

# VU Research Portal

## In de gunst bij het hele volk

Visser, C.M.

2013

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Visser, C. M. (2013). *In de gunst bij het hele volk: Evangelicalen, religie en de civil society*.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

## SummaryF

Evangelicals form a fast-growing group, considered on a global level. There are approximately 545 million Evangelicals worldwide, i.e. nearly 8% of the world population. This raises the question as how this group of believers relates to society. The question is interesting since the answer is defined by two paradoxes (according to Evangelicals) of contrasts (according to a great number of social scientists).

The first paradox or contrast deals with the issue of whether a person may be oriented towards the supernatural and earthly matters concurrently. This paradox is displayed in the painting entitled *Micah 6-8*, as depicted on the cover of this book. The second paradox is implied in the book's title *Having favor with all the people* (American Standard Version, in Dutch: *In de gunst bij het hele volk*). This is a quotation from the Bible, the Book of Acts, which shows that the first Christians were 'having favor with all the people', because of (paradox) or in spite of (contrast) the fact that they were oriented both towards their own community and towards God.

The purpose of this thesis is to contribute to the development of theory concerning the connection between religion and civil society, by means of scientific research into the attitude of Evangelicals in the civil society.

The thesis focuses on the following three research questions:

1. What kind of attitude do Evangelicals assume in the civil society?
2. How can this attitude be explained sociologically?
3. What do the answers to the first two questions suggest about the connection between religion and civil society and about the method by which the connection has been analyzed theoretically?

This research can be characterized by an hourglass structure. It starts out broad, with a comparison of current approaches to religion and civil society. Next, the research is intensified, by the outlining of a new theory on, as well as the composition of a number of expectations regarding the attitude of Evangelicals in the civil society. The smaller part of the hourglass consists of the case studies in three countries: Kenya, The Netherlands and Brazil. Based on these case studies, the hourglass broadens, as the theory and the expectations are fine-tuned. Finally, the broadest part of the hourglass consists of the conclusions about civil society and religion in general.

The nature of this research is socio-theoretically; it discusses the testing of current theories and the proposition of adaptations to these theories. Hence, this is also an exploratory research: it discusses both a large and diverse group of believers, the Evangelicals, by case studies in three countries on three different continents.

The term 'Evangelicals' is used as an umbrella concept in this thesis. Evangelicals are Christians who are characterized by four features: conversion (conversionism), activism, authority of Scripture (Biblicism) and emphasis on Jesus' death by crucifixion as the essential and sole means for the pardoning of sins (crucicentrism). 'Civil society' is defined as the social domain in which citizens voluntarily become organized in associations and relational networks in

order to achieve common interests and/or the interest of others (chapter 1).

The potential relevance of this research emerges from the conclusion presented in chapter 2: secularization is not a phenomenon that occurs anytime, anywhere. On the contrary, there is no secularization in terms of an overall decline of the number of followers of a religion, or in terms of the privatization of religions. There is evidence that religions and believers are not just present in society, but they are able to deprivatize in modern societies as well. This act of deprivatization may also apply to Evangelicals. Secondly, chapter 2 concludes that Evangelicals are not *world rejecting* or *otherworldly*, by definition. Moreover, even when they are world rejecting or otherworldly, this does not need to be accompanied by withdrawal from society. It appears that being oriented towards the supernatural as well as towards the present moment may occur concurrently.

Chapter 3 outlines various theories that are helpful in interpreting the connection between religion and civil society. The first is an approach that assumes that religion is a reservoir of social or moral capital formation, then there is an approach of religion in terms of religious economy and the third approach considers the social implications of religion particularly as the constitution of free space respectively. Although each approach contains elements that are helpful in analyzing the attitude of Evangelicals, the free space approach appears to be the most useful. In the first place, because this approach explicitly applies to Evangelicals and secondly, as this approach leaves room for elements of the social capital approach as well as for elements of the approach of religion in terms of 'religious economy'.

