

Thomas K. Kuhn /
Nicola Stricker (Hg.)

ERINNERT VERDRÄNGT VEREHRT

Was ist Reformierten heilig?

Vorträge der 10. Emdener Tagung
zur Geschichte des
reformierten Protestantismus

Inhalt

Vorwort	V
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I. Hauptvorträge

Irene Dingel

Lehrer und Märtyrer

„Heilige“ in der reformierten Erinnerung?	3
---	---

John Exalto

Reformed sanctity:

Some observations from Dutch religious history	21
--	----

Andreas Mertin

Erinnerung im Wandel

Kirchengebäude als Speicher historischer Information	39
--	----

Judith Becker

Der Weg zur Heiligung?

Kirchenzucht in Tradition und Erinnerung	53
--	----

Hans-Georg Ulrichs

„... in schwere Bedrängnis geraten“?

Reformierte Erinnerungsnarrative im 20. Jahrhundert	81
---	----

II. Kurzvorträge

Mona Garloff

Irenik um 1600. Der reformierte Gelehrte Jean Hotman
(1552–1636) und das späthumanistische Projekt

einer Kirchenreunion.....	101
---------------------------	-----

Marco Hofheinz

Ethik der Erinnerung oder:

„Von göttlicher und menschlicher Gerechtigkeit“

Der Einfluss der Sozialethik Huldrych Zwinglis

auf Arthur Richs „Wirtschaftsethik“	113
---	-----

<i>Gerald MacDonald</i> Patrick Hamilton (1504–1528) Nationalheiliger Schottlands und erster „Doktorand“ der Universität Marburg	131
<i>Raphaela J. Meyer zu Hörste-Bührer</i> Erinnerung als Verehrung oder Anbetung? Die Religionskritik Karl Barths als Schlüssel zu einer relationalen Unterscheidung.	153
<i>Dennis Schönberger</i> Reformierte und Krieg – ein verdrängtes Thema? Ideengeschichtliche Perspektiven auf einen gewaltlimitierenden Umgang mit der „Lehre“ vom gerechten Krieg im Anschluss an den reformierten Juristen Johannes Althusius.....	161
<i>Frauke Thees</i> Erinnerung und Heiligung Die Abendmahlsliturgien Oekolampads	179
<i>Albrecht Thiel</i> Erneuerung? Wiederherstellung? Reform? Veränderung? Was meinten und meinen Menschen, wenn sie von „Reformation“ reden?	205
<i>Fredericke van Oorschot</i> Confessio semper reformanda Reformulierungen des Heidelberger Katechismus zwischen Erinnerung und Vergessen	215
Autorinnen und Autoren	227

Reformed sanctity: Some observations from Dutch religious history

von John Exalto

1. Introduction

The sixteenth-century Reformation, according to popular historiography, made a radical and definitive break with the Roman Catholic tradition of hagiolatry. An important indication for this radical break was the occurrence of the iconoclastic movement, which can be seen as an eruption of the new religious enthusiasm which swept through Europe in the mid-sixteenth century. Iconoclasm, defined as hostility to religious images, often followed by their destruction, derived from the rejection of the medieval cultus of images and thus of religious images themselves. Although the question of images was not a central theme of the Reformation, iconoclasm did cause, as Eamon Duffy (b. 1947) has written, “the destruction of a vast and resonant world of symbols”, a destruction of the cultic objects of previous generations. In doing so, it intensified the social and political divisions in Europe.¹

But Protestant iconoclasm was not a monolithic phenomenon; nor was it simply religiously inspired vandalism. Lutheran churches only saw a partial elimination of images, while in Reformed areas iconoclastic theology did not always result in iconoclastic policy. We find different modes of thinking about images and about the visualisation and representation of the divine on the spectrum of the Reformation.² We also have to realise that iconoclasm was a deconstruction of the iconoclasts’ own past, breaking images in their own churches. As Alastair Duke (b. 1941) has demonstrated for the Low Countries, iconoclasm was a way of testing the divine power of religious images by angry people, who were as yet uncertain of the outcome of their

¹ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580*, 2nd ed.; New Haven 2005, 591.

² Willem J. van Asselt, *The Prohibition of Images and Protestant Identity*, in: id. a.o. (eds.), *Iconoclasm and Iconoclasm. Struggle for Religious Identity*, Leiden/Boston 2007, 299–311.

actions. They were unsure of the power of these materialisations of the divine.³

The multifaceted Protestant reflection on images shows that the Reformation was not exclusively verbal and aural, but that it also incorporated visual elements into its worship and spirituality. Recent Reformation studies have focused to this visual dimension of Protestant faith and culture and have shown that Protestants created their own world of religious images, not for worship, but for reflection and meditation.⁴ Protestantism did not cause a complete break with the Roman Catholic world of visual images, symbols and rituals. We have known this since the 1980s, when Bob Scribner (1941–1998) published his groundbreaking studies of Lutheran folk religion and how it dealt with images of Luther, who was seen and portrayed as a prophet and a saint in a very traditional and Catholic manner.⁵ Moreover, Reformed Christians also developed their own modes of religious visualisation and cultures of storytelling that included dead and living saints. The image-breakers themselves became image-makers.

In this paper I will discuss Reformed sanctity; what it meant, how it manifested itself in early modern times, and how it can be studied. I will first make some general observations, then focus on Reformed culture in the Netherlands, and finally provide an example of Reformed exemplariness.

