Nature and Neighbours in the Netherlands: Talking with *Doopsgezinde* Farmers about the Environment

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Introduction

While Mennonites in North and South America have been the subject of extensive study, Anabaptists of Western Europe have received comparatively little attention. In the Netherlands in particular, Mennonites of the Golden Age have been extensively studied, but few sociological or ethnographic studies have been undertaken of their contemporary descendants, the *Doopsgezinden*. The reason for this scholarly disparity may be that the Dutch Doopsgezinden, unlike other Anabaptist/Mennonite groups in other continents, do not have a history of agriculture or rural existence at the root of their group identifications. Both today and in the past, many Mennonite groups internationally have contemplated a history that contests modern ways and venerates rural society. The pages of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* bear ample testimony to such views among many Mennonite migrants within Europe and the Americas (see Toews 1988; Horner Shenton, 2017). In contrast,

Doopsgezinde communities in the Netherlands today do not celebrate a history of migration or one centered on farming as a way of life, and have long been integrated in mainstream society. The professional lives of the minority of Doopsgezinde in the Netherlands who do farm, are more often shaped by their interaction with non-Doopsgezinden farm neighbours than with members of their own church.

Farmers, whether Doopsgezinden or non-Doopsgezinden, have found themselves in a constantly changing agricultural system. As farmers they have been in a state of continual negotiation relative to the technologies, policies and land uses in which farmers are networked. Van der Ploeg (1999) writes of the "virtual farmer" that has been created in the Netherlands by the explosion of policymaking and the number of people talking about agriculture. He argues that the expert system surrounding agriculture creates more problems than it solves because it bases its policies on a fictive image of the farmer rather than on real farmers with their actual concerns. Thus, farmers need to deal not only with farm work but also with perceptions and expectations of other social actors and with the ramifications these opinions have for their work. The growing public perception of agriculture's perceived negative environmental effects, for example, has figured prominently in the individual farmer's thinking as each considers their role within the system.

Perhaps the Doopsgezinde are not historically identified as a farming people or community, but there are nevertheless Doopsgezinde farmers. As such, they face the issue of the perception of the effects of their farming practices on the environment, in part because this is the lot of every farmer. But they face this issue for another reason. Based on their generally progressive viewpoints and high education levels (see Vliegen 2007), environmental concerns are an issue for a significant number of Doopsgezinden . I suggest, therefore, that a pertinent way of investigating farming and faith in the Dutch context is to ask whether a farmer's identity as Doopsgezind is connected to their concern that their farming methods may affect the environment. In this paper I report on a number of interviews conducted in the 'Seven Points on Earth' oral history research project described in the foreword of this issue. In these interviews I explore farmers' perspectives on what constitutes being Doopsgezind and what it means to farm, and what is an acceptable overlap for them between these two parts of their lives.

Approach

In 2015 I interviewed ten farmers in Friesland, generous women and men who took the time to talk with me, a non-farming professional from the city. During the interviews I listened for their perspectives and memories of changing farming practices over time, but I was also interested in their current interpretations of farming and being Doopsgezind. Thus, the project was both historical and sociological in nature, with the latter being a particular sociological method that views social practice as being achieved locally and cooperatively (see, for examples, Garfinkel, 1967; Livingston 1987, ten Have and Psathas, 1995). In such a framework, the discussion unfolds with the researcher as a full participant in the social achievement of the conversation. I have chosen three of the ten interviews to draw upon, in part because of space constraints, but also because these proved to be most suitable for showing the *in situ* practice of "talking about farming and religious identity." Thus, my focus is on what these interviews reveal about the *possibility* of conversing about farming and the environment within the context of Doopsgezinde church congregations.. Put another way, the focus is on how interviewees – here and now – see their position having changed and continuing to change as farmers within a tumultuous agricultural social and political context over the twentieth century. Oral history certainly is reflexively aware, in recognizing the significance of the interview format in constructing the outcome of the remembering or narrating act. I seek to push this reflexivity further by interrogating the interviews themselves as an actual part of and not something separate from the interviewees' lives. As researcher-intervener, I had a part in achieving the remembering/narrating acts that these interviews were.