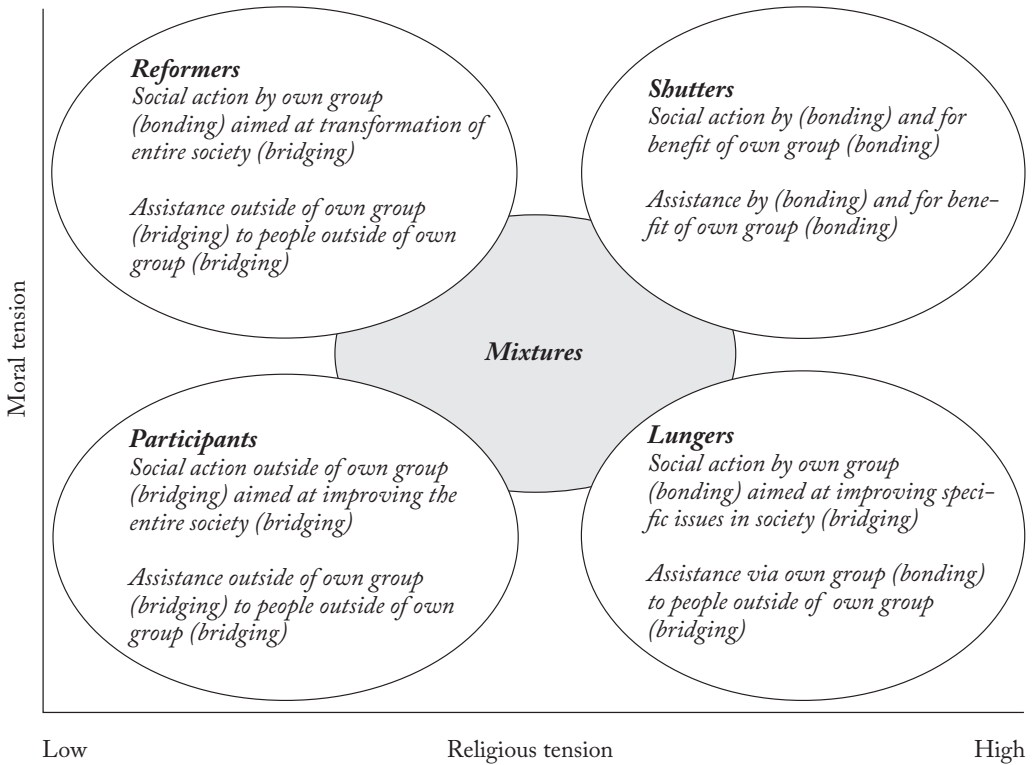
Based on the free space approach and the additions thereto, the outlines of the free space theory are drawn (chapter 4). The free space theory reads as follows: Evangelicals create a space, in which communities with their own system of conventions, empower committed members to develop activities in society, by the activities of the religious communities themselves and by means of the teaching of responsibilities and skills. The size and the boundaries of this space are determined by the social context.

From this theory, a number of expectations may be deduced:

1. Evangelicals create free space, in which local religious communities play an important role.
2. Evangelicals are empowered within this free space to be engaged in the civil society. Empowerment – the fact that Evangelicals teach skills and responsibilities within their own group – is the connection between the creation of free space and the development of activities within in the civil society.
3. This empowerment results in mutual assistance, at least.
4. What this empowerment may bring about additionally – i.e. social action and focus on the own group or on society as a whole - depends on moral and religious tension. Moral tension is the difference in patterns of principles and values that may occur between Evangelicals and other groups within society; religious tension is the degree of exclusivity of a religious movement. Depending on the moral and religious tension, the attitude of Evangelicals may be characterized as 'Participants', 'Reformers', 'Shutters' and 'Lungers' (c.f. to lunge); see diagram 1 below.

*Summary: Having favor with all the people, evangelicals, religion and the civil society*

*Diagram 1: Typology of attitudes of Evangelicals, based on moral and religious tension*



The theory and the expectations have been reviewed in case studies conducted within three countries. Such a cross-cultural comparison takes account of the significance of the social context and of the fact that Evangelicals constitute a global movement. The research has been conducted in Kenya (chapter 5), The Netherlands (chapter 6) and Brazil (chapter 7) respectively. These three countries differ in their cultural and religious backgrounds and in the stage of development of Evangelicals. The study of the attitude of Evangelicals in these countries has been conducted over three tracks: by literature study of Evangelicals in the corresponding countries, by analysis of available statistical information and by research into two organizations which are representative of Evangelicals in these countries, i.e. the Evangelical Alliance (EA) and the national branches of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES). The interviews with people involved with these organizations and the analysis of documents of the two organizations not only give an idea of the attitude these organizations favor, but also an idea of how this attitude is related to that of Evangelicals in general (chapter 4).

The case studies show that the expectations about the attitude of Evangelicals in the civil society in the three countries studied have proven to be partially correct. Two important con-



The Netherlands may be characterized as Shuttters. Until recently, the same applied to the Pentecostal movement in Brazil. When the perceived group size slightly increases, a high degree of self-organization remains and the members participate in social action to a limited extent. Social action will be applied highly targeted on specific topics. These are either topics by which one may have a chance to bring about change, or topics that are very important to Evangelicals (micro-ethical topics, such as abortion and euthanasia). This category of 'Lungers' is best suited to Evangelicals from Brazil. Once the perceived group size increases, the social aspirations rise, or to rephrase it: Evangelicals notice that they may play a positive role in society. Social action is used widely, to transform or reform the entire society, primarily starting from their own organizations. The IFES organizations in Kenya and Brazil are on this track of Reformers. In case of a very high perceived group size, the degree of organization within one's own circle is small, since society includes a relatively large number of Evangelicals and one will naturally encounter other Evangelicals in different contexts. The commitment is particularly aimed at assistance, social action is less necessary, since society is already 'evangelical'. Evangelicals who assume this attitude are considered 'Participants'. Groups of Evangelicals in Kenya incline towards this attitude.

