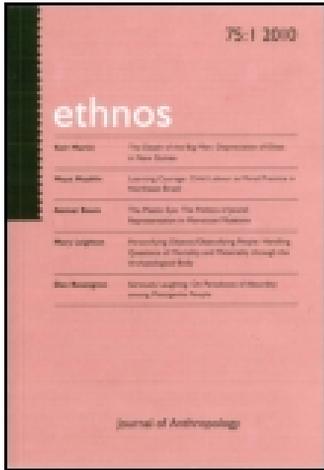


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From Sprinkling to Immersion: Conversion and Baptism in Dutch Evangelicalism

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ABSTRACT *Why do recent converts in new evangelical churches desire to be re-baptized by immersion despite their previous infant baptism in mainline churches? This article addresses this question through a discussion of the observed shift in baptism practices from that of 'sprinkling' infants (in Protestant mainline churches) to full bodily immersion of adults (in new evangelical churches) in the Netherlands. Based on an ethnographic comparison of these two baptism practices, I demonstrate the performative effect of rituals as well as the importance of connections between material forms, embodiment and doctrines. The call for different baptism practices, I suggest, illustrates a broader shift in Dutch Protestantism from a didactic to an experiential form of Christianity in which the encounter with the sacred is increasingly located in the body. At the same time, it demonstrates how religious authority has moved from institutions to individual believers.*

KEYWORDS *Infant baptism, adult baptism, conversion, embodiment, Dutch evangelicalism*

Introduction: The Call for Adult Baptism

Betty, a woman in her early thirties, was born and raised in the Dutch Reformed Church. There she was baptized as an infant; after getting married, she had all her children baptized in the same church. She had been a regular church attendee all of her life. A few years ago she was invited by a friend to attend a special service in a Dutch Reformed Church in another town. She had heard people talking about a revival, a visiting pastor from Nigeria and people being healed and touched by God. She was curious and decided to go. That night brought about a profound change in their faith.

I did not feel that I needed conversion since I have been a believer all my life, but still, I was changed. Before, faith was information, just tradition – not alive in your heart. Now I do regard it as my conversion, but that is quite something to say out loud. I have been in the church all my life, I have been confirmed, and now I am converted! I noticed that my church gradually lost relevance after the experience, and I felt attracted to the Pentecostal church. There it is more cheerful, they talk about faith and not about rules. I know, it does not sound nice, but I felt at a dead end in my former church. And then the issue of baptism. You have been changed and you want to choose baptism, but that is difficult. I called the minister of our church and decided not to ask for his opinion but just inform him about our decision.

Betty and her husband were re-baptized in the Pentecostal church while they were still members of the Dutch Reformed Church. A few months later, they resigned from their former church and started attending the Pentecostal church regularly.

During my research,¹ which focusses on conversion experiences in Dutch new evangelical churches,² the topic of baptism was a recurrent theme in the conversion narratives of new believers. As the majority of new visitors to the two Evangelical/Pentecostal (hereafter E/P) churches studied originate from Protestant mainline churches, most were baptized as infants. In their faith journey, which led to a new articulation of faith, I found that believers experience more conflicts over baptism than the process of conversion itself.

Newcomers' narratives often revealed heated debates within families over the issue of baptism; interviewees expressed particularly strong statements with regard to their parents. Fred, for instance, was somehow relieved that, due to his mother's Alzheimer's disease, he did not have to tell her about his decision. Marc even postponed his baptism until his parents had passed away. Clearly, for parents, who had initiated their baby's baptism ceremony in mainline churches, it was difficult to accept that their grown-up children, 30 or 40 years later, might decide to be re-baptized by immersion in an E/P church.

The issue of baptism leads to a number of questions. Why does the shift in baptism practices raise conflicts and heated discussions within families? And what differences in terms of the understanding of baptism rituals exist between mainline Protestantism and E/P churches? Moreover, the observed loss of meaning associated with infant baptism in lieu of adult baptism raises the following question: what renders a ritual meaningless, and when does meaning lose its interpretive salience? In this article, this question will be addressed in light of present debates surrounding baptism practices in Dutch

Protestantism. I propose that the conflict over modes of baptism is indicative of the challenges posed by E/P churches to Protestantism. The Protestant prioritization of words and texts, which stresses the mind over the body and beliefs over experience, is being increasingly challenged by other forms of knowing which may involve embodied or sensorial processes (Mellor & Shilling 1997:47). Moreover, the issue of evangelical baptism uncovers the importance of individualization processes in structuring the meaning of rituals. I will discuss how the need and call for different baptism rituals is related to an understanding of rituals as a communicative action (Rappaport 1999), focussing specifically on the role of the body in ritual. This call for ritual change by believers is also related to cultural and societal changes in Dutch society; and I propose that one of the main appeals of E/P churches is its focus on embodied and experiential forms of believing, of which baptism by immersion is a striking example.