2. Sanctity and exemplariness

What does it mean to talk about “Reformed sanctity”? When encountering processes of exemplariness in history, my approach is not to analyse sanctity from the perspective of an ecclesiastical, normative definition. Instead, I will work on the basis of Willem Frijhoff’s (b. 1942) reflections, who studied sanctity in the cultural sense using insights from anthropology. Present-day forms of extraordinary or

³ Alastair Duke, Calvinists and “Papist Idolatry”. *The Mentality of the Image-Breakers in 1566*, in: id., *Dissident Identities in the Early Modern Low Countries*, Farnham 2009, 179–197.

⁴ Cf. for example Sergiusz Michalski, *The Reformation and the Visual Arts. The Protestant Image Question in Western and Eastern Europe*, London/New York 1993; Paul Corby Finney (ed.), *Seeing Beyond the Word. Visual Arts and the Calvinist Tradition*, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge 1999.

⁵ Bob Scribner, *Incombustible Luther. The Image of the Reformer in early modern Germany*, in: id., *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in reformation Germany*, London/Ronceverte 1987, 323–353; id., *Das Visuelle in der Volksfrömmigkeit*, in: id. (ed.), *Bilder und Bildersturm im Spätmittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit*, Wiesbaden 1990, 9–20.

exemplary life form the starting point for Frijhoff's reflections. Despite secularisation, the vocabulary of holiness is still present in contemporary culture, as is evident from popstars, football heroes and other idols, including veneration and other religious connotations. There certainly has been a shift in the semantic field of sainthood, but it does show the need for idols, the demand for models of behaviour, the management of sentiments and the search for personality.

This anthropological insight can help us to see the same processes of appropriation of exemplariness without church authority in history. Although Protestantism lacked explicit procedures and the official designation of people as "holy", this kind of sanctity was an interdenominational mechanism. Protestantism did not speak of saints, but certainly knew saintly living, blessed deaths, holy martyrs, godly persons and heroes of faith. The genre of the saint's life (hagiography), for example, shows a structural similarity between the Catholic and Protestant traditions, as is evident from martyrologies as well as from other forms of biographical writing. According to Frijhoff, sanctity in a cultural-historical sense means "the desirability of exemplary forms of life" and is "the collective manner in which social groups appropriate exemplary forms of life". Sanctity is, according to Frijhoff, not regarded as a supra-temporal category, but as a paradigm of desirable and exemplary behaviour, restricted to a certain time and place. In this sense, sanctity is an interdenominational phenomenon, not identical with perfection but "exemplary behaviour on the human level".⁶

From this point of view it is possible to speak of Reformed sanctity. In earlier research I focused mainly on the *exemplum* tradition, where exemplary forms of life are presented in the lives of saints, godly people and heroes of faith.⁷ The genre of the *exemplum* can be found in many texts that are part of a broad culture of religious storytelling. Long before church historians discovered this type of text as a serious source, ethnologists were already writing about these texts and their exemplariness, as the handbook *Volkserzählung und Refor-*

⁶ Willem Frijhoff, *Heiligen, idolen, iconen*, Nijmegen 1998; id., *Witnesses to the Other. Incarnate Longings – Saints and Heroes, Idols and Models*, *Studia Liturgica* 34 (2004), 1–25. Cf. for this approach also Jürgen Beyer a.o. (eds.), *Confessional Sanctity (c. 1500–c. 1800)*, Mainz 2003.

⁷ John Exalto, *Gereformeerde heiligen. De religieuze exempeltraditie in vroegmodern Nederland*, Nijmegen 2005; id., *Wandelnde Bibeln. Interkonfessionelle Heilighkeitsmodelle im niederländischen Pietismus des 17. Jahrhunderts*, in: Udo Sträter (ed.), *Alter Adam und Neue Kreatur. Pietismus und Anthropologie*, Tübingen 2009, 117–125.

mation (1974), edited by Wolfgang Brückner (b. 1930), shows.⁸ One important starting point for the study of Reformed sanctity is the conviction that the Reformation did not abolish the old world of symbols and rituals, but replaced it with its own symbolic and ritual world, in which many old traditions were transformed in a Protestant way. This is also the argument of Peter Matheson's (b. 1938) fine study *The Imaginative World of the Reformation* (2000).⁹ In the Reformation, the saints were no longer regarded as mediators between God and man, but this did not mean that they disappeared altogether. As the *Confessio Augustana* (1530) stated, the saints are the examples of God's grace; they can help Christians to strengthen their faith (CA 21, "Vom Dienst der Heiligen").¹⁰

3. Exemplariness in the Dutch reformed tradition

My study of exemplary lives is mainly restricted to Reformed Protestantism in the Netherlands, but it has unearthed many saints whose stories were also exported to other European countries, just as stories from abroad were imported and translated for the Dutch public. Thus there was – to give one example – the Reformed ascetic Jacob Jansz Graswinckel (1536–1624) of Delft, a *living saint*, who gave spiritual and physical aid to the poor and the sick in his city. After his death, his life's history was recorded by local Reformed ministers; Graswinckel was presented as an example of Christian virtue. Graswinckel's biography can be regarded as a Protestant hagiography. It is remarkable that his biography was later included in the *Historie der Wiedergebohrnen* (1698–1717), a German collection of examples, compiled by the radical pietistic author Johann Heinrich Reitz (1665–1720). I have found various Dutch exemplary figures in Reitz's collection, as well as in the *Unparteiischen Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie* (1699–1700) by Gottfried Arnold (1666–1740), which is very similar in spirit to Reitz.¹¹

The framework in which the Reformed perception of sainthood can be interpreted is that of the religious example tradition. In the first place, the *exemplum* is a rhetorical figure of style. As a rhetorical device, the *exemplum* is a representation of reality. The *exemplum* is a broad literary genre, a collective term for various literary forms. As

⁸ Wolfgang Brückner (ed.), *Volkserzählung und Reformation. Ein Handbuch zur Tradierung und Funktion von Erzählstoffen und Erzählliteratur im Protestantismus*, Berlin 1974.

