the former Dutch Reformed Church (Hervormde Kerk), to accommodate its young congregation in Barneveld and surrounding areas. Architect Van Beijnum designed both the Adullamkerk and De Hoeksteen, while architect Huls did so for the Pniëlkerk. The members of the congregations are native Dutch people of all ages.

In this case study we focus on the experiences with and uses of two important material entities in Dutch Bible Belt Protestantism: bibles, the physical carriers—from the perspective of orthodox Protestants—of the words of God, and buildings, the places of worship. The Dutch Bible Belt understands its history and identity as being deeply rooted in sixteenth-century Calvinism (Stoffels

**FIG 1**  
Exterior of  
Adullamkerk.  
Photograph ©  
Maarten Wisse.





**FIG 2**

Exterior of De Hoeksteen.  
Photograph © Maarten  
Wisse.



**FIG 3**

Exterior of  
Pniëlkerk.  
Photograph ©  
Maarten Wisse.



1995, 129; Van Lieburg 2007, 13). It has evolved from orthodox strands in the former national Dutch Reformed Church (Hervormde Kerk). These strands have aimed for purification of Protestant ideologies and practices since the seventeenth century, and withdrew from the national Protestant church in the nineteenth century. From then on they started to organize themselves in free Reformed churches, resulting in a patchwork of many smaller orthodox Protestant denominations. We look into the way bibles and buildings are shaped by ideas about religious materiality, and

how these ideas have informed the choices made in the process of designing and constructing the new church buildings.

We collected the data in the spring of 2014 using several sources and methods. First, we visited all three churches to observe their material features such as construction styles and materials used. Second, open interviews were arranged with representatives of the congregations,<sup>2</sup> always including a member of the congregation's building committee and either the verger or one of the church officers. The interviews addressed the considerations behind the choices made in the design and construction process on the one hand and respondents' experiences of the buildings and various objects within them, especially bibles, on the other. Third, the architects of the church buildings, who identify themselves as orthodox Protestants as well, were interviewed about the ideas that underlie their designs. All interviews took place in the church buildings. Respondents thus had the opportunity to show exactly what they were referring to. Fourth, recordings of the inauguration sermons of the new church buildings were added to our data, in order to analyze the particular representation of the buildings and the bibles by the congregations' pastors. Fifth, a historical study into the local context was conducted. After gathering the data we extensively discussed the observations, wrote them down in field notes, and analyzed these together with the transcripts of the interviews and the inauguration sermons. The results of this analysis are described below. For the sake of their privacy, pseudonyms were used in the citations of the respondents.

### **Profaning Church Buildings**

"Seest thou these great buildings? There shall not be left one stone upon another." These were among the first words that the chairman of the building committee said to the assembled congregation during the inauguration service of the Adullamkerk. This quotation from the Bible (Mark 13:2<sup>3</sup>), in which Jesus emphasizes the impermanence of the temple in Jerusalem, might not seem particularly fitting for a celebration of the completion of a new church building. However, the chairman was not the only one who downplayed the significance of church buildings. The pastor of the same church also warned his congregation: "You could sit in a beautiful church building the whole of your life, but that will not bring you anything." Apparently, at these moments of special attention for the church building, the speakers felt the need to emphasize the unimportance of "these stones." Instead, one of the pastors told his congregation that the most important thing in this life is seeking "the building that is not made with hands," hinting at a strictly spiritual mediation. In these sermons devoted to the celebration of something as material as a new church building, the religious significance of materiality was explicitly downplayed.

Our respondents did so in various other ways, too. For example, rather than referring to religious purposes, the members of the building committees explained that the main aim was to construct

“a church that is simply practical and functional” (Jansen), a profaning description that was used by other respondents as well. “In the Reformed or Protestant process of church construction, that [i.e. religious argumentation] plays less of a role,” according to architect Van Beijnum. In line with this, the material choices made during the construction process were said not to have been inspired by any religious consideration. The schedule of requirements that both architects received from the building committees simply contained “the number of seats, the number of rooms ... and things like that” (Van Beijnum). Even features that are generally regarded as having religious meaning were defined in a profaning way. Van Beijnum explained for instance that the high ceiling in the Adullamkerk (see figure 4) was not designed to symbolize the majesty of God, but simply “because a lower roof would be unsightly.” For similar aesthetic yet profane reasons he opted for a large pulpit. In the case of De Hoeksteen, the profane status of the church building was underscored by the congregation’s decision to exclusively nominate members with expertise in either the construction industry or the financial world for the building committee. “The church officers have to do the pastoral work; we [the building committee] have ensured that this building is achieved,” Visser clarified.