In the following, I will first describe how baptism is discussed and performed among believers within the context of E/P churches. From there, I will examine the current situation with regard to baptism rituals in the Netherlands and will give a brief historical overview of Protestant baptism rituals. From the theoretical approach of baptism as ritual communication, the two distinct modes of baptism are compared, discussed and evaluated in the last section.

Baptism in the Context of Evangelical/Pentecostal Churches

I wished my parents were at the baptism service to celebrate the new life I found. But when I told them that I was going to be baptized, they could not accept it because I was baptized as an infant. What have we done wrong, they asked me. Nothing, I told them, can't you be happy for me? I found God and I want to surrender my life to Him. Baptism is part of that. But no, they kept telling me that it was wrong and gave me a booklet by one of their ministers why adult baptism is not biblical. They never said anything about my brother who does not believe anything anymore and has left the church. But in my case they cannot accept the fact that I have become a believer. We cannot talk about it. (*Marc, a teacher in his early forties, after his baptism by immersion*)

Nearby Amsterdam, I conducted my research in two thriving E/P churches. The churches hold three or four annual baptism services. Among the baptism candidates were new converts, young people from the church (as the norm is to baptize youth from their early teens and up) and long time visitors or associate members. Occasionally, the importance of baptism was mentioned in sermons, and a few times a year, a seminar about baptism was organized in the churches.

During the seminars, potential baptism candidates were presented with a teaching program on baptism that emphasized the relation between the 'born again experience' (or 'beginning of a new life') and the biblical call to publicly demonstrate this inner change by immersion. Symbolically, the meaning of the immersion ritual was explained through the invocation of biblical imagery; baptism implied the washing or cleansing of sins, identification with the death, the burial and resurrection of Jesus, and being added to the 'body of Christ' (understood as being the church itself). These symbolic meanings were also compared and contrasted with infant baptism during the teaching program. The concept of baptism as a covenant that replaced the Jewish practice of circumcision in Old Testament times – as is taught in Protestant mainline churches – was set aside as a misinterpretation of God's covenant with Abraham. The importance of confession preceding the ritual of baptism was underscored by referring to the bible where it says that one first must believe in order to be baptized.³ At the end of the teaching session, the responses and questions of participants revealed the widespread concern for how parents of those who were baptized as infants might react. Participants gave each other advice on how to tell parents about their decision: 'acknowledge the good intentions of your parents in infant baptism, and do not give them the feeling that they have done something wrong'. Those with no former church background could hardly relate to this discussion, as for them the connection between conversion and baptism seemed obvious.

Another topic raised during the seminar concerned the relation between baptism and church membership. Since most people were former members of mainline churches, the separation of baptism and church membership was new. 'Baptism', it was taught, 'is foremost an act of commitment to follow Jesus, intrinsically connected to faith rather than membership'. While baptism was portrayed as a biblical act of obedience and public testimony of faith, it was not a condition for salvation or means of becoming a full member of the church. At the end of the program, the participants received a brochure with a summary of the teaching on baptism and a registration form for baptism.

Baptism in E/P churches is usually conducted in the midst of the full congregation during the Sunday morning worship service. Candidates are encouraged to invite their relatives, friends and colleagues, underscoring the importance of their public confession of faith. In their sermons, pastors address the invited (non-believing) guests and encourage them to make a choice 'to follow Jesus'. In preparation for the ritual, the baptism candidates are asked to present their conversion stories in front of the congregation. The actual moment of

confessing their faith is enacted while standing in the large baptism font with the pastor and one of the elders. In anticipation of the act of baptism, the candidates are asked to answer the question: 'Do you know the Lord Jesus Christ, the son of the living God, do you know Him as your personal Lord and Savior?' As the candidate responds 'yes', the person is baptized by moving backwards and being dunked under water for a brief moment by the pastor and his assistant. During the act of baptism, the pastor utters: 'On the confession of your faith I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'. When the baptized person rises out of the water, the audience celebrates by bursting into applause.

Evangelicalization of Dutch Protestantism

A unique feature of Dutch Protestantism is the strong division between mainline Protestantism and evangelical churches, which is clearly marked by baptism practices (e.g. infant baptism by sprinkling *vs.* adult baptism by immersion). Historically, and in contrast to how E/P churches developed in England, for example, evangelical influences in the Netherlands have not been recognized as a wider current in, nor penetrated the boundaries of, Dutch Protestant churches (Klaver 2011). Evangelical churches operated outside or at the margins of the established churches until the 1950s. While in the nineteenth century, free churches were established, like the first Baptist churches in the Netherlands which practiced adult baptism, their influence and number were marginal and of minor significance.

With the rise of the E/P movement and spread of evangelical churches in the Netherlands in the second half of the twentieth century (Boersema 2005), alternative religious practices and ideas like adult baptism have become more accessible and visible for members of Protestant mainline churches, as Martha's account illustrates.