⁹ Peter Matheson, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation*, Edinburgh 2000.

¹⁰ Cf. Peter Manns, *Die Heiligenverehrung nach CA 21*, in: id., *Vater im Glauben. Studien zur Theologie Martin Luthers*, Stuttgart 1981, 217–261.

¹¹ Exalto, *Gereformeerde heiligen* (note 7), 24–31.

a literary category, examples constitute an appeal to imitate and follow the virtues presented, although the example does not have to be followed in its entirety. It must be geared to the level of ordinary mortals, because saints and role models do not present the average moral norm. They are the embodiment of the highest norm that a culture aims at. The example can be regarded as the illustration of a model of behaviour, which is moralising and understandable.¹²

In the Reformed tradition, the example manifested itself in many forms.¹³ Thus there is the sermon example, the miracle story, the thanatography (description of a deathbed scene) and the funeral sermon. The Dutch Reformed example tradition underwent a revival after 1650. A possible explanation for this may be the fact that the Reformed Church in the Netherlands became an institution with a fixed role in society after the middle of the seventeenth century. In the sixteenth century the Reformed Church was in a state of persecution. Its martyrs were the principal examples. Later, a struggle for law and order ensued, with attention focused primarily on purity of doctrine at the expense of the pursuit of a godly Christian life. After the church had become an established institution, the question of the practical application of Reformed principles in the lives of church members became urgent. Examples could play an important role in this process. Spiritual biography and funeral sermons especially were frequently reprinted after 1650.

Particularly striking is the great importance attached in many examples to deathbed scenes and dying persons' last words. In the middle of the seventeenth century, obsession with death was a common cultural phenomenon. This obsession remained alive in the Reformed example tradition throughout the seventeenth century. Death was a reality and to prepare oneself well for it was considered to be of great importance. Examples of edifying deathbeds not only pointed out the significance of a Christian and virtuous life, but also provided

¹² About the example in general, see Peter Assion, *Das Exempel als agitatorische Gattung. Zu Form und Funktion der kurzen Beispielgeschichte*, in: *Fabula* 19 (1978), 225–240; Claude Bremond/Jacques le Goff/Jean-Claude Schmitt, *L' "exemplum"*, Turnhout 1982; Christoph Daxelmüller, *Narratio, Illustratio, Argumentatio. Exemplum und Bildungstechnik in der frühen Neuzeit*, in: Walter Haug and Burghart Wachinger (eds.), *Exempel und Exempelsammlungen*, Tübingen 1991, 77–94; Joachim Duyndam, *Hermeneutics of Imitation. A Philosophical Approach to Sainthood and Exemplariness*, in: Marcel Poorthuis/Joshua Schwartz (eds.), *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity*, Leiden/Boston 2004, 7–21. Cf. for a Dutch case study: Fred van Lieburg, *Remarkable Providences. The Dutch Reception of an English Collection of Protestant Wonder Stories, Intersections*. in: *Yearbook for Early Modern Studies* 3 (2003), 197–219.

¹³ For what follows: *Exalto, Gereformeerde heiligen* (note 7).

the model of a good death.¹⁴ Five functions can be distinguished in the texts of the religious example tradition:

1. *Entertainment and relaxation.* The written *exempla* served as a useful pastime and even as an alternative for the theatre, because they could be read aloud in the domestic circle. Some of them were in the form of a dialogue.
2. *Upbringing and education.* The example of pious Christians from the past or the present gave Christians a model of godliness to reflect on. Religious education was aimed at children as well as adults. Around the middle of the seventeenth century the first children's books were published: examples of a good death for young people.
3. *Introspection.* *Exempla* were intended to influence the Christian's behaviour positively or in restraining him from sin. But examples were also a means of introspection that could be used by a Christian to determine his progress in the holy life, to measure the extent to which he matched the example set, and to discover which virtues he could already find in his own life.
4. *Consolation and strengthening of faith.* The religious example tradition was intended to instruct, and to encourage introspection. In addition, it presented attitudes which could help people to guard against disaster. Self-control was the basic principle of consolation. It was also the leading thought in many early modern devotional writings, tragedies and farces. In this case the influence of neo-stoicism is evident. Moreover, the examples could strengthen faith, while the lives of the role models showed that faith would by firmness ultimately triumph over sin.
5. *Confessional propaganda.* In addition to offering entertainment and to its educational, pedagogical and pastoral functions, the example tradition also served as confessional propaganda. Various examples constituted "proofs" of the truth of Reformed doctrine. This function was dominant in some collections of examples. In these collections, "witnesses of the truth" from every century proved that the doctrines of sixteenth-century Protestantism had been professed throughout the ages. The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, had

¹⁴ Cf. Karl S. Guthke, *Last Words. Variations on a Theme in Cultural History*, Princeton/New Jersey 1992; Bruce Gordon/Peter Marshall (eds.), *The Place of the Dead. Death and Remembrance in late medieval and early modern Europe*, Cambridge 2000.

deviated from the apostolic truth. Catholics had their own examples, which claimed to show the exact opposite.