The profaning discourse on the church buildings was also underscored by a lack of interest in the symbolic meanings of the material features. For instance, the building committee of the Pniëlkerk requested architect Huls simply “to design a church like that in Harskamp,<sup>4</sup> only cheaper.” Although the committee clearly had a detailed idea of what the church had to look like—it in effect even presented the architect with a full-fledged and detailed design by referring to an already built church—it nevertheless communicated a lack of interest by not even taking the time to seriously consider the building requirements. Likewise, the representatives of De Hoeksteen did not show interest when the research team asked them about the meaning of the stained-glass

**FIG 4**

Interior of Adullamkerk with large pulpit and high ceiling. Photograph © Maarten Wisse.



**FIG 5**

Stained-glass window with the depiction of a tree in De Hoeksteen. Photograph © Maarten Wisse.



windows depicting scenes from the Bible (see [figure 5](#)). Van Beijnum told us that the depiction of a tree beside a stream in one of the windows was his idea, and symbolizes the wish that “the congregation may grow spiritually;” but Visser and Jansen, representatives of the building committee, maintained that they were not even aware of such a meaning. “That was the architect’s idea,” they argued—“these [depictions] were not chosen deliberately, we did not need them.”

Yet this marked display of indifference towards religious symbols turned out to be accompanied by clear stylistic and color preferences. The representatives of the three congregations all articulated clear and strikingly similar preferences for a “simple” and “sober” auditorium that should have a “restful” and “warm” atmosphere—to mention a couple of words that were often used to describe the desired ambiance (see [figure 6](#) for an impression). According to Jansen and Visser respectively, a restful atmosphere was created by using “only a few colors,” “that have to be light.” Visser illustrated this as follows.

I can remember that I once came into a church with snow-white walls. That is hardly restful! It makes you restless instead. The same goes for bright colors. And yes, we have been very sensitive to this.

The building committee of the Adullamkerk chose a wooden pulpit, because a “warm atmosphere is important”

**FIG 6**

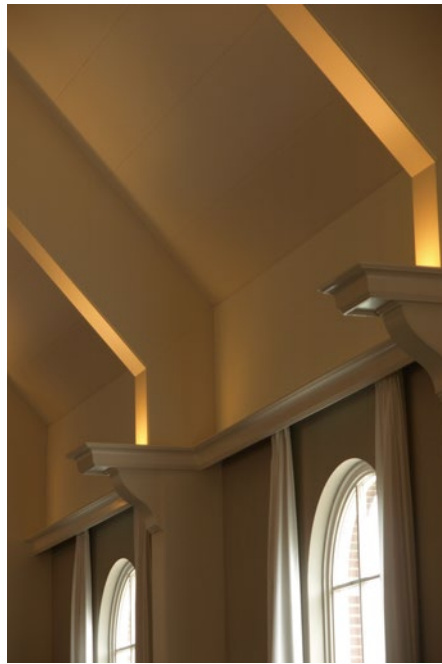
Interior of  
Pniëlkerk.  
Photograph ©  
Maarten Wisse.



(Mulder). “Wood is warmer [than stone],” Blok added. Also, the building committees wanted “nothing special” (*niks geen bijzonderheden*) or “over the top” (*overdreven dingen*) (Mulder) and deemed soberness important. For this reason, Van Beijnum told us that he chose “a simple overall shape” for his church designs, based on the Romanesque style of church construction.