Martha, who is in her fifties, was raised in a Dutch Reformed Church but left it in her teens. More than 20 years later, she moved back to her home town and, because of the advice of old friends, started visiting the church again. Gradually, faith became more important in her life. Then a crisis hit the local Dutch Reformed Church: the news spread that the pastor's wife had been baptized by immersion in another church. A while later, the pastor left the ministry.

At that moment, I thought, now I want to know everything about the issue of baptism. Why is it such a big deal? I started to read and talk with other people, and slowly I came to the conclusion that adult baptism is the only true and biblical mode of baptism. Then the desire to be baptized emerged. I wanted to be baptized

too. I no longer wanted to be around all those fighting people, and I started attending the Pentecostal church. I no longer felt at home in my former church. And you know, baptism was the last piece of the puzzle, everything fell into place. When I stood in the baptismal water I could say that Jesus is the way, the light and the truth. It was a kind of enlightenment, being born again, because until that moment, it was very hard for me to say that.

While Martha has been actively involved in a Pentecostal church since her baptism, she decided against becoming a full member of the church. According to her, membership is not important and she is just as committed as others in the church.

The increasing evangelical influence on mainline Protestantism is evident in the rise of processes of individualization, a broader trend that has characterized religion in the Netherlands since the 1960s (Van Harskamp 2005:46). Together with the increasing mobility of believers across denominational boundaries – which is one of the striking features of religious behavior today – the authority of tradition is increasingly questioned and infant baptism is no longer self-evident for young parents. The motives people may or may not have against infant baptism are also not univocal. Some parents express their dissatisfaction with the timing of baptism and emphasize the element of free and conscious choice when their children reach a certain age. Others have biblical grounds to dismiss not only the timing but also the performative practice of baptism by sprinkling, preferring baptism by immersion instead. But more often, the desire for adult baptism is expressed by former nominal Protestants who have experienced a renewal of their faith following a conversion experience which may have occurred in any number of evangelical settings, such as conferences, retreats or evangelical courses like the Alpha course (Hunt 2004). Therefore, the desire to be baptized by immersion is often the outcome of the conversion experience as intensification of religious beliefs. In contrast, this ritual affirmation of the conversion experience found in baptism by immersion is not possible within the Protestant Reformed tradition. Those converts who have been baptized as infants are confronted with church politics that cannot fulfill their request for immersion as baptism is regarded as a ‘once-for-all’ event.⁴ As a consequence, these believers are easily attracted to E/P churches, where baptism by immersion is the norm.

The conflict over baptism is partly the consequence of the different models of conversion adopted in mainline Protestant and E/P churches. In the mainline Protestant tradition, becoming a Christian is foremost a process of religious

socialization (McKnight 2002:5). The traditional route is to be born into the tradition by being initiated into the community through the ritual of infant baptism and growing into the tradition through one's upbringing. This occurs within the context of the church and through the process of religious formation – enhanced by catechism classes. The confirmation ritual marks the fulfillment of the religious socialization process, as the participant makes a personal statement of faith and confirms the intentions and promises accompanied with the act of one's own baptism as an infant; at the same time, the confirmation ritual formalizes one's church membership at the time of reaching adulthood. This 'model of conversion' appears to be in stark contrast with the evangelical, decision-orientated approach to conversion, which emphasizes personal faith. Becoming a Christian is (ideally) demarcated by reaching a point of decision in one's life and relies on individual responsibility. This decision-orientated model is publicly demonstrated in the evangelical baptism practices. While conversion is understood as a private inner decision and confession of faith, decisive in the sense that it leads to eternal salvation, baptism by immersion is, in contrast, a performative practice regarded as an outer expression, witnessed by the public, of the inner transformation that has taken place.

This debate over infant baptism and the desire for adult baptism show that while religious traditions may still be relevant, people 'experience themselves as beings who make decisions and choices for themselves in the religious field, and who appropriate elements from one or more traditions on the basis of their own authority' (Van Harskamp 2005:47). Both the shift in religious authority to the individual believer and the emphasis on the bodily, experiential dimension underpin the impasse in meaning of baptism rituals between mainline Protestant churches and E/P churches. This leads to a further question of how baptism as a ritual is conveyed within the larger Protestant tradition, something I will address in the following section.

A Brief History of Protestant Baptism Rituals

The history of the Christian ritual of baptism makes clear that, in spite of the fact that rituals have the ability to give the impression of a certain immunity to change, alterations in practices and ritual meanings have occurred throughout the different periods of church history (Bell 1997:212). In the formation of Protestantism, contestations over the place and meaning of ritual formed a central issue in the battle with the Protestant reformers. The differences

between the baptism practices within the Reformed Church traditions and the E/P churches have their roots in Reformation times.

