

On the Construction of Religious Texts

The Case of Writing a Catechism

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Abstract

Religious texts represent a specific rhetorical genre. What does it mean to construct these texts? In order to answer this question we reflect upon our experience of co-authoring a religious text, the *Ordinary Catechism* (*Gewone Catechismus*), published in 2019. The findings include insights in collaborative spirituality, a dynamic interaction with tradition, and various levels of abstraction in theologizing. Further, we analyze these findings by using genre theory. It is concluded that religious texts are responses to a rhetorical situation; they are part of genre repertoires that religious communities use to express and to experience the Christian faith.

Keywords: religious texts, genre theory, collaborative authorship, spirituality, auto-ethnography, catechism

Introduction: The complexity of religious texts

Theologians work with religious texts. The reception and the production of these texts are complex processes, permeated with theological assumptions, decisions and methods. For instance, Biblical scholars engage in the interpretation of religious texts; the books of the Old and New Testaments, the sacred texts in Christianity. Yet, at this point already, we have to pause. First, the concept 'sacred text' is a religious concept. Religious studies and theology differ on the use of religious descriptors; a sacred text is rendered as an 'ancient' or a 'formative' text from a religious past. Further, referring to the biblical books as 'Old' versus 'New' betrays a certain theological point of

view, and plunges us in the depths of Christian-Jewish relationships on the one hand and the scope of canonical literature on the other.

Thus, working with religious texts is not a simple activity. Systematic theologians deal with a variety of historical and dogmatic texts, such as dogmatic treatises, confessions, and spiritual biographies. Empirical or practical theologians use 'text' with an even wider meaning, think of written expressions of religious practice, such as liturgical service books, hymnals, sermons; textual renderings of empirical data on religious practices, such as interviews; empirical approaches to the field of religion with metaphors like 'living human document' that 'textualize' religious experiences and spiritualities.¹

The above examples suggest that theology is mainly a science of *reception*. Theologians, however, also *produce* texts; theological as well as religious texts. Religious texts intend to create and maintain religious involvement; prayers, hymns, sermons evoke religious emotions and intend to stimulate religious awareness and sustain the life of faith. This *performative* dimension is critical for religious texts.² Theological texts, however, are reflective and suggest distance by nature. Religious and theological language can be understood as first order and second order language respectively; the latter reflects upon the former. This distinction between theological and religious texts, however, is not clearcut: Martin Luther King's sermons are a source for religious inspiration but also a source for his theology of non-violent resistance; the Canons of Dordt are theological statements yet they do also communicate Reformed spirituality.

In this article we address the question how constructing a religious text works. As academic theologians we are used to producing scholarly products like papers, articles and books. During 2013-2019 we embarked on a non-academic project: writing a catechism. The outcome of the project was published in 2019 as the *Gewone Catechismus* (English: *Ordinary Catechism*, from now on abbreviated as *GC*).³ We discovered that constructing a religious text entails the process of organising a complex interplay of spirituality, hermeneutics and performativity.

This experience challenged a dearly held conviction in current theology that academic theological production does not aim for religious

1 C.V. Gerkin, *Living Human Document. Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode*, Nashville 1984.

2 On performativity, see G. Immink, *The Touch of the Sacred. The Practice, Theology, and Tradition of Christian Worship*, Grand Rapids 2014, 22-32.

3 Published by KokBoekencentrum, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

involvement, religious texts however do. This conviction is grounded in the distinctions between first order and second order theological language,⁴ or between normative and meta-theology.⁵ These distinctions have been challenged by Kathryn Tanner on the grounds that they entail a competition between academic theology and theologies of everyday life. Theology, she argues, 'has to be engaged in negotiations with popular theologies'. In order to do so, academic theology has to meet people in their actual theological existence.⁶

The production of the *GC* provides an exemplary case to explore the distinction between producing two kinds of knowledge; theological and religious knowledge. On the one hand, a catechism is educational and challenges the intellectual engagement with the content and practice of religion. On the other hand, it is designed to elicit a religious response to the Christian faith. The former is closer to the task of theology, the latter specifies the nature of religious practices. Hence, the typical genre of the catechetical text and its production provides 'rich data' to explore the construction of religious texts.⁷

In this article we reflect upon the construction process.⁸ The contribution to theological method relies on two different methodological approaches. First, we use a genre theoretical approach to clarify some of the *textual* features of religious texts. Second, auto-ethnographic observations clarify the role of *religious involvement* in the production of religious texts, particularly our own involvement as authors of the *GC*.

4 G. Heitink, *Praktische Theologie. Geschiedenis – Theorie – Handelvelden*, Kampen 1993; R.R. Ganzevoort, 'What You See Is What You Get. Social Construction and Normativity in Practical Theology', in J.A. van der Ven, M. Scherer-Rath (ed.), *Normativity and Empirical Research in Theology*, Leiden/Boston 2004, 17-34.