For this reason, when I asked interviewees about the relation between faith and farming, I was intervening in their own thought processes and maybe their ongoing conversations about themselves and their understanding of their work, their faith and their communities (Rapley, 2004). In these interviews I asked people to 'demonstrate competence' in multiple roles. The most straightforward of these was their role as a farmer. Whether it was explaining in rich detail how much the physical labour of farming has changed – and especially, become easier – or explaining the impossibility of legislative policies moving forward, farmers young and old had no trouble filling this role in various forms. Also fairly straightforward was the role of being Doopsgezind. Where the roles became vague – both in the ability of interviewees to respond

and in the possibility of even formulating a query about it – was in the *combination* of these two. Interviewees were asked – both explicitly and implicitly by the event of the interview itself – to demonstrate a coherent account of both their roles as a farmer and the meaning and value they found in church, and the way in which the two were linked.

In what follows, then, I explore how these particular farmers responded to questions about the juxtaposition of the two parts of their lives: being Doopsgezind and being a farmer. The fairly verbatim transcription style and lengthy quotations are meant to remind us that these were real 'social-work-doing' events (Laurier and Philo 2006). In short, I am not mining data but the interviews themselves are the data.

Doopsgezinde Congregations and Agricultural Change

In Dutch church history, denominational lines have often been quite rigid dividers of professional and social circuits. While the history of Doopsgezinde congregations shows evidence of such lines as well, we see these demarcations changing quickly. Postma's history of the congregation in Warns, Friesland, for example, shows a community taking its boundaries quite seriously. In the nineteenth century, members were routinely called to account for their walk of life at the annual Lord's Supper. Church minutes from the mid-twentieth century record a resolution to prefer doing business with the Catholic tradespeople, rather than those from the Reformed Church (Postma 1977). But Blaupot ten Cate (1839) writes that marriage outside the group became common and accepted in nineteenth-century Netherlands. Further, elites (and others) participated in civil society (Kuiper and Nijboer 2009; Trompetter 2007). Doopsgezinden were closely integrated with their neighbours, sharing influence in the village.

In terms of land, Doopsgezinde congregations had at most an incidental relationship as owners of some agricultural real estate. Some congregations were bequeathed land or farms by deceased members. But this was not common and churches did not hold these properties for long.[1] In this we can see, though, a kind of 'last gasp' of denominational influence on social boundaries. One older couple that I interviewed applied for a farm owned by the church in Sneek and were questioned about their willingness to do catechism and join the church. And in selling land in the 1970s, one church still chose to sell to a church member rather than to a Catholic inhabitant of the village because, as an interviewee ex-

plained "he will bring money back into the coffers, whereas the Catholic will go again back to his own people." In sum, Doopsgezinde congregations generally did not provide much moral guidance for farming, and whatever guidance they did provide has waned over time as well.

At the same time, the position of the farm within society has changed. The era following World War II was the peak of the land consolidation projects. These initiatives were initially about making farms more efficient by consolidating spread-out fields nearer to the farmsteads, but were also occasions for other infrastructural changes such as building new roads or improving water management systems. Andela (2000) shows how these projects dovetailed with unfolding national plans to address the inefficiencies of the agricultural system on many fronts. Following the war's destruction of much of the nation's infrastructure and productive capacity, there was a collective sense of the need to centralize planning and interventions in order to create a strong economy. A widespread social crisis in rural areas resulted; Mak (2012), for one, describes the hollowing-out effect of population drain. Lange's (2013) study of the challenges farmers face in finding successors for their farm shows how the demographic processes of the last half century have threatened the viability of their businesses.

Thus, farmers who were starting out in the 1950s and '60s found themselves in a system characterized by rapid, concerted change. In addition to technological changes such as milking machines and tractors, farming practices were transformed in more invisible but equally important ways. The implementation of new knowledge of animal feeding, as narrated by farmer Jobbe, is an example that illustrates the intertwining of social layers for farmers..[2] He attended agricultural college right after World War II and describes his collaboration with his father on the farm and how he started "feeding theoretically"; in his farming practices, he considered not only "what father does is right" but also the cost calculations on inputs and outputs to the cow. In the generation after Jobbe first attended college, knowledge, measuring and monitoring and entrepreneurial experimentation became even more important, as I learned from his son, Aat. He explains in great detail, for example, the technical possibilities for modifying manure, the migration of farmers to other countries because of opportunities there, the need to keep up with new developments and the way he and his farming friends regularly got together to learn about new ideas.

In the following sections, I will focus on the theme of the public image of farming in the Netherlands. The public perception of farmers hinges on the environmental impact of agriculture. As I

noted, since environmental impact is a shared concern for farmers and the Doopsgezinden, this exploration leads into my central question about the relationship between faith and farming.