Throughout the Reformation, rituals were stripped of their high status, as evident in Catholic practices dating back to the Middle Ages. With regard to the sacraments, the symbolic and material aspects of rituals were increasingly distinguished in order to address the question of mediation and its efficacy in ritual practices (Keane 2007:78). The Catholic sacramental understanding of the efficacy of the baptism ritual as the 'removal of original sin' was denounced by the reformers, and new theological teachings on the meanings and particular forms of baptism emerged. In the development of the Dutch Calvinist Reformed tradition, the interpretation of infant baptism by the reformer Zwingli became authoritative. He linked the Old Testament practice of circumcision as an initiation ritual to the practice of infant baptism, basing his beliefs on covenant promises made to Abraham. Likewise, he argued, Christians should baptize their children by virtue of the fact that their children are part of a covenant community (Riggs 2002:24; Spinks 2006:32,33). Therefore, the personal faith of parents who offered the child for baptism was a necessary (pre-)condition for the ritual. Infant baptism implied a form of divine promise attributed to the infant that was to be appropriated through immaterial subsequent acts of faith and not in the material aspects of the ritual.⁵

In the development of Protestantism, the above-mentioned dualism between the material and immaterial aspects of rituals had a profound effect on the role of language in Protestant tradition, as is displayed in the primary function of ministers in the emphasis on text and speaking, scriptural words and preaching (Keane 2007:63). At the same time, the dismissal of material mediating practices gave rise to the notion of sincerity, stressing the inner state of the believer in terms of truth. As result, sincerity became the cornerstone of modern views of the self and of language (Keane 2007:186, 187). As Keane has argued, Calvinist Protestantism, seen in light of a larger historical process, induced a modern re-visioning of the self that had to be abstracted from material and social entanglements. In locating certain kinds of agency in people, and in assigning agency a special value, religion is primarily modified into a matter of concepts. As a consequence, Protestant ritual practices reflect an emphasis on the communication of religious meanings: transmitting messages by stressing words and language rather than the performative acts.

By taking this turn, Protestantism came to be an important force of antiritualism: leading both to the distrust of and aversion to ritual practice. This is not to say that baptism has lost its performative aspects altogether. The confession

of faith as actualization of the infant baptism during the confirmation ritual is performative in a strict sense: the very saying of a creed can be a constitutive part of the act of becoming a Christian (Keane 2007:70 nt. 14).

The turn to the individual was even more observed in the radical church reform movement of the Anabaptists in the time of the Reformation. Their understanding of baptism reveals a more individualistic nature as infant baptism was renounced due to the requirement that baptism be preceded by faith of the believer (Spinks 2006:85, de Vries 2003:84). Interestingly, while the actual mode of baptism was less of an issue among the Anabaptist, immersion as a norm gradually developed over time (Spinks 2006:91).

In spite of the divergent reinterpretation of the baptism ritual, the Calvinist Reformed and Anabaptist (being the forerunners of evangelical churches) both stressed the subordination of religious materializations to beliefs.⁶ However, different from how mainline Protestantism developed, which coincided with an era of modernity, evangelicalism was able to preserve more sensual aspects of religion.⁷ This is particularly visible in the conversion narratives encountered in this study, which serve as personal accounts of religious experience, and in baptism rituals as conscious, intense and performative acts.

By comparing the performative dimensions encountered in the practices of adult baptism by immersion against infant baptism by sprinkling, various different forms of embodied practices stand out. The emphasis on the sensuous aspects of baptism by immersion points to the importance of the bodily participation of the believer. Thus in contrast to infant baptism, attention is geared toward the body in E/P practices, signifying the evangelical importance of both sensorial experience as well as cognition.

Finally, Mellor and Shilling (1997:24) observe a recent shift and re-emergence of forms of sociality based on sensuous rather than cognitive criteria in the Western world. If the sensuous is becoming more important as a larger cultural trend, the Protestant emphasis on contact with the sacred through reading the Word of God, which primarily stresses knowledge gained through the mind, might lose its saliency. In contrast, the evangelical movement, which is according to Smith (2008) characterized by an affirmation of materiality, is intimately linked with an understanding of the human body as embodied spirit. Smith argues that E/P practices reflect a distinct epistemology which recognizes the affective mode of knowing and importance of active participation in religious practices. This resonates with the current, broader cultural climate wherein the body and the senses are part and parcel of the ways people relate to the world.

Baptism as Ritual Communication

Rituals can be seen as a testing ground for meaning; it is in ritual action that meanings can be affirmed or contested. Recent debates in the anthropology of religion have highlighted that the discipline's focus on ritual meaning has been influenced by Christian thought (Asad 1993; Engelke & Tomlinson 2006:20). The question of meaning has clearly encompassed a central theme in Christianity and remains a useful heuristic device in the anthropology of Christianity. Moreover, as Asad and others (Droogers 2006:28; Engelke & Tomlinson 2006:5) have stressed, as processes of meaning-making are also embedded in social processes, meaning cannot be addressed without considering how it comes into being within the context of power relations.