Thus the figure of the saint lived on in the Reformed example tradition, but in a Protestant form. It was merely the intercession of the saints that was rejected, because this jeopardised the uniqueness of Christ's atoning sacrifice. In addition, the idea of man as an *imago Dei* is important in understanding Reformed sainthood. In the early modern period, the concepts of *imago* (image), *similitudo* (similarity), *speculum* (mirror) and *figura* (figure) were seen as essential metaphors to understand reality. A "figure" or a "type" referred to its fulfilment, the anti-type. The so-called pre-images or pre-figurations who had lived before Christ, in the time of the Old Testament, pointed forward to Him.¹⁵ The saints of the Middle Ages were seen as post-figurations, a complement to the pre-figurations. In Protestantism, these post-figurations were held in high esteem. But they did not refer back in the first place to Christ Himself, but to Christ's pre-figurations. The Old Testament, therefore, played an important role in the example tradition. Samson, David and other heroes of faith were significant figures for early modern people, who saw them as warnings for the present time. Contemporary saints were more often than not modelled on Old Testament heroes.¹⁶ Reformed ministers and the stadholders of the House of Orange-Nassau, for example, were called "David" or "Enoch", and Old Testament designations such as "prophet" or "godly man" were ascribed to them. Willem Teellinck (1579–1629) and Theodorus à Brakel (1608–1660), influential Dutch Reformed authors of devotional booklets, identified themselves to a great extent with the Old Testament King David, as did Johannes Calvin (1509–1564).¹⁷

The Old Testament model influenced various aspects of life, such as children's literature, art, and the conception of the Dutch form of

¹⁵ Edward Peter Nolan, *Now through a Glass Darkly. Specular Images of Being and Knowing from Vergil to Chaucer*, Ann Arbor 1990; Herbert Grabes, *Speculum, Mirror und Looking-glass. Kontinuität und Originalität der Spiegelmetapher in den Buchtiteln des Mittelalters und der englischen Literatur des 13. bis 17. Jahrhunderts*, Tübingen 1973; Erich Auerbach, *Figura*, in: id., *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie*, Bern/München 1967, 55–92.

¹⁶ Cf. Johann Anselm Steiger, *Fünf Zentralthemen der Theologie Luthers und seiner Erben. Communicatio – Imago – Figura – Maria – Exempla*, Leiden/Boston/Köln 2002.

¹⁷ For Teellinck and Brakel, see *Exalto, Gereformeerde heiligen* (note 7); for Calvin: Barbara Pitkin, *Imitation of David. David as a Paradigm for Faith in Calvin's Exegesis of the Psalms*, *Sixteenth Century Journal* 24 (1993), 843–863; Max Engammare, *Calvin. A Prophet Without a Prophecy*, *Church History* 67 (1998), 643–661.

government. In addition to the Old Testament role models, the martyrs of the early church and of the sixteenth century played a dominant role in the example tradition. The martyrs were the oldest Protestant saints, who were time and again presented as *exempla*. Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498) of Florence was also numbered among them; as a seventeenth-century minister said, Savonarola was a pious, God-fearing and erudite martyr. It was mainly his anti-Popery that was regarded as exemplary. But his treatise on the simplicity of the Christian life, too, was frequently reprinted and received positive assessments.¹⁸

Alongside positive *exempla*, the example tradition also included negative ones. Cautionary examples were thought to be useful to restrain men from evil and to incite them to self-reflection. These negative counterparts of the Reformed saint functioned within the context of Protestant rhetoric against Roman Catholicism and against the Habsburg rulers, against whom the Protestant Netherlands revolted in the sixteenth century. According to this line of thought, heretics in doctrine must be heretics in the way they lived, and vice versa. Philip II (1527–1598), the King of Spain, who according to the Reformed example tradition died in despair, was often presented as an anti-saint in Reformed rhetoric. Another example of despair was the Italian lawyer Francis Spira (1502–1548), who renounced his Protestant faith and returned to the Roman Catholic Church. He felt remorse for this deed, sank into great desperation and died in this condition. This sixteenth-century narrative was reprinted countless times until the eighteenth century and functioned as a warning example in many sermons.¹⁹

Ministers made a great contribution to the religious example tradition, but were also part of it themselves. They were “canonised” as heroes of faith in funeral sermons. These sermons have many aspects in common; they belong to the same genre, which contains many *topoi*. The minister is represented as a godly man, a servant who sacrifices his life for the service of the gospel. He is a figure with the appeal of a prophet who issues serious warnings against sin and on

¹⁸ Exalto, Gereformeerde heiligen (note 7), 109–112; Bruce Gordon, “This Worthy Witness of Christ”. Protestant Uses of Savonarola in the Sixteenth Century, in: id. (ed.), Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth Century Europe, vol. 1: The Medieval Inheritance, Aldershot 1996, 93–107; for lutheran appropriation: Robert Kolb, “Saint John Hus” and “Jerome Savonarola, confessor of God”. The Lutheran “Canonization” of Late Medieval Martyrs, in: ConJ 17 (1991), 404–418.