5 J.T. Granrose, 'Normative Theology and Meta-Theology', *Harvard Theological Review* 63 (1970), 449-451.

6 K. Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Minneapolis 1997, 71-86.

7 'Rich data' should be understood in the tradition of qualitative research, seeking 'to understand what is being investigated as deeply as possible and to situate it within the context of time and space rather than in isolation'. The concept is related to the ethnographic intention to generate a 'thick description' that 'seeks to present and explore the multifaceted complexities of the situation being studied, the intentions and motivations of the actors involved, and the context of the situation'. S. Marx, 'Rich Data', in L.M. Given (ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, Los Angeles, CA 2008, n408.

8 Elsewhere we reflect upon the theological choices that determine the content of the *GC*, see A. Huijgen, T.T.J. Plezier, R.T. te Velde, 'Christelijk geluk in een seculiere cultuur. Een verantwoording van de belangrijkste theologische keuzes in de Gewone Catechismus', *Theologia Reformata* 63 (2020), 245-262.

In the first part of the article, we apply insights from genre theory. The textual features of religious texts reflect their function in religious practices; religious texts function within religious communities. They represent a particular 'genre repertoire' that is operative within these communities. The interplay between spirituality, hermeneutics and performativity is embedded in the practices in which religious texts function.

Next, elements from auto-ethnography enable us to reflect upon authorship of a religious text without neglecting our existential involvement. By reflecting upon our collaboration we take into account intersubjective spirituality in shaping a religious text. This reflexivity also honours the subjectivity of researchers against rationalist scientific approaches that position the researcher as a 'neutral' or a 'detached' observer.⁹

Finally, we close the article with a discussion of the interplay of performativity, spirituality and hermeneutics.

The genre of religious texts

Constructing a religious text contributes to the development of a specific textual genre; a genre that consists of texts that aim for creating and maintaining religious involvement. The textual features of religious texts evoke religious emotions and shape religious knowledge. In order to understand this performative dimension of religious texts, we turn to genre theory to illustrate some of the textual features of the *GC*.

David Duff argues that 'genre' is a rather unstable concept. Yet, its analytic potential makes it possible 'to speak with some precision about the ideological functions of particular genres [and] about the conditions of possibility for the existence of particular genres'.¹⁰ Applying genre theoretical insights to our case of writing a catechism, we consider three elements. First, we deal with the typical catechetical form (questions and answers) and substance (introductions to the Christian faith). Further, two recently developed concepts in genre theory are relevant. So, secondly we reflect on religious texts from the perspective of 'genre as action'; and thirdly, we look at religious texts as part of larger 'genre repertoires'.

9 For reflexivity in theological method, see T. Stangeland Kaufman, 'Normativity as Pitfall or Ally? Reflexivity as an Interpretive Resource in Ecclesiological and Ethnographic Research', *Ecclesial Practices* 2 (2015), 91-107.

10 D. Duff, *Modern Genre Theory*, London/New York 2014, 18.

Rhetorical form and religious substance evoke spirituality

The *GC* is easily recognized as a catechism because of its typical rhetorical feature that it consists of questions and answers, the hallmark for catechetical texts.

A catechism seems to be an invention of the protestant Reformation: the sixteenth century produced hundreds of catechisms.¹¹ Yet the method of asking questions and formulating answers was an integral part of the pedagogy of the medieval and early modern universities. The scholastic method was known for its application of the *quaestio-technique*, with Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* as its specimen; the *quaestio-technique* remained the standard method of scholarly reasoning into the age of Reformed Orthodoxy.¹² Further, until the late nineteenth century it was not uncommon to present knowledge in the form of questions and answers. For instance, the 'Catechism for agriculture' (1849) presents a complete body of knowledge of the agricultural domain in questions and answers. A catechism, thus, neither represents exclusively a protestant nor a religious genre.

Genre is a combination of form and substance. A religious catechism frames the doctrinal content of Christianity in questions and answers. This entails a spirituality that combines education and dialogue.

Further, Christian catechisms present the Christian faith in a structure based on the four formative Christian 'texts': the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Apostolic Creed, and the words of Christ, according to the New Testament, that instituted baptism and eucharist as sacraments of the church. The body of Christian knowledge, it appears, has a certain order and it is acknowledged that we need to know how to pray, to act, to believe, and to celebrate. These are the four typical functions of religion according to sociologists.¹³ The Christian religion has its specific approach to prayer, to the contents of faith, to ethical behaviour and to rituals. The structure of *GC* fits this practice.

11 A. Huijgen, J.V. Fesko (ed.), *Handboek Heidelbergse Catechismus*, Utrecht 2013, [Transl. into German: A. Huijgen, J.V. Fesko, A. Schiller (ed.), *Handbuch Heidelberger Katechismus*, Gütersloh 2014].

12 R.T. te Velde, 'The Relevance of Reformed Scholasticism for Contemporary Systematic Theology', *Perichoresis* 14 (2016), 97-115, 99.

13 Cf. V. Saroglou, 'Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging: The Big Four Religious Dimensions and Cultural Variation', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 42 (2011), 1320-40.