Rappaport in his book, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999), makes an important contribution to this discussion. In his theory on ritual, Rappaport synthesizes a performative approach of ritual, which considers ritual to encompass a form of communication. The novelty of his theory is the extensive attention he gives to the semiotics of performance as well as the messages laid out in texts, beliefs and ideas, as he stresses both the performative and the perlocutionary⁸ functions of ritual. In this way, Rappaport's approach is well suited to a semiotic study ritual within the context of Protestantism, as it brings together the central aspect of meaning and the performative aspects of ritual practice.⁹

Rappaport makes a distinction between two categories of semiotics: rituals convey *canonical* messages and *self-referential* messages (Rappaport 1999:52). Canonical messages have to do with abstract beliefs and myths and represent the general, enduring or even eternal aspects of universal orders (Rappaport 1999:53).¹⁰ By contrast, self-referential messages transmit information concerning participants' own physical, psychic or social state.

In his discussion of self-referentiality, Rappaport first stresses that rituals often have a performative effect on participants themselves rather than on the audience. During the performance, participants become part of the reality which the ritual aims to transform. In turn, the performative aspect of participation signifies – or is an index of – the performer's relationship with canonical messages. Rappaport states that 'there is a self-referential component in all rituals, but it might seem that in some rituals its significance is so far outweighed by the grandeur of the canonical that it appears trivial, [] . . . *in all religious rituals, there is transmitted an indexical message that cannot be transmitted in any other way and, far from being trivial, it is one without which canonical messages are without force, or may even seem nonsensical*' (Rappaport:58).

In other words, according to Rappaport, in order for rituals to make sense, the relationship between self-referential and canonical messages must be complementary. The latter requires the reinforcement of certain self-referential messages in order to be understood as meaningful. Material components of ritual are especially appropriate for the indexical transmission of messages, but the physical display is even stronger since 'the use of the body [] is a meta-message concerning the nature of acceptance – that it is the act of an identifiable living person' (Rappaport:153). Therefore, in the process of attributing meaning to ritual, Rappaport points to the importance of the body as an index¹¹ and a bridge between the canonical and self-referential messages. This resembles Webb Keane's concept of semiotic ideology, which is an approach to studying the interconnection between ideas and performative, material domains (Keane 2007:21). These two domains are particularly at stake in the discussion of baptism rituals. It is here where the interrelatedness of performative forms and doctrines is enacted, transmitted and debated. In the call for a shift in baptism practices, it is not by accident that the locus of the body is put forward as the connection between canonical and self-referential messages. While traditional Protestantism is primarily based on giving credence to doctrinal canonical propositions, legitimized by the power of tradition, this is highly contested in the current cultural climate of individualism and subjectivism. In turn, with their attention to personal experience, evangelical churches offer a more embodied, experiential and self-referential understanding of the sacred.

Canon and Self-referentiality: Infant Baptism as Communal Faith

In comparing infant baptism by sprinkling and adult baptism by immersion, there is a striking difference in canonical meanings. In the Reformed tradition, covenant theology provides an overarching conceptual framework of ideas surrounding the baptism ritual. Baptism indicates entering the space of God's salvation, which is synonymous with the space of the church. In the practice of infant baptism, children are born into a tradition and a community. In contrast to the emphasis on choice in the E/P churches, baptism is foremost stressed as God's initiative and a generous offer of grace to any new member of the community.

However, in practice this offer is limited and confined to former generations of believers in the historical church community, and therefore based on descent. While the divine initiative is recognized, agency is primarily embodied by the parents, who decide whether their newborn will be baptized; they are the

ones who receive instruction preceding the ritual. In terms of self-referentiality, it is not the child that consciously participates in the ritual but the parents, who speak for the child by uttering 'yes' in front of the congregation. The performative aspects of bodily participation are moreover indices of the parents' relationship with the canon. As a consequence, the baptized child has to fall back on the canonical communication of the baptism ritual.¹² Self-referential aspects of infant baptism are therefore absent for the baptized persons as infants, since they are not embedded in conscious bodily memory and experience. When growing up, the didactic forms of confirmation class offer a cognitive form of knowing which (also) stresses the mind over the body, as does the confirmation ritual itself by the verbal affirmation of the confession.

In the conversion narratives of E/P believers raised in Reformed Churches, negative associations with confirmation class were displayed. Although most of the interviewees were expected to attend confirmation class by their parents, only a few actually performed the confirmation ritual. For those who did, the role of tradition and expectancy of family stands out in their decision-making. These motives were also encountered in considerations over the baptism of their children. It is here where the breakdown of the church's authority and tradition, influenced by societal changes leading to increasing individualization, comes to the forefront. The shift in power balances from institutions to the individual has a profound influence on the lack of acceptance and inadequate transmission of canonical messages to the younger generations.