History, Identity, and (Not) Discussing the Environment in Church

The theme I want to bring out in these excerpts is the perception that farmers hold about work and the environment. To introduce this idea I begin with a quotation from Aat about keeping cows outdoors on pasture, which is an issue that figures widely in public discourse, whether from environmentalists or official government departments. Aat is skeptical whether a one-size-fits-all approach is really practical or even if it is good for all cows:

> And okay, in itself I think the image of pasturing is good, and I think the cows should be outside as much as possible, … but you can't say that it counts for all the cows in principle; it's supposed to be for every individual cow but there's also cows that don't care for the outside at all….They'd rather stay inside, in summer they all come inside, see, and I had an inspection, … and yeah at that moment all the cows were inside because it was warm weather and yeah those cows think, good, uh, in the sense of, 'I'm not going to stand there baking' so they've come inside. So she [the inspector] says, "Look I can't give a positive evaluation to your pasturing." "uh no," I said, "wait a minute! I put the cow first and not the consumer."

This story of Aat is told to illustrate concretely how a farmer's practices are ever in danger of making their way into public discourse; it is a small step, for example, from this interchange with an official inspector to imagining the story reported on an evening regional news program.

Moving now from the issue of the public image of farming to the matter of explicitly formulating a connection between farming and faith identity, the following two excerpts come from an interview with Jesse, a potato farmer. When questioned on this topic, Jesse does not readily wish to make a statement about faith and farming. First I ask about the characteristics of a Doopsgezinde way of seeing life. Jesse hesitates, "Well, characteristics, of well, a Doopsgezinde approach to life?" and "Well a tough question, eh?" He then offers one characteristic, stating simply, "Well, yes not judge too quickly." But Jesse also thinks that having a pleasant time with others and showing mutual concern can be said to characterize Doopsgezinden:

> You can also see Doopsgezind as characterized by conviviality…. [It] takes priority over all else….You might as well be in the neighbourhood association where you also certainly have conviviality….I think it is also because of, well the aging here, of, sure we are all together and having a good time right, it is so nice, everything is so pleasant….It is mainly older people, we do not look ahead very far, but if you are fifty years old, I'd rather look further ahead than – I am seventy-five myself – than the people now who are seventy-five who do not want to look ahead too far because now when I am seventy-five, really I also still want there to be something.

I will return to the implication of this line of reasoning below. Meanwhile, as Jesse is reflecting on the question, I see a chance to suggest that his farming work is connected with his faith. Jesse is one of the founders of an association of farmers called Ecolana, in which farmers facilitate land exchange but also engage in public relations and nature management. When I ask whether this might be an expression of his Doopsgezinde ethic, he hastily corrects me: "No…Ecolana is more [about] entrepreneurship….You respond to social developments…[i]n agriculture….especially with livestock. We have actually far too long, been turned against society."

From here, Jesse moves into a long description of the ways farming is distant from society and what has and has not been done about that. As a crop farmer, his evaluation is much more analytical, non-emotive than the presentations by dairy farmers I interviewed, although he undertakes the same kind of analysis. For example, he says, it is "a huge pity" that one old kind of manure disposal wagon, a so-called "honey wagon," now outlawed, was once caught on television and then was seen as representative for the whole dairy sector. Of note is the way he moves to the question of a farmer's position in society, rather than making the connection between farming and personal faith. And this makes sense if we see that the Doopsgezinde community is not very cohesive; as Jesse describes it above, the 'elderly' are more interested in "having a good time" than thinking seriously about the legacy they're passing on to the next generation. In this absence of a communal sense of a faith identity, other aspects of life, like social perceptions, will serve as the dimensions of identity in the community. Indeed, Jesse also expresses an understanding of the Doopsgezinde church that would allow this nonchalant approach to his involvement in it. He contrasts it with the church a friend of his attends, a "hallelujah-church" in his words, where if his friend asks questions, "[he] gets an answer there, and with us [Doopsgezinde]….asking the questions might be more important than….answering your questions."

So not only might there be "too much having-a-good-time" for the Doopsgezinden to address serious matters of faith and identity, but Jesse's ideal church might not be one that would address this connection either.