¹⁹ Exalto, Gereformeerde heiligen (note 7), 147–158; M. A. Overell, The Exploitation of Francesco Spiera, in: SCJ 26 (1995), 619–637; Herman Westerink, The Heart of Man’s Destiny. Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Early Reformation Thought, New York/London 2012.

the other hand comforts feeble believers. He stands firm for the truth, but otherwise he is friendly and meek. This type of the ideal minister was modelled on the Old Testament prophets. A standard catalogue of common Christian virtues and qualities was ascribed to him. A component of every funeral sermon was the deathbed scene. The Christian deathbed was considered to be a confirmation of the Christian life, and evidence of the truth of the doctrine which the minister had preached during his lifetime. Some ministers were held in extraordinary veneration. This was the case, for example, with Jodocus van Lodenstein (1620–1677) and Theodorus à Brakel. The latter was a mystic who received visions and prophesied. Just as Lodenstein he was appropriated as a saint, not only in the Dutch Reformed tradition, but also in German radical pietism.²⁰

Godly rulers also played an important part in the Reformed example tradition, as well as being spiritual leaders. In the Dutch context this meant the stadholders of the House of Orange, who were often also supreme commanders of the army and the navy. In the funeral sermons preached at their burials, their heroic virtues were praised according to a uniform pattern. Just as the ministers mentioned above, the stadholders were modelled on Old Testament heroes. Their exemplary deathbed and pious last words were also recorded. The comparison with Old Testament heroes was significant. It corresponded to the view which the Reformed Church held of life in the public sphere or of the ecclesiastical order, of which the stadholder was one of the foundation stones. Church, country and dynasty were the pillars of this order, which was compared to that of Israel in Old Testament times. Funeral sermons on the stadholders, important sources for the example tradition, show an interesting shift. Before 1702, they were mainly based on analogies with Old Testament Israel. This kind of analogy was characteristic of the Reformed example tradition (ministers as Enoch, stadholders as David). From the year 1702 onwards, however, after the death of Stadholder-King William III (1650–1702), this parallel lost its importance. This change in the depiction of the stadholder can be attributed to the demythologisation of kingship at the end of the seventeenth century, which has also been observed by Peter Burke (b. 1937).²¹

But the Reformed example tradition also had its boundaries. Contemporary writers attached great importance to examples, but within the confines of the Biblical order. As a rhetorical genre, too, the ex-

²⁰ Exalto, *Wandelnde Bibeln* (note 7).

²¹ Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*, New Haven 1992; cf. Paul Kléber Monod, *The Power of Kings. Monarchy and Religion in Europe, 1589–1715*, New Haven/London 1999.

ample tradition is limited. Examples can be considered as a figure of style in “the rhetoric of godliness”. In this sense, they are preceptive works, based on the clergy’s highest norms. The question that arises in this context is who appropriated examples, and to what extent. Moreover, there were also important role models outside the religious domain, such as admirals and maritime heroes, whose lives were also portrayed as examples.

Gaining an understanding of the significance of the religious example tradition can nevertheless be of great value to a proper cultural-historical view of the early modern period. Examples played an important part in communicative networks. Moreover, they can be seen as part of the early modern Christianisation offensive, as well as of the Protestantisation process. The Reformed example tradition shows today’s researchers how the Reformation assimilated its Roman Catholic heritage. In this sense, the tradition presents a framework for a meaningful interpretation of the phenomenon of sanctity, exemplariness and godliness.

The early modern religious example tradition is a multifaceted entity of texts and genres. There are at least ten types of Reformed saints that can be distinguished in the Dutch text corpus: the Biblical role model, the witness to the truth, the martyr, the forerunner of the Reformation, the reformer, the prophet, the minister, the saintly ruler, the pious child and the pious woman or the “mother in Israel”. These types partly overlap each other. A number of types have similar characteristics, four of which are worth mentioning:

1. *A catalogue of Christian virtues*, attributed to many saints. In Protestantism, virtue remained highly important, even though it was no longer connected with the idea of earning salvation. The common Christian character of these virtues is striking.
2. *The value of a good death and of the last words*. As in the Middle Ages, the hour of death was considered to be of decisive significance. Reports of deathbeds of exemplary godly people and catalogues with last words therefore constitute important sources for the example tradition. A good death had to be preceded by a good, i.e. Christian, life.
3. *Modelled on the Old Testament*. The lives and deeds of the Old Testament witnesses of faith included important elements that were used as models for contemporary *exempla*. King David was the preferred role model, closely followed by Enoch, Moses and Jacob. These models were applied according to the requirements of the position, and they were gender-specific. Certain Biblical examples belonged to each type.

4. *Visions, prophesying and dreams*, supporting the message of the saint, constitute the fourth characteristic, which was in fact the least important of the four. For church leaders, the most common writers of the example tradition, these phenomena were not decisive in affording someone exemplary status.

The above may suffice for present purposes as a general introduction to exemplariness in Dutch religious history. I will now illustrate this outline by describing the case of a young adult girl whose story was a model for the tradition of thanatography in the Netherlands, and which formed a bridge between the text genres of the martyrologies on the other hand and the later exemplary tradition.