It is, in particular, the importance of self-referentiality on behalf of the parents that gives more insight into the strong repudiation of adult baptism by parents. Their conscious participation in the baptism ritual of their child, as a performative act in the midst of the church community and in the presence of God, imparts a significance to the ritual as a meaningful or sacred event. By their act of adult baptism, E/P believers force a definitive break with the traditional community in which they were raised, but at the same time, implicitly, they confront parents with the decision to baptize them as children in the past. Significantly, parents have difficulties talking about what seemed self-evident at the time and often refer to external authorities, sometimes suggesting theological books to children in support of their opposition. Here the transformation of religion taking place since the 1960s between generations comes to the forefront: a shift from a predominantly non-reflexive form of Christianity, expressed in collective customary practices based on tradition, toward a more expressive

and reflexive form of Christianity based on personal choice and individual needs; in short, from canon to self-referentiality.

Parents' negative response to adult baptism is experienced as a painful event by new converts, especially when siblings who have left the church are not confronted with the same strong opinions. According to some evangelical converts, this points to their parents' implicit conviction that siblings are regarded as being part of the covenant community and therefore within the reach of God's grace.¹³

Adult Baptism as Embodied Faith

In adult baptism practices by immersion, the attention is drawn to the performative features of the ritual, which go beyond the transmission of concepts and statements of canonical faith. The performative and participatory character of the ritual stands out in a twofold way: in the importance of narratives and the embodied practice of baptism. These two elements of the baptism ritual offer emplotment of one's life story and display the strong connection to the evangelical conversion experience. Baptism resembles the notions of a boundary experience which carries with it connotations of space, time, embodiment and movement.¹⁴

In terms of space, the baptism ritual takes place in the community of believers. But while this communal aspect is embodied by the presence of the congregation and invited family and friends, to the candidates, baptism is a highly individual event. In my in-depth interviews, hardly any reference was made to the meaning of baptism and the local church. In contrast to clear boundaries of membership in denominational churches, the boundaries of an evangelical community are less visible in formal criteria but far more based on a common vocabulary, rooted in the shared narrative identities of the believers. Access to the narrative community is obtained through the conversion experience, as expressed in narratives that display the presence and transformational power of God in distinct evangelical language.¹⁵ Believers' own religious experiences are not only recognized as a reliable source of communication but are also a source of authority and empowerment. They evaluate external religious authorities such as religious professionals, the Bible and tradition in light of their personal experiences, integrating them into a constellation of beliefs and experiences, as expressed by means of narratives.

The importance of narratives in defining evangelical communal space is strongly connected to temporal aspects of narratives. In preparation for the baptism service, the candidates are encouraged and asked to write down their

conversion story and motivation for baptism. During the baptism service, they summarize or read aloud their reasons in front of the congregation. In practice, the person gives a testimony of faith – often while standing in the water – in anticipation of the baptism moment. Through the narration of one's life story and the act of telling one's story, conversion as a process is being emphasized. By reworking memory, one reaches into the past to cast events in a new light. In terms of self-referentiality, in telling the story the believer not only recalls but also orders the conversion experience in a sequence of events, making it a temporally meaningful event.¹⁶ According to Ricoeur, time becomes a meaningful entity to the extent that we can render it in a narrative form (Ricoeur in Hughes 2003:165), as narratives bring new congruence to the organization of events.

The conversion narratives of new believers in the evangelical churches reflect a wide range of religious experiences in which the encounter with Jesus is being recalled as an overarching theme. In their motivation for baptism by immersion, strong references to biblical narratives are often made. New Testament examples of baptism, such as the story of the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip in the book of Acts, are mentioned, but more often it is the example of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River that serves as a biblical legitimating argument. By means of biblical texts, converts easily situate themselves in biblical times and contexts, making connections between one's life story and that of Jesus' disciples as the first Christians, but more importantly with Jesus himself. Evangelical believers, in their articulation of baptism, stress conversion as an encounter experience with Jesus. It is the identification with Jesus that stands out. The meaning of this identification is twofold: being baptized just like Jesus was in the river Jordan, but also following Jesus metaphorically in his death and resurrection. Next to the importance of identification in the act of baptism, converts memorialize and re-enact the basic structure of the conversion experience (Rambo 1993:129). The extensive variety of individual religious experiences is framed into a basic structure by the ritual of baptism which serves, for the convert, as an ordering device to frame these experiences as conversion. For the community of believers, the authenticity of the new convert's conversion experience is recognized and confirmed.