Related to the expectations previously distinguished, there is yet a fifth type of Evangelicals, namely the 'Presenters'. When the perceived group size is very low, it is to be expected that Evangelicals will believe there are few issues left to defend. Consequently, Evangelicals will organize themselves less within their own groups, but they will try to improve society by social action via other organizations. A large part of the Evangelicals in The Netherlands is moving towards the direction of the Presenters. As appears from this description, the boundaries of these five groups are not strict and within a given country, different attitudes of Evangelicals may occur.

Following the conclusion about the perceived group size, two more conclusions about the attitude of Evangelicals may be drawn. The fourth conclusion is about the great impact of the social context on the attitude of the Evangelicals. It is the social context, which determines the size and the boundaries of the free space. This has become visible in the legacy of a culture once dominated by the Roman Catholic Church and patronage in Brazil, in the influence of the *civic* and *primordial public* in Kenya and in the effects of denominationalism or 'pillarization' in The Evangelical Netherlands. The attitude Evangelicals assume in the civil society in Kenya, The Netherlands and Brazil is more like the attitude of their compatriots, than that of fellow believers in other countries.

A fifth and final conclusion is there is evidence that the religious conviction affects the attitude of Evangelicals in two ways. First, it affects by ways of the evangelical elite (for instance IFES and EA) that explicitly searches for connections between faith, Bible and one's attitude within society. The convictions and the commitment of this elite may affect larger groups. A second continued effect of religious conviction is the emphasis Evangelicals put on local religious communities. Particularly, being a religious community has consequences on their members' attitudes regarding empowerment in general.

In broad terms, the expectations remain the same, but in the matter of the perceived group size in particular, the expectations need to be adapted. The outlines of the theory on free space remain largely similar. However, the following comparison between the former outlines and the new outlines shows that several alterations occur.

Outlines of free space theory (former)	Outlines of free space theory (new)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Evangelicals create a space</li> <li>-in which communities</li> <li>-with a personal system of conventions</li> <li>-empower committed members</li> <li>-to develop activities within society</li> <li>-by the activities of the religious communities themselves</li> <li>-and by means of the teaching of responsibilities and skills</li> <li>-and whose size and boundaries are determined by the social context.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Evangelicals create a space</li> <li>-in which within communities</li> <li>-members are empowered</li> <li>-to be active within society</li> <li>-by means of the teaching of responsibilities and skills</li> <li>-and whose size and boundaries are determined by the social context (social and political freedoms and the combination of religious conviction and embedding within an international religious movement)</li> <li>-and of which the nature of activities are determined by the perceived group size.</li> </ul>

These five conclusions and the adaption of the outlines of the free space theory provide an answer to the first two questions of the thesis: What kind of attitude do Evangelicals assume and how may this attitude be explained.

The third research question addresses the consequences the answers to these two questions will have on the connection between religion and civil society in general. The first and most important conclusion is religious communities are essential to the attitude of believers. As greater importance is attached to local religious communities within a religious movement, such as is found among Evangelicals, the abovementioned outlines of the free space theory will apply to that movement as well. A second conclusion is that the issue is not so much about whether these communities create *bridging* social capital (relationships outside of one's own community) or create *bonding* social capital (relationships within one's own community), but about the circumstances in which the social capital will flow over the rims of the community. The fact that *bonding* social capital need not remain within the own community, is evident from the action of the first Christian community from the Book of Acts, chapter 2. This community was internally oriented, but it took care of the poor and it was 'having favor of all the people'. This paradox provides the title of this thesis. Furthermore, it is probable that, regarding the attitude of believers of any kind of religious movement, both the perceived group size and the social context will have an impact on the attitude assumed within the civil society.

These conclusions concerning Evangelicals and believers in general show that the attitude of believers depends on different factors. What is more, it may very well be the case that believers combine two seeming opposites after all, such as their orientation towards the supernatural as well as towards this world. This thesis shows that paradoxes are there to be explored and, furthermore, that both believers and social scientist sometimes need to acquiesce in *seeming* contradictions. For without paradoxes, science, faith and life will be less exciting, and as a result less interesting.