Color and styling choices were important and had been issues of lengthy discussions for the building committees. The Pniëlkerk’s committee even had a quarrel with the Design Review Committee at the municipal council about the color of the stones to be used—a dispute which the church’s building committee ultimately won.<sup>5</sup> The lighting plan of this same churches’ auditorium (see figure 7) constitutes an interesting case to demonstrate the complex interplay between attention to style and indifference to it. On the advice of a hired expert, advanced lighting techniques were applied to create an atmosphere with a few special spotlights. It was the first thing Dekker showed us during our visit. However, even though undeniably much time and money had been spent on lighting, Dekker quipped in his acknowledgment of the lighting expert during the inauguration service that he had asked the latter to “just install fluorescent tubes.” Hence, while lengthy discussions and the hiring of external expertise demonstrate the importance of style and sphere, the religious importance of the aesthetics of the church buildings is consistently downplayed in words. These are all just a matter of taste, our respondents repeatedly told us, and “It does not have [any religious] ulterior motives” (Jansen).

**FIG 7**  
Advanced lighting effects in  
Pniëlkerk. Photograph © Maarten  
Wisse.



### **An Auditorium for Hearing and Seeing the Word**

The ample attention paid to the auditorium was not just meant to satisfy the taste preferences of building committees, but, according to Jansen, to emphasize its special status as “meant for the preaching of the Word.” The auditorium must be designed in such a way “that the preaching of the Word, which is central [in our religion], resonates better in you,” he explained. Van Beijnum also regarded “the liturgical center, and the pulpit with the Word of God on it [as] the central reference point.” He continued,

Sometimes, the pulpit is called a “wall of attention.” That’s what the attention should be focused on, so it must be clearly visible, [and the Word of God] must be well understood. These are the main elements that are important for a church design. I would not say that other things are side issues, but actually they are.

This citation demonstrates how the main function of the auditorium is to serve the preaching of the Word, understood as the principal means of connecting to the sacred. This special status of the church building as an “auditorium for hearing the Word” (Morgan 2004, 91), and the tendency to build “costly and churchly houses of worship” informed by this specific status can in fact be seen as a distinctive feature of orthodox Protestantism more generally (Dexter, cited in Buggeln 2003, ix).

For the same reason of effectively serving the preaching of the Word of God, the committees aimed for a restful, warm, and “cozy” atmosphere, created by advanced indirect lighting, natural materials and warm colors. “Then there will be room for

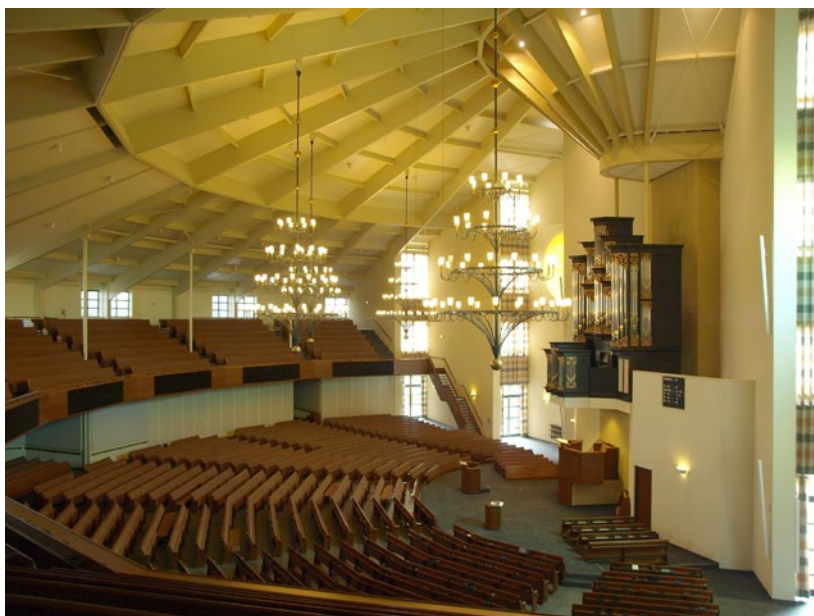
introspection. I think that then the central message [of the Word of God] will resonate better in you," Dekker explained. The same applied to the desire for soberness, which according to Van Beijnum was meant