In spite of the fact that conversion stories tend to be articulated along a certain predictable meta-narrative pattern, when the baptism ritual is approached as a performative action, baptism embodies the basic structure of the ideal evangelical conversion experience.¹⁷ This type of conversion, however, is the exception within evangelical churches; it represents a desire for an authentic form of Chris-

tianity as is found in New Testament times, which is characteristic of the revivalist roots of E/P churches. While public narratives display the wide range of possible conversion experiences over time as a process, it is baptism by immersion – as a form of ritual communication – that metaphorically embodies the conversion experience as a defining moment: one enters the water at a specific time, and after a certain duration of being in the water, comes out. The aspect of movement of the physical body directs the attention of the spectators: the body has to move down, disappear for a moment and move up again. But for the baptized person, the bodily movement induces an intense range of sensory experiences: the temperature of the water (often experienced as cold), the body becoming wet, a speech act while standing in the water, being touched by the pastor and his assistant. And at the actual moment of baptism, the person has to surrender the body to the water by releasing muscular tension while going under and regaining control while moving upwards. During this time, the pastor and his assistant are physically in touch with the person, and as the convert comes up for air, they support the person in getting back on his/her feet again. It is the tactile sense which stands out in the experience of water baptism. Adult baptism by immersion could therefore be understood as an intense sensational form (Meyer 2010:751).¹⁸ Adult baptism appeals to an extensive sensorium, wherein an actively engaged body serves as the locus and center of the ritual. As Tim, a businessman in his early forties, expressed of his baptism experience:

It was totally awesome. I thought, I'll just go duck under and come up again, that's it. It was very special, wow! Water getting into your nose and stinging in your head, wow, but it did not matter. You already belong to God and you already are a child of God, but then it is official, it's like you have given your soul to God, and it is complete, official, like getting married: you have said yes, you already loved each other but then it is for real.

While E/P churches stress the public testimony of faith as one of the important meanings of the baptism ritual, baptism as embodied performance brings the content of the ritual into being and makes it real, as Rappaport has argued (1999:57). Together with the conversion narratives, the past is brought alive and the conversion experience is articulated in the present. It is in the act of narration that past experiences coincide with the actual experiences (Stromberg 1993). But by means of a metaphorical, bodily re-enactment of the basic structure of conversion, the baptism ritual has powerful indexical qualities

of linking the canonical with self-referential notions of surrender, washing off of sins, and notions of death, rebirth and new life. Canonical meanings are no longer abstract or expressed in linguistic forms, but appear as multi-sensory, embodied experiences, 'invading' the performer and altering his or her way of seeing the world.

At the same time, the ritual embodies the notion of the 'ideal' evangelical conversion experience as a template to articulate a wide range of religious experiences as conversion experiences. The performance of a meaning-laden sequence of actions renders an emotional and cognitive state within the ritual performer that is informed by one's personal story. To be baptized is therefore more than an outer expression of a pre-existing consciousness of faith of the believer. It is much more: through a convergence of cognitive and corporeal forms of knowing, linking mind and body in performance, the evangelical ritual of baptism has the power to make the 'abstract' real to the believer.

Conclusion

In this article I have discussed the disputes over different baptism practices in relation to conversion experiences of new believers in E/P churches in the Dutch context.

In the wake of the diminishing power and influence of mainline churches, together with the process of evangelicalization, the practice of infant baptism is increasingly challenged by evangelical adult baptism practices by immersion. Larger societal and religious changes in the Dutch context have contributed to this diminishing relevance of infant baptism by sprinkling. As a result of the observed shift in religious authority from institution to the individual, the call for adult baptism by immersion becomes a critique, in the name of individual choice, of the ritual practices in mainline churches.

In the Reformed tradition, Protestant rituals such as infant baptism reflect an emphasis on the transmission and communication of religious meanings by stressing words and language over sensuous forms of knowing. Following Rappaport's theory on ritual, the importance of the performative effect of the ritual on those choosing the baptism is a key area of concern. First, this perspective reveals the strong impact of infant baptism on parents who opt for infant baptism, which explains their resistance when their grown children decide to be re-baptized by immersion. And second, it shows how the different modes of baptism can, from a performative perspective, lose their saliency in changing constellations of power between religious institutions and individual believer. Through the act of baptism by immersion, believers publicly demonstrate

and enforce a break with former church traditions and communities. At the same time, they challenge and critique the historic characteristics and configurations of the Dutch religious landscape as they relate to pillars of faith communities and shared traditions of infant baptism. It also shows how new forms of community and modes of binding and bonding emerge which can no longer be described according to formal categories like church membership. Indicators for these new forms of communities are moreover found in shared esthetic and performative forms like narratives and bodily practices like baptism.

Therefore, the call for adult baptism illustrates the change in Dutch Protestantism from a didactic to a more evocative type of Protestantism; in turn, it signals the encounter with the sacred as being located in the body rather than biblical texts (Roeland 2007:201).¹⁹ Evangelical spirituality – as a conversionalist piety – entails a unique constellation of a Protestant ideology which emphasizes words, intentionality, sincerity and, in particular, the importance of the Bible as the Word of God. But at the same time, it also affirms the locus of religious experience through the senses in the body, staging an authentic and normative divine encounter. The baptism ritual by immersion reflects both aspects of the importance of narratives and embodied ritual practice; it is thus an expression of the inner converted state of the believer as well as a constitutive element of conversion by making the believer a ‘real’ believer.