4. The chaste virgin of Naarden

The case is that of an eighteen-year-old girl named Abigael Gerbrants (1582–1600) from the north of the Netherlands. Shortly after her death, an anonymous account of her illness and deathbed appeared in print under the title of *A Testament or Confession of the eighteen-year-old Abigael, Gerbrant's daughter*. The 1604 edition is the oldest known edition; the title page and the printer's preface are followed by an account of Abigael's illness and deathbed; the text concludes with a one-and-a-half-page biographical appendix describing Abigael's life before her illness.²² The *Testament* must have been a comparatively popular booklet, as editions from 1609 and 1610 have also been preserved. Moreover, we know of a reprint from 1625, while a French translation appeared in Sedan in 1632. Several further editions of the *Testament* were printed after 1800 and were used as so-called prize books in schools.²³

Abigael's father was the Reformed minister Gerbrandus Jansz (1552–1612), who was born in Purmerend, a small city in the north of Holland of Holland. Gerbrandus was one of the so-called *Duyt-*

²² The only preserved 1604 edition in Ghent University Library (Acc. 1385): Een testament ofte bekentenis van Abigael Gerbrants dochter/ oudt achthien jaren/ de welcke in een groote cranckheydt lach aent root melisoen/ sprekende op haer dootbedde dese naebeschreven woorden/ hare speelnoots ende jonghe maechden tot Naerden/ oock andere die den Heer vreesen/ tot leeringhe ende troost der ghedachtenisse naeghelaten. Met de beschryvinghe hoe sy inde kindtsche daghen teghen haer ouders haer ghedraghen heeft/ ende een leer-kindt inder schole Jesu Christi vander jonckheyt aen geweest is (Amsterdam: printed by Joris Gerritsz. Nachtegael, 1604).

²³ For an analysis of Abigael's story in the context of the early Reformation in the Netherlands, see John Exalto and Leendert Groenendijk, Child of the Reformation. Protestant Spirituality, Young Adult Literature and Confessional Competition in the Late Sixteenth Century, in: *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 84 (2013), 313–340.

sche clercken, lay ministers who could communicate only in their mother tongue. It is possible that he had visited the refugee congregation of Emden, at that time a centre of Reformed life. Between 1580 and 1600, the Dutch ministers received practical training in “prophet schools”, in particular in Biblical exegesis.

In 1579 Gerbrandus became the first Reformed minister of Wasse-naar. Initially he may have held services in his living room, because the destroyed church building was only rebuilt in 1581. Around 1600 his church had no more than eighteen members. The number of worshippers was probably greater, however; in this phase of the Reformation there were many so-called *liefhebbers* or “sympathisers of the Reformed religion” who attended church services without being full members. From 1582 onwards, Gerbrandus Jansz served the Reformed congregation of the town of Naarden. This is also where Abigael was born as one of eight children from a mother whose name is unknown. In 1594, when she was twelve years old, the family moved to the north of Holland. But Abigael’s friendships in Naarden continued after the move; she possibly worked in her father’s parsonage for a patron from Naarden, because she was made fine lace and in addition worked as a nurse for young children.

Abigael’s friends from Naarden are mentioned a few times in the *Testament*. The opening sentence addresses itself to her “most worthy friends” in Naarden, especially “the chaste virgins, who invoke the name of God with us”, which means the young adult girls who belonged to the same religious community. In her *Testament*, Abigael implored these virgins not to love the world and to abandon their “great pride”. Two months before her death, she admonished them because they wore luxurious clothes. It is clear from this reference to their dress and the silver they wore, that they belonged to the upper middle class.

In 1598 Gerbrandus Jansz began serving the Reformed congregation in his birthplace Purmerend. In 1601 this congregation had only 47 male members, and the number of women will presumably have been about the same. This amounts to no more than 8 per cent of the town’s population. Gerbrandus Jansz’s Sunday services were presumably attended by many “sympathisers of the Reformed religion”. In addition to the Reformed congregation, Purmerend also had a Mennonite congregation and an extensive Catholic community. On 21 January 1600, Abigael died in Purmerend at the age of eighteen, after having been seriously ill for eight days. She suffered from dysentery, a serious form of diarrhoea in which the patient loses a lot of blood and which, in the early modern period, usually resulted in death for children and the elderly.

The *Testament* gives us an insight into Reformed spirituality during the first two decades of the church's freedom. In the *Testament*, Gerbrandus Jansz describes a model of spirituality that he sets as an example for the reader: everyone ought to live and believe as his daughter did. It is a text that is still influenced by the diffuse "evangelicalism" of the period before 1550, and that at the same time already shows marks of mainstream Calvinism. Four of the characteristics defined by the church historian Cornelis Augustijn (1928–2008) for pre-1560 Dutch Protestant spirituality, that is, the time prior to the crystallisation of intra-Protestant confessional differences, can be clearly identified in this text: a concentration on the Bible, justification by faith alone, the contrast between flesh and spirit, and individualism.²⁴

Abigael derived her great knowledge of the Bible from intensive reading; according to her biography, she read the Bible and Reformed literature "with great delight well into the night". She also paid her brother Johannes to read the Bible aloud to her when she was busy making lace. At the age of 17, Abigael made her profession of faith in church; at that stage she knew by heart the manual *Een corte undersouckinge des gheloofs* [A Short Investigation of the Faith] (1553) by Marten Micron (1523–1559), minister of the Dutch refugee church in London. The manual contains many biblical fragments, both texts and paraphrases. Nearly all Scriptural quotations in the *Testament* were from the so-called Deux-Aes Bible, a Reformed translation from 1562 printed in Emden.²⁵

The spirituality presented in the *Testament* bears an egalitarian character. Abigael's mother praised her for knowing the Scriptures better than she did herself. "Daughter", the mother said, "you have the anointing of which John spoke, you do not need anyone to teach you." To this Abigael replied: "Yes mother, they must all be taught by God." This quotation qualifies the usual image of law-abiding Calvinism with rigid enforcement of parental authority over children. The biographical appendix certainly stressed Abigael's obedience, but according to the *Testament*, in the Gerbrants family there was a relationship not of authority but of confidence and intimacy between parents and children. The roles were reversed, as it were, on Abigael's deathbed: the child comforted her parents and to mitigate their grief she confessed her hope of heaven. It was not church office or age that afforded someone spiritual authority and spiritual status, but

²⁴ C. Augustijn, *Godsdienst in de zestiende eeuw*, in: H. L. M. Defoer a.o., *Ketters en papen onder Filips II*, Utrecht 1986, 26–40.