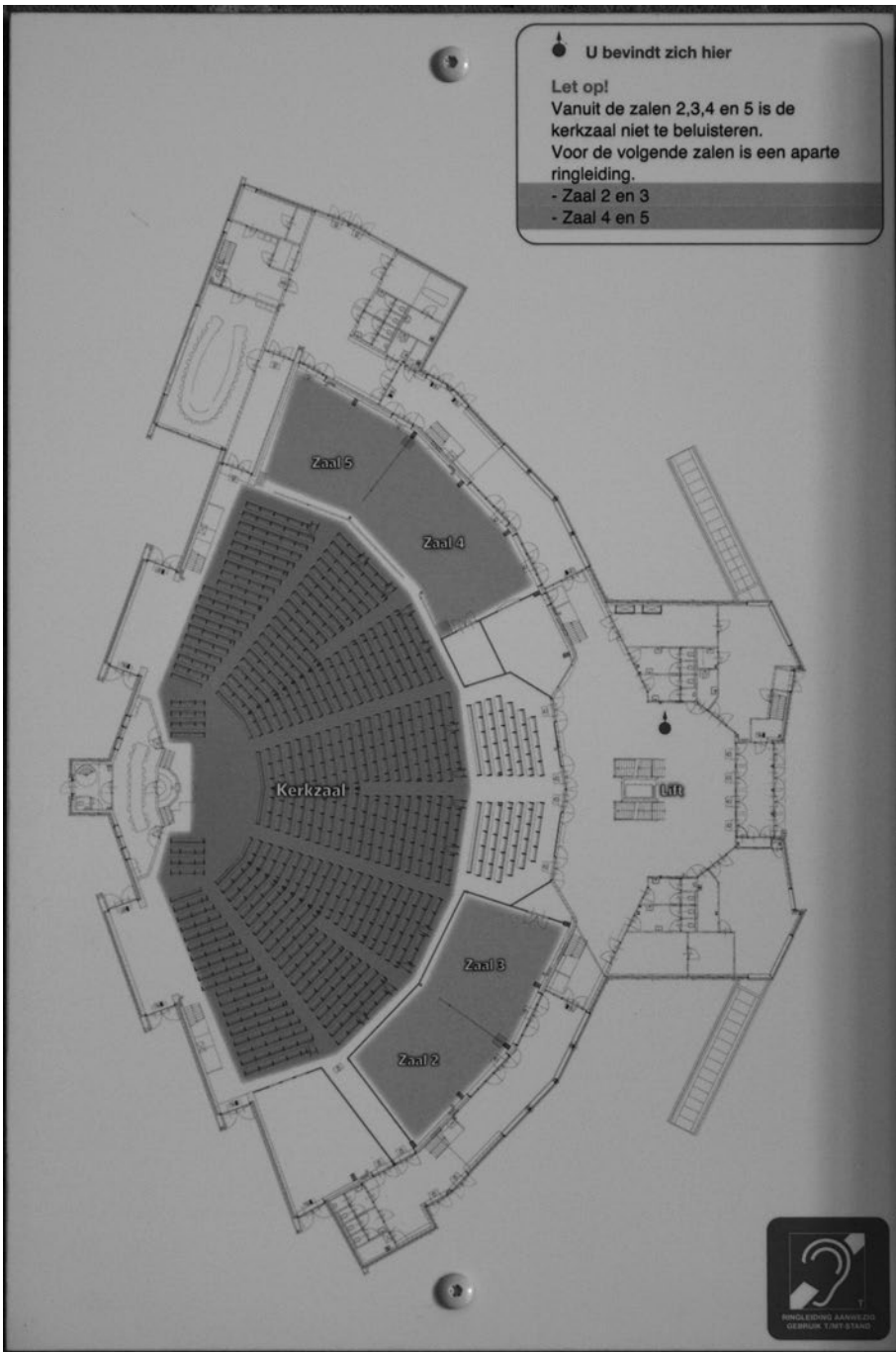
to foster attention. When one enters a richly decorated Roman Catholic church, one's attention is distracted from the preaching of the Word of God. Thus, the less a building cries out for attention, the more attention can be paid to the Word of God—and that is the aim. So, distraction must be minimized.