From this first excerpt, then, we have a sense of a desire to unlink the two spheres of church and farm work. In another interview, the question of the relation between farming and faith gets asked and answered much more explicitly. Here I am talking with Raang, another potato farmer from a different part of Friesland, and I ask: "are the worlds of your work with land and agriculture and faith….connected; is there reciprocal influence, for you?" Raang answers by referring to the wind turbine that he has on his property, which produces electricity both for his farm and the neighbourhood: "Well, no I would not know it just off-hand. Yes, that wind energy is of course somewhat founded on sustainability, but if that really comes out of faith, that…I find hard to, really name it that clearly….that it really comes from being Doopsgezind." But then as he reflects further, he connects faith and farming with reference to social issues, rather than environmental ones: "I think more of…. how we treat one another as people, or how you shape a society….yes that is, as far as I'm concerned, what being Doopsgezind is all about." But then he qualifies even that link: "you know, that you try to get a society in which everyone has equal opportunity. But to relate that also to agriculture….I find that a bit too….far-fetched."

Both Jesse and Raang explain that being Doopsgezind has no bearing on their farming work; however, where Jesse articulates that his farming, even the more environmental aspects of it, is more about entrepreneurship than faith, Raang focuses more on how being Doopsgezind is about social justice, but not necessarily within the realm of farming. As in my interview with Jesse, the conversation with Raang quickly moves from a discussion of farming and faith into a detailed description of the considerations involved in agriculture today:

> [T]he Netherlands is a really productive country; we harvest incredibly much per hectare here, and…that has to do with how we in the Netherlands research things and communicate to farmers and how the farmers pick that up and then grow their crops. And that's actually led to us…being at the top, as far as agricultural production is concerned, both for plants and in dairy, etcetera. And…then of course you have the bio-industry with pigs and chickens… [Y]ou can have your doubts about that, but I find that a difficult discussion. [M]y feeling says, yeah, a chicken should just be walking outside freely, right? [B]ut on the other hand, if a chicken isn't happy it won't lay eggs, and…ultimately those

> chickens [in factory farms] do lay a lot of eggs so you would think that…they must feel okay because otherwise they wouldn't do that. So, yeah, that's a bit of an ethical discussion in which…your feelings often contradict reality.... [But] to connect that to being Doopsgezind, I find a bit far-fetched.

Both Jesse and Raang easily talk about farming. Jesse emphasizes how dealing with public perception has become an integral part of a farmer's work. Raang draws attention to the way scientific knowledge and public policy play a large role in agriculture, positively affecting social, economic and environmental issues. By doing so both interviewees are responding to the implication, made by virtue of the interview event itself, that there is a link between farming and faith. Thus, Raang's references to "ethical discussion" might be part of his way of filling in the role of farmer-Doopsgezind, which he is being asked to play.

More explicit is the response of the final interviewee, dairy farmer Sietske. She is aware of broader discourses on how she as a farmer should be working in relation to the environment. Furthermore, with her the discourses take place not only in society in general, but also with those happening within the Doopsgezinde church itself. When I ask whether there is anything "Doopsgezind about…your company" she simply says "no." But then, upon reflection, she changes her answer somewhat:

> Well, I'm imagining that if you'd become an organic farmer or if you'd be a 'care farm'….[that is] farm in another, more alternative manner….Not that we don't respect nature, but, well other people have a different opinion than we regarding us not having flowers in the fields and stuff….And us just using fertilizer, and also for trying to get as much milk as possible from the cows, not at the expense of the cows, but well…we also separate the calves from the mother….So you can name all sorts of things, that….other people view differently.

In working out how she will respond to the offered juxtaposition of being Doopsgezind with being a farmer, Sietske appeals to a supposed general perception of what could be a Doopsgezinde influence on farming. Apparently being organic or running a farm with "social care" programs would match with some kind of perceived Doopsgezinde values. But she also immediately frames this suggestion as being a matter of interpretation:

> If you'd do that [in our congregation] then I'm certain that there would be some people who would disapprove of the way I farm… [or]of somebody who uses chlorine and ammonia […] [They would]think that

> you shouldn't use anything that can't be found in nature.[…] I don't know if that then, is especially Doopsgezind.

But she also says that church members are sensitive to such diverse opinions and when I suggest that "those kind of discussions don't exist," she returns to a version of her initial answer:

> No, we don't have those [conversations], no…. Sure you can express or convey your opinion or your feelings, but not with the intention to hurt or judge someone….[Being]…so diverse…[and] more urban [alongside those with having]…a more agricultural background, so there's already a big difference between our congregation members anyway, but, yes, I think that if you'd start a discussion…on the viewpoints of the other members, that that would be very enjoyable.