²⁵ Cf. Andrew Pettegree, *Emden and the Dutch Revolt. Exile and Development of Reformed Protestantism*, Oxford 1992.

anointing with the Holy Spirit. The words “you do not need anyone to teach you”, derived from 1 John 2:27, gave rise to a strong “democratic”, or at least, egalitarian consciousness, implying a big role for the laity: children and young adults could also receive the anointing, which placed them on the same spiritual level – or even a higher one – than their own parents.

Our image of Abigael may be somewhat distorted because the *Testament* is for the most part a deathbed account, stressing the faith of the dying person and her hope of eternal life. The biographical appendix has a slightly different focus, however, especially in relation to the sanctification of life. The appendix gives her “biography” by describing seven acts of Christian faith or virtues: confession of faith, church attendance, prayer, Bible reading, Psalm singing, charity, and obedience to her parents. These virtues were not identical to the traditional four cardinal virtues and three theological virtues, although these virtues are also present in the text of the *Testament*. But the cardinal and theological virtues are not distinguished from each other, given the dynamic character of Abigael’s exemplary function. In this sense, the *Testament* forms a parallel with the *Devotio Moderna*, where a similar dynamic of virtues can be found.²⁶

Abigael never sang a worldly song and never used secular melodies; instead she sang the Psalms of David with delight. Her choice to sing only Psalms seems to have been a reaction to the secular songbooks with romantic lyrics that were so popular among young people around 1600. After describing the Psalm singing, the appendix continues with a description of Abigael’s charity by the giving of alms. When, lying on her sickbed, she saw her mother giving to the poor, she quoted Tobias about giving to the poor even when you have less than they have. The topic of excess in dress is not addressed in the biographical appendix, but in the *Testament* itself, as we have seen before.

Abigael’s virtue is clearly manifested in the closing sentence of the biographical appendix: “She never went out without consent, and when she went out, she did not look out for people of leisure, but for people who talked about the Word of God. Amen.” This quotation combines Abigael’s obedience to her parents, her avoidance of worldly youths, and her desire to attend religious meetings instead.

By portraying the exemplary conduct of his daughter Abigael in the *Testament*, Gerbrandus Jansz depicted a model of sanctification of life, possibly adopted from the Walloon minister and student of Cal-

²⁶ Wybren Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries. The “Modern Devotion”, the Canonesses of Windesheim and their Writings*, Woodbridge 2004.

vin, Jean Taffin (1529–1602).²⁷ Abigael's *Testament* is not a biography in the proper sense; it is an account of the piety of her illness and deathbed, and may therefore be labeled a spiritual thanatography (i.e. deathbed depiction). The text was written as a model for behaviour; readers could use Abigael as an example. This thanatography was written by the author in the style of a spiritual testament. The spiritual testament as a genre originated in the tradition of the Old Testament farewell speech, such as the patriarch Jacob's for example. Such speeches are also known as the pseudepigraphic testament genre, because they were written down long after the person in question had died.²⁸ The *Testament* of Abigael also bears a pseudepigraphic character: her father was not sitting at her deathbed with a notebook, but put together the story after her death.

Central to the pseudepigraphic testament model is a description of the key figure's death and last words. The purpose of the text is parenesis, inducement to virtue by means of prescriptions for behaviour. The pseudepigraphic testament model was known in the late medieval Low Countries in the circles of the *Devotio Moderna* or Modern Devotion, where followers of a beloved religious leader recorded their patriarch's farewell speech; the same practice was subsequently also applied to women. *Paraenese* also played a key role in the *Testament* of Abigael, as is clear from the portrait of her presented to the reader as a mirror and a model of godliness. This element also emerges from the prescriptions for behaviour given to Abigael's Naarden friends.

The author of the *Testament* was influenced in particular by martyrology, a genre that also originated in the pseudepigraphic testament model. Abigael's reading material would have included books of martyrs, and this will also have influenced her devotion. Her father had been raised in a time of martyrdom, and possibly told his daughter stories about the heroes of faith. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries martyrs functioned as shining examples of faith for all confessions. All denominations published their own martyrologies around 1550, which were composed from the pamphlet literature that had been circulating since the 1530s, complemented with stories from early Christianity and the Middle Ages. The ideal of martyrdom as a "living embodiment" of the religious community did not first appear in the sixteenth century, but was already present in the Mid-

²⁷ For Taffin, see Exalto and Groenendijk, *Child of the Reformation* (note 22).

²⁸ Th. Mertens, *Geestelijke testamenten in de laatmiddeleeuwse Nederlanden. Een verkenning van het genre*, in: G. R. W. Dibbets/P. W. M. Wackers (eds.), *Wat duikers vent is dit! Opstellen voor W. M. H. Hummelen, Wijhe 1989, 75–89*; F. Wiljaert a.o. (eds.), *Medieval Memory. Image and Text*, Turnhout 2004.

dle Ages, although it was often transformed and sublimated into ascetical practices. The willingness to die, one of the most distinctive aspects of martyrologies, developed from the medieval *ars moriendi*.²⁹ In this respect the Reformation did not represent a break with the past, but an accentuation of the medieval heritage through its stress on the Bible as the source of the martyr's salvation.