Hence, the explicit and shared desire for a sober, restful and warm style is actually aimed to stimulate concentration and avoid distraction: "We paid great attention to [that] function of the building—to find an optimum in it" (Visser).

The church buildings' religious aim of serving the preaching of the Word of God logically informed the profane understandings of their material forms. Huls articulated this as follows: "I don't have any illusions of designing a 'house of God,' but I know that I have to design something very beautiful with which God can be served." In this quotation, Huls demonstrated that he does not perceive the building itself as sacred, while at the same time affirming the importance of a perfect building because it is thought to serve the Word's mediation of God. The choice for a fan-shaped auditorium in two of the three churches (see [figure 8](#) and [9](#)), a shape recommended by the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper (1911, 116) and common for large churches in the Dutch Bible Belt, exemplifies how this is practically dealt with. Even though, as Van Beijnum admitted, "the really classical shape is a cruciform church," and even though

**FIG 8**  
Interior of De Hoeksteen showing the fan-shaped auditorium. Photograph © Maarten Wisse.





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**FIG 9**

Ground plan of the auditorium in Adullamkerk. Photograph © Maarten Wisse.

various respondents considered such a classical shape more beautiful, he nonetheless designed a fan-shaped auditorium.

The fan-shape in larger churches has to do with the distance to the pulpit. After all, if you choose a cruciform church or a hall-shape [zaalvorm], the sightlines from some spots in the church will be very



poor. That's what we want to avoid. So, if many seats are required, you have to choose a fan-shape, because then distances to the pulpit, which is the center of the church, are equal. Then everybody is sitting around the Word of God.

Thus, for Van Beijnum, aesthetic preferences and the usage of typical Christian symbolism was determined by the purpose of optimizing the hearing of the Word of God, which underscores that a material building as such is regarded as profane.

Whereas church buildings, and especially the auditoria, were certainly important for these orthodox Reformed churches to serve the mediation of the sacred, this significance nonetheless sat well with their profaning discourse on materiality. In the words of Jansen,

We didn't want to build a luxury church. We wanted to build a practical and functional church. And yes, it is nice that it has a beautiful feel, but it was not an end in itself.

In fact, paying much attention to the practicality and functionality of the materiality of the church buildings demonstrates its subordination to the higher purpose of staying in contact with the divine, and therefore confirms its perceived profane status. However, we also found a different and seemingly contrasting discourse related to church buildings, and even more so about bibles, which indicates that ambivalence about these religious objects seems to be present in this case as well.

### **The Bible in a Silent Church**

The general feature of these Protestant congregations is that the Word [of God] is central to them. I think that this centrality of the Word [of God], instead of the communion table or the building, fits with [the religious doctrines of] a [Dutch] Reformed congregation. (Huls)

The Word of God is valued over all other religious elements because "the Spirit of God can go with it," as Blok explained this mainstay in many Protestant traditions (Crapanzano 2000, 35). "Here, God comes in the raiment of His Word," the pastor assured his congregation during the inauguration sermon of the Pniëlkerk as well. The Word of God is hence experienced as a special means of connecting with God.

When using the phrase "Word of God," respondents might refer to God's speaking to individual believers, the preaching of God's Word, or the physical Bible as the materialized form of God's speaking. This multifarious use was crucial to the understanding of the role of the physical Bible in the congregations in Barneveld. The act of opening the pulpit Bible that took place during the inauguration services of all three church buildings sheds light on this. It started with the congregational singing of Dutch metrical verse 65 of Psalm 119,

How wonderful is Thy testimony;  
therefore my soul will keep it faithfully,  
for *the opening of Thy Words* will surely,  
like a light, illuminate the darkness.  
It will make wise sinful people, for whom the lack  
of such brilliance will bring an eternal night.<sup>6</sup> (emphasis added)

It is common that at the moment the congregation sang the highlighted phrase, the pastor opened the pulpit Bible, which had remained closed until then. From that moment on the pulpit Bible would always remain open (see [figure 10](#)), even on weekdays when no sermon is held. Here, the spiritual meaning of the Word of God and the solidification of these words into the matter of the pulpit Bible flew into each other, literally materializing the Word(s) of God as means of mediating the sacred.