I may be looking for characterizations of Doopsgezinden in the Netherlands in general but Sietske consistently reminds me of her experience in her own local congregation. As she does so, she offers an explanation of why her church avoids discussion of environmental issues; it relates to its specific history of being a church composed of several congregations, one of which was more urban and the others more agrarian. This experience of diversity seems to have encouraged church members to be careful in discussing things that might hurt others. Sietske concludes that there is a real difference of opinion within her congregation, in relation to her work as a farmer: "if you would [discuss these things] I know for sure there would be a few who would condemn the way I farm." Sietske's experience in her congregation reveals some of the complexities of relating faith to farming among the Doopsgezinde in the Netherlands.

In the social event of collaboratively achieving these three interviews, the farmers and I discussed both the environmental issues involved in agriculture and the place that discussions of agriculture and environment might have in the Doopsgezinde church. The three interviewees explore the complexity of issues which farmers have to consider and display sensitivity to the public discourses that surround their work. At the same time, they characterize their congregations as places where discussions about agriculture and the environment, as well as the issues that farmers face in their work, do not really have a place. It seemed to me that had I not steered the interviews in the direction of trying to relate the two areas of life, the interviewees would likely not have spoken to that issue at all. It was a concern, after all, of only one of the interview participants.

Perhaps it is going too far on my part, then, to wonder at how this comes to be the case. I think that elderly church members may be occupied with issues other than how their faith informs their views about the environment; as one interviewee stated, "we don't look too far ahead." Secondly, church is but one part of life for farmers and the church itself makes little claim on areas of its members' everyday lives. Third, while these farmers do embrace a Doopsgezinde theology and its ethic of social justice, they do not wish to go so far as to say that it is a theology or ethic that relates to their way of farming. While church members certainly hold opinions and expectations about farming and the environment, my experience interviewing Doopsgezinde farmers suggests that these beliefs do not directly impact their daily work as farmers.

Conclusion

I went to Friesland as a professional from Utrecht and visited Doopsgezinde farmers to have conversations with them, asking about farming and about being Doopsgezind. I have explained that these interviews, though they provide details of historical interest in regard to farming practices and issues, were at a basic level actual social events in their own right. I have not, therefore, drawn data *from* the interviews, but have seen the events of the interviews as places where feelings, ideas and opinions about the relationship between faith and farming were in the process of being formulated.

I noted at the beginning that, in contrast to many other Mennonite communities around the world, agriculture and migration are not central themes in the history of the Doopsgezinden in the Netherlands. The narratives I have presented confirm this image, that in this important birthplace of Anabaptism, farming does not seem to relate to Doopsgezinde history, theology, or group identity. But if we follow their own definitions of what is important in farming and in church, we might conclude that framing the question as one of faith and farming is itself an artificial construction imported from comparisons to Mennonite groups living in other historical and social contexts.

If we want to better understand the relationship of farming and faith in the Dutch context, one good place to look is the question of agriculture's environmental impact. This is an issue which figures prominently in Dutch public perceptions of farming, and, based on characterizations from these interviews, may also be a current discourse among certain Doopsgezinden. However, even in reference

to this question, these farmers did not draw an explicit connection from their faith to their work. If, as the final excerpt implies, environmental consciousness for the farmer's fellow Doopsgezinden might mean buying organic products and supporting ecological farming practices, for the farmers themselves environmental impact is but one part of a complex field of work with conflicting demands. Doopsgezinde and non-Doopsgezinde farmers alike face the challenge of sustaining their businesses in times of constraining state policies and a harsh economic climate.

Despite knowing, by virtue of the event of the interview itself that one of the central themes of my questioning is the connection between faith and farming, the farmers I interview nonetheless prefer to speak about the struggle to keep their farms viable and the tensions inherent in relating to a society that is critical of some farming methods. When invited to make explicit connections between faith and farming, they are reluctant to do so. Thus, on the one hand it may be unfair to press these farmers into speaking definitively about the connection between faith and farming, because for them, if there is a connection, it appears to be an indirect one. On the other hand, however, they do accept the role of commenting on that relationship within the context of the interview event. They indicate awareness of social expectations concerning their activities as farmers, provide justifications for their practices and weave subjects related to faith, like ethics, into their comments on farming. Evidently, the interviews, as social events in themselves, including the intervention of a researcher, were – even if in a minor degree – genuine sites of conversations about the faith-farming question for Doopsgezinde.

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Notes

[1] I found only Drachten-Ureterp to have significant archival records of rental and sale of farmlands. Cadastral maps show that the Ameland congregation owned many plots.

[2] To protect the privacy of the individuals I interviewed, I have used pseudonyms for all interviewees in this paper.