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Notes

1. I conducted my PhD research on the meaning of conversion in an evangelical-seeker church and a neo-Pentecostal church in the Netherlands from September 2005 to June 2007. In this article I mention several quotes from the 50 life-history interviews with newcomers in these two churches.
2. Shibley (1998) introduced the term new evangelicalism in his description of non-denominational churches who participate in international network organizations of successful mega-churches, who franchise their ways of ‘doing’ church by international network organizations. They are contemporary in their use of forms and world affirming as is expressed by their music, dress, opinions on dress and lifestyle. Within this category of new evangelicalism, Shibley (1998:77) includes two types of churches: the evangelical-seeker churches and independent charismatic/Pentecostal churches.
3. This is based on the Bible reference in Matthew 28:19.
4. This category of ‘new believers’ in mainline churches poses new questions to the church order. This issue has been addressed in a discussion paper on the topic of baptism called ‘Doop, doopgedachtenis en doopvernieuwing’ (Baptism, remem-

- branch of baptism and renewal of baptism) presented at the general synod of the largest Protestant mainline church the 'Protestantse Kerk in Nederland' (PKN) in 2008. Among the different groups represented in the PKN, liberal Lutherans and strict orthodox Reformed protestants strongly rejected the possibility of 'renewal of baptism' as it would affect the sign of baptism as an exclusive once-for-all event.
5. Heidelberg catechism (question 69): 'Baptism as a divine pledge and sign are thus assurances that God accomplishes inwardly what the outer signs signifies' (Riggs 2002:80).
 6. It is important to note that Protestantism as a dematerializing form of religion has developed over time. As Van der Kooi observes: 'There is an element that has found little or no reception in Reformed theology. In the way that it takes [...] the knowledge of God has an involvement with the physical and the sensory which has been lost in Calvin's heirs (Van der Kooi 2005:199).
 7. Colin Campbell points to a parallel Protestant tradition of a Romantic ethic which promoted Arminianism, romanticism and sentiment (Campbell 1987:184,185). These Pietistic and revivalist movements recurrently emerged as a countermovement against established Protestant churches. The rise of the evangelical movement, having its roots in these revivalist movements, the emphasis on personal conversion and the attention to will, mind and body contributed to evangelicalism as an experiential mode of Protestantism (Bebbington 2005:148–151).
 8. When examining perlocutionary acts, the effect on the listeners or reader is emphasized (see Robbins 2001).
 9. One could argue that Rappaport's theory is informed by a Protestant understanding of ritual as he focusses on the question of how rituals begin to make sense to people. An ongoing debate in ritual studies is how to understand rituals, what constitutes them and whether they are meaningful or meaningless (Bell 1997:4; Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994; Staal 1979). Rappaport's theory works well in the case of baptism, I realize, but by taking into account the aspect of the body, I want to emphasize how the baptism ritual, as an embodied practice, constitutes new converts. In this respect I take into account Asad's approach of ritual via the focus on the body (Asad 1993).
 10. As Keane has argued, doctrines matter as they are not only about the world but also function within the world; this has implications of how believers act upon and relate to the world (Keane 2007:32).
 11. Rappaport's use of index is based on Peirce's semiotics of signs (Rappaport 1999:54).
 12. I suggest that other connections between the canonical and self-referential messages are possible; for instance, the faith practices of the parents – or the active engagement of the church community in the life of a believer, from childhood to adulthood. From the interviews, however, I was struck by the often heard comments that, although people were raised in a Protestant Reformed Church and Christian homes, many had never learned to talk about matters of faith.
 13. This points to the complicated understanding of the efficacy of the baptism ritual in the Reformed tradition. In fact, I often heard people say that they could not fully grasp the way the mainline churches explain the meaning of infant baptism. The far more simple explanation of baptism in evangelical churches stands in stark contrast with the complicated theological construction of infant baptism in Reformed Churches.

14. Cf. Hughes (2003:153), who uses the metaphor of the frontier in describing the iconicity of worship.
15. This is displayed in phrases such as: 'accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior', 'choosing to surrender one's life to God' and 'receiving the forgiveness of sins'.
16. During the baptism service, because of the limited amount of time, converts have to condense their conversion story or testimony to one or a few meaningful events and experiences. This contributed to the construction of conversion as a brief moment in time. In the in-depth life-history interviews, conversion stories showed a great variety and complexity in terms of how people became believers.
17. In an evangelical discourse, the ideal conversion account is often constructed along the story of the Prodigal or Lost Son found in Luke 15 and the conversion of Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9.
18. With this concept Meyer stresses the specific ways the spiritual and the physical are interrelated and draws attention to the importance of the esthetics. While the esthetics is always involved in the realm of religion, Meyer focusses on the ways the body and the senses are mobilized in distinct religious mediation practices as religious groups and traditions differ in their appreciation and evaluation of esthetic forms (Meyer 2010:749).
19. I acknowledge that texts also assume a form of bodily engagement, like reading or listening. Here I want to emphasize the relative difference in the intensity of sensorial bodily engagement in religious practices.

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