This habit exemplified other practices concerning physical Bibles, for instance when we discussed the possibility of throwing away worn out Bibles in our conversation with two respondents,

Blok: No! No, I would never do that. I wouldn't even dare.

Mulder: No, that's actually a strange idea.

Interviewer: So, would you say that it is actually a sacred book?

Blok: Yes ... I would not do it.



**FIG 10**  
The pulpit Bible in Adullamkerk. Photograph © Maarten Wisse.

The reason for this way of dealing with Bibles was—as Blok put it—“a feeling of awe for God, who is in that Word.” Interestingly, the word “Bible” was interchanged with “Word” in this explanation of the meaning of the Bible. To underscore the religious importance of the physical Bible for him and his congregation, Mulder referred to Jozias Fraanje (1878–1949), an influential pastor in the Dutch Bible Belt. It is said that Fraanje once made the following observation about so-called “vacant pulpits,” congregations that do not have their own pastor: “But that [pulpit] is not empty at all; the Word [the pulpit Bible] is on it.” Thus, the pulpit Bible is believed to embody “real presence” (Orsi 2016), even if the spoken words were absent through vacancy, resulting in feelings of reverence for and a special dealing with its materiality.

Hence, in addition to a profaning discourse on religious objects, there is also a sacralizing one. The connection with God that is experienced through the Word of God apparently not only concerns words spoken by God or the preached Word, but also its materialized equivalent, namely the Bible. This finding recalls earlier studies on conservative Protestantism who conceive the Bible as the carrier of the literal and infallible truth of the Word of God—a hermeneutics that is coupled with reverence for the Bible as being bound up with God’s spiritual words (Crapanzano 2000, 4; Keane 2007, 193).

### House of God

As we noticed in Barneveld, however, feelings of reverence and awe were not restricted to the Bible. The auditorium was also experienced as markedly different from other spaces. Before, after and during the church service, people—decently dressed “in their Sunday’s best,” mostly in black and grey—tended to be silent and only whispered to each other. Our respondents even hesitated to make noise in the auditorium on weekdays when no sermon is held. The story of Blok, who every now and then needed to go to the church to pick something up, is telling in this.

Blok: I always wear wooden clogs ... [but] I dare not enter the church with clogs. I feel so much awe that I don’t dare to do that. I take my clogs off in front of the door, just as I do at home.

Interviewer: Can you explain that further? Why do you take off your clogs in church?

Blok: Yes, it is awe and reverence for the Lord. Probably, this is merely an outward issue, but I just feel it that way.

Interviewer: So, actually the building itself has to do something with God as well?

Blok: Yes: with respect.

Interviewer: But what does this building have to do with God?

Blok: It’s where the Word of God is preached. It is not about those particular stones; only [about] the respect you feel in your heart. Only respect and reverence.

It is important to underscore that the space was completely silent and empty, since the Word of God was not being preached

at the moment the respondent entered the church. Nevertheless, Blok felt reverence and respect because he experienced God's presence in the building. Mulder made a similar point by stating,

It [meeting God] is through hearing. At this moment, you can't hear it. But, yes, the Bible is here, so you know that you are in a church ... and this [the Bible] always needs to be open ... It is the opened Word that always creates something like reverence.

Thus, feelings of reverence for God's presence in the auditorium on weekdays were connected to the visible and permanent presence of the opened pulpit Bible. This opened Bible ensures that this space itself is experienced as a sacred space even when the Word is not preached, a position Smit (2009, 191–195) also found among Dutch Presbyterians.

During the inauguration sermons the pastors also referred to the role of the church buildings in mediating God's presence. The frequent use of the expression "house of God" as an equivalent for the church building referred to the Temple of the Old Testament, in which God was held to be present among the Israelites. In the inauguration sermon of the Pniëlkerk, the temple metaphor was invoked explicitly, since the central Bible text of the sermon—"that Thine eyes may be open toward this house night and day" (1 Kings 8:29)—was part of Solomon's prayer during the dedication of the First Temple. The pastor literally applied God's promise, "my Name will be there," to the newly-built church and assured his congregation: "That is imposing! It means that, if His Name is here, God Himself is here." The pastor of De Hoeksteen also referred to God's presence in the church building by quoting Exodus 20:24: "In all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee." According to the pastor, this means that "the Lord personally is coming to us," and "we will hear His beloved voice." He continued: "then we shall experience that we are on sacred ground ... a gateway to heaven." Thus, the church building is defined to become "sacred ground," because the hearing of God's words is perceived to evoke His presence.