When religious persecution had ended and the Reformed church could be built up in relative freedom, a need emerged for religious models on which the new generation could mirror itself – in other words, there was a need for generational transmission of ideals and of exemplary lives. The ideal of martyrdom was once again transformed into an ascetical ideal of piety. The *Testament* shows similarity with martyrologies in at least five ways. First, just as the martyrs or “blood witnesses”, Abigail underwent physical suffering, which she bore patiently; according to the *Testament*, her dysentery was accompanied by loss of blood. Secondly, Abigail demonstrated firm faith, which did not waver even under critical questioning from her father. He did this to test the authenticity of her faith, just as the judges of the martyrs did. Abigail's perseverance was, thirdly, like that of the martyrs, based on her great knowledge of the Bible. Fourth, Abigail expressed her willingness to die. And a fifth similarity between Abigail and the martyrs is the girl's deathbed, which was a semi-public event, with various observers who were witnesses of her pious courage. The medieval deathbed was also a semi-public event, but it had a different character: devils and angels were visually present, the dying soul experienced deep anguish through the attacks of the devil, and good and dark powers struggled over the soul of the dying person. In the case of Abigail and the martyrs, the theatrical character of the last hour was absent: the destination of the soul had already been decided by faith.

Gerbrandus Jansz gave his daughter a place in the Christian tradition of examples, a tradition in which the “saints” lived on in Protestant fashion: the Reformation did not radically abolish saints. A distinction was made with regard to these saints between their *person* and their *virtues*. The person was not to be adored and could not be imitated, but the virtues that were represented in the example were deserving of imitation. Reformed Protestantism enhanced the *communio sanctorum*, the Christian tradition of heroes of faith and shining examples, and thereby designed a religious identity anchored in history. This went back, via the medieval witnesses of faith and the

²⁹ Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake. Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, MA 1999.

fathers and martyrs of the early Christian church, to the Old Testament covenant with its model of the patriarchs.

In his preface, the publisher referred to Abigael as an example: this booklet, he wrote, contains Abigael Gerbrants's Christian confession of faith, a faith to which she witnessed by her life and by her death. "I hope", he added, "that this [example, J. E.] will be fruitful for many persons, who at this time (God help us!) live in vanity, that they may mirror themselves [on Abigael, J. E.]." Thus Abigael functioned as a mirror of faith and virtue in the *Testament*, an age-old function of the traditional example as a means of introspection, to lead the reader to question his progress towards holiness of life and to reflect on his own virtues compared to those of the model.

The *Testament* is explicitly addressed to the "chaste virgins" of Naarden, which indicates the gender-specific nature of the virtues represented in Abigael's story. It was to these young women that Gerbrandus Jansz presented a model of godliness as an example for imitation. The model seems to refer to a future role as wife and mother: pious, charitable and obedient, with attention to upbringing, and especially religious education by means of the Bible. It is not surprising that minister Jansz addressed the *Testament* to young female adults: they were about to enter the marriage market and were the future mothers of the young Dutch Republic's new generation. In other words, their role as future educators or models of behaviour was very important for church, state, and society.

By telling the story of Abigael Gerbrants's exemplary life, her father sought to demonstrate that the church could be soundly missionary in character. His aim in writing the *Testament* was to win over young adults for the Reformed church. At the turn of the seventeenth century, many remained undecided and had not yet made a definitive choice for a particular confession, so the future lay open.³⁰ The age structure of Dutch society at that time was relatively young, making it highly important to win supporters among young adults.

The exemplary model of behaviour that Gerbrandus Jansz presented was innovative in more than one respect: not only was it a contemporary model (whereas the stories of the martyrs dated from fifty years ago), but the model herself was also a young adult. The implicit message of the *Testament* was that anyone who wanted to imitate the virtues of Abigael could expect to lead a faith-filled and holy life, and have a faith-filled and triumphant death. Just as the early Reformation, Gerbrandus Jansz emphasised the necessity of a holy life; this emphasis was probably due at least in part to competition with

³⁰ Cf. Alastair Duke, *The Ambivalent Face of Calvinism in the Netherlands, 1561–1618*, in: id, *Reformation and Revolt in the Low Countries*, London 1990, 269–293.

the Mennonites. Gerbrandus Jansz wanted to show that early Calvinism gave equal weight to true doctrine and to a pious life.

5. Conclusion

It might be said by way of conclusion that looking outside normative ecclesiastical boundaries reveals the presence in early modern Protestantism of modes of sanctity and exemplariness. Using anthropological insights, it is possible to speak of “Reformed saints”. These Reformed saints are best characterised as heroes of faith. This is what the language of those days reveals, a type of hero derived from the Old Testament and that is particularly evident in the examples of the martyr, the minister and the godly ruler. But Reformed saints were not just heroes, they were heroes of faith, because it was only God’s grace that had made heroes of them. There are two points that distinguish the Reformed heroes of faith from the Roman Catholic saints: the former were never given an intercessory function, and miracles only played a secondary part in their “canonsation”. Moreover, the virtues of the Reformed saints were not catalogued so as to suggest that they had merited salvation; distinctive characteristics for Catholic saints. But apart from these differences, there are many striking similarities between the Catholic and the Reformed saints of the early modern period.