In sum: for those Dutch orthodox Protestants in Barneveld, the Word of God is a central means of connecting with God. This is not a purely dematerialized connection; instead, it is established through the physically-present Bible as the carrier of the Word of God, and through the church building—and especially the auditorium—where the Word of God is preached. The reverence with which both book and building are treated demonstrates that these things do not simply have a symbolic meaning, but impersonate God's presence. On the other hand, books and buildings are not worshipped or in any other way treated as divine in themselves. So, in the Adullamkerk the congregation's old pulpit Bible was exchanged for a new one, because the pastor regarded the old one as "impractical," which demonstrates that God was not understood as being present in the old pulpit Bible. Also, Blok emphasized that his reverence for the church building had nothing to do with "those particular

stones."The divine subject, in other words, was not believed to be merged with, or locked into, the church building as if it were intrinsically sacred. Rather, the bibles and the church buildings can be profane and sacred at the same time, which indicates that objects do not have a fixed status, either profane or sacred, in the semiotic ideology of orthodox Protestants.

### **Individual Sacralizing**

Thus far we have demonstrated that we can discern two discourses on church buildings and bibles in the Dutch Bible Belt: a profaning discourse in which buildings and bibles are understood as merely facilitating the hearing of God's Word, and a sacralizing discourse in which the buildings and bibles evoke experiences of divine mediation. Although these discourses seem incompatible and mutually exclusive, the respondents did not experience their co-existence in that way. For instance, while Blok told us how he felt the need to take off his wooden clogs due to his feelings of reverence for the church building, Mulder who participated in the same conversation defined it in profane terms, explaining that he instead has a "down-to-earth" view of the church hall and "walks through it with a vacuum cleaner, a mop and buckets." Moreover, and even more important, the two did not feel that their positions were incompatible and contradicting each other. This is because the two discourses are in fact informed by a shared semiotic ideology.

This semiotic ideology holds that the divine can be experienced through material forms like a church building or a Bible if, and only if, the believer in question can relate it to a preceding personal spiritual experience. This was exemplified by Blok's account of his need to take off his clogs out of reverence for the church building.

It is God who brings that about. Sometimes a sermon is read or preached and God is in it ... When that happens, the building falls away. But if you have had a fruitful sermon, you will remember it the next week, and the majesty of God is still present in the whole church.

Past spiritual experiences like these transform one's definition of and approach to the material object in question, in this case the physical space of the church building—that eventually can become "holy ground," as Mulder remarks,

Our previous pastor often spoke about the Holy Spirit. That Spirit ought not to leave, for if He does, it [the church building] will be empty[...] Reverence is important: the realization that we are in church, in the House of God. "Holy ground," he often said.

The pastor of De Hoeksteen also assured his congregation that

If God is glorified ... if men are humbled ... if the grace of God is preached ... and if men are encouraged to live godly ... then I will come ... to that place I will, I really will come ... Then we feel ourselves to be on holy ground.

In both quotations a process of sacralization of the church building is taking place, yet it is also made clear that this special status of the building is only achieved if it is connected to a personal and spiritual experience of God through His (spoken) Word. This close link to a spiritual experience is quite typical for this orthodox Reformed semiotic ideology, and provides an understanding of when religious forms need to remain profane and when they are allowed to be sacralized.

It is important to underscore that the coexistence of a profaning and a sacralizing discourse among the Dutch orthodox Reformed is informed by its common understanding that material forms and spirituality might be linked at the level of the individual believer, which, however, is not something that happens necessarily. It is for this reason that Blok, after his explanation of why he experienced the church building as sacred, immediately added: "It is just my feeling, but if you would do it [wear clogs in the church], it would not bother me. But personally I won't." Jansen communicated a similar message when he told us that he personally did not experience God through the church building, immediately followed by "probably, others do experience it in that way." In these quotations Blok and Jansen both emphasized the centrality of embodied personal experience. In their cases, this led to diverging understandings of the sacrality (or lack of it) of the space, yet also to a shared recognition of the legitimacy of each other's position. The pastor of the Pniëlkerk expressed this requirement of a link between a personal spiritual experience of divine mediation on the one hand and the sacralization of material forms on the other as follows: "It is my prayer that you [members of the congregation] will experience in this place: 'Here, my soul is fed with delight' ... Then this building will have a special meaning." Hence, individuals are only allowed to sacralize religious objects if they are connected to an individual spiritual experience of the divine. This is why, as we have seen above, the pastor of the Adullamkerk told his congregation that "you could sit in a beautiful church building the whole of your life, but that will not bring you anything." Without connecting any matter to an individual spiritual experience of divine mediation, the building remains merely "practical and functional."

The coexistence of profaning and sacralizing discourses on church buildings and bibles among these orthodox Dutch Reformed believers can be understood, in short, from the prevalence of one coherent semiotic ideology that opens up the possibility of sacralization of religious objects if these objects can be related to a personal spiritual experience. Even though such a semiotic ideology can in principle yield the sacralization of a wide range of material forms, bibles and buildings are the most appropriate objects. Due to the centrality of the Word of God in these orthodox Reformed circles, the Bible—as the direct objectification of God's spiritual words—is obviously the most likely object. As we have seen, the same logic makes the church building, and its auditorium in particular, another likely

candidate. For it is this place where the Word of God is permanently present in the form of the opened pulpit Bible and it is this place where God's Word can be heard during sermons.

### Conclusion

Our analysis of the discourses on buildings and Bibles in the orthodox Reformed Dutch Bible Belt add to recent discussions on the ambivalence and instability of Protestant material practices and semiotic ideologies. In line with findings in earlier studies (e.g. Meyer 2012; Morgan 1993), profaning and sacralizing discourses on Bibles and church buildings turn out to coexist, and even to be compatible with each other. In addition, we found an underlying regularity behind the seemingly ambivalent attitude towards religious forms. The semiotic ideology at stake enables the assignment of a sacred status to religious materiality if, and only if, an individual believer can forge a connection between a religious object and a personal spiritual experience of the divine. This requirement for sacralization not only accommodates profanization of religious objects, but make a primary attitude of profanization of even indispensable things because any preexistent sacredness of matter would precisely rule out this personal spiritual experience. This finding suggests that a promising avenue for future research may reside in the comparative study of how in different Protestant contexts profanized objects become sacralized, and how individual spiritual experiences—which are so much valued in Protestantism—play a role in this process.

## notes and references

<sup>1</sup>“Semiotic ideology” is a concept introduced by Webb Keane (2007, 17–21) to describe the set of beliefs among a religious group about whether and how material forms can mediate the divine, and how good and evil forms have to be distinguished. We will discuss this concept in more detail further on.

<sup>2</sup>All representatives were male. We did not deliberately choose to exclude women. Their absence in our research sample is due to the fact that gender roles are very traditional in the Dutch Bible Belt. Women are simply not involved in the public positions of the building committees of the Dutch Bible Belt.

<sup>3</sup>The respondents used the “States translation” (*Statenvertaling*) when they cited from the Bible. In this article the

King James Version is used to translate these quotations.

<sup>4</sup>Another recently built church in Harskamp, a village close to Barneveld.

<sup>5</sup>As a part of the procedure to obtain a building license from the municipal council, the municipal's Design Review Committee reviewed the application concerning the appearance of the building's design. This committee initially rejected the application because they preferred a more colorful type of stone for the walls. However, the congregation's building committee deemed their choice for a natural looking, light-colored type of stone so important that they contested the decision of the Design Review Committee, and spent a lot of time to convince the municipal council. In the end they succeeded, and as a

consequence the light-colored type of stone preferred by the congregation was used.

<sup>6</sup>This is a literal translation of the Dutch Psalter of 1773, made by the authors.

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