Thirdly, the religious nature of catechisms is visible in a specific focus, usually introduced in the first question. The first question sets the tone of the catechism's spirituality. Consider for instance the first question of the *GC* as compared to the first questions of *HC* and *WC*:¹⁴

<i>GC</i> (2019) 'Where do you find happiness? My happiness is that Jesus Christus found me. He sacrificed himself to bring me home in the love of God (...).'	<i>HC</i> (1563) 'What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own but belong body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ (...).'	<i>WC</i> (1647) 'What is the chief and highest end of man? Man's chief and highest end is, to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.'
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The question and answer structure entails a specific religious performativity. Rather than merely aiming at producing propositional knowledge, these questions and answers evoke a spiritual response. This is also the case in another contemporary catechism, *Doornse Catechismus* (Catechism of Doorn, named after the Dutch town called 'Doorn' where the Catechism was written): 'What is my deepest comfort?' the first question runs; '(...) Then I discover that nothing in the world is absolute. Me neither. I discover my "poverty". And precisely this poverty provides the entry to God. God is what remains if everything else is lost.'¹⁵ This text evokes the spiritual response of acknowledging Gods ultimacy in the experience of utter human emptiness.

The comparison of these Protestant catechisms indicates that religious texts are designed to help the users to actually 'perform' religion. Religious texts invite their users into a religious practice. They do so by responding to particular rhetorical situations and by providing religious communities with a rich genre repertoire.

14 The translation of *GC* is by the authors. The translation of the *Heidelberg Catechism* (*HC*) is authorized by the Christian Reformed Church of North America: <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism> accessed 6th of October 2020. The *Westminster Catechism* (*WC*) consists of a *Larger* (1647) and a *Shorter* (1648) version; the first question, however, is similar in both versions. See Ph. Shaff (ed.), *The Creeds of Christendom. With a History and Critical Notes*, Volume III: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds With Translations, Grand Rapids 1998⁶, 675.

15 A. van der Deijl, S. de Jong, A.M. Spijkerboer (ed.), *Doornse Catechismus. Oude vragen, nieuwe antwoorden*, Utrecht 2010, 9. (Our translation).

'Genre as social action'. How religious texts respond to rhetorical situations

In an influential essay *Genre as Social Action*, Carolyn Miller adds two features to understanding of genre, based on action theoretical insights.¹⁶ First, genres must be understood as 'rhetorical responses to recurrent rhetorical situations'. Second, based upon a pragmatic approach to language, a genre entails a certain 'macro' speech act. The understanding of genre, she argues, 'must be centered not upon substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish'.¹⁷ According to Miller, the genres are 'organized around situated actions'; to classify texts in a genre is to seek 'to explicate the knowledge that practice creates (...) [and] to take seriously the rhetoric in which we are immersed and the situations in which we find ourselves'.¹⁸

The social action approach thus understands texts as 'responses to current rhetorical situations'.

In recent years, several Dutch theologians have produced a catechism. We consider three examples. First, Jos Strengtholt published his 'Small catechism for Freethinkers' (2013). He presents the Christian faith in the face of its atheist critics. The style is apologetic. Second, Ben Wentzel produced both a large and a small 'Protestant Catholic Catechism' (2012). His emphasis is upon religious plurality and a lack of experiencing the real presence of God. He phrases the answers as prayers. Thirdly, 'Op Goed Gerucht', a writing collective of liberal theologians, authored the 'Doorn Catechism' (2012), already mentioned.¹⁹ It presents an inquiring type of faith. It suggests new answers to old questions in order to correlate Christian faith with modern and postmodern challenges.

These recent Dutch examples of catechisms illustrate a variety of speech-acts; they flow from various theological intentions: polemics (Strengtholt), prayer (Wentzel), and correlation ('Op Goed Gerucht'). Despite the different speech acts, the 'macro' speech act of these 21st century catechisms responds to the rhetorical situation of a loss of meaning

16 C.R. Miller, 'Genre as Social Action', *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984), 151-67; C.R. Miller, 'Genre as Social Action (1984), Revisited 30 Years Later (2014)', *Letras & Letras* 31 (2015), 56-72.

17 Miller, 'Genre as Social Action', 151.

18 Miller, 'Genre as Social Action', 155.

19 Their name refers to the idea that the gospel is of 'good rumor', see <https://opgoedge-rucht.nl/wie-zijn-wij.html>, accessed 24th of February 2020.

of the Christian story in contemporary Western European cultural and societal contexts. Cultural circumstances spark an array of possible responses of Christianity in the face of secularization. The responses in these recent catechisms range from being culturally sensitive and correlating cultural values with Christian ideas on the one end of the spectrum; to engaging in apologetics, even polemical dialogue with cultural values, on the other. Within this spectrum, the *GC* attempts to provide a response similar to C.S. Lewis' 'mere Christianity', hence 'ordinary catechism'.²⁰ The rhetorical situation it responds to is twofold. First, the *GC* articulates orthodox Christianity for those who are convinced of the superplus of 'classic' Christianity while they increasingly feel a loss of meaning of traditional language. Second, the text aims for an inclusive formulation of Christianity in a cultural situation in which the content of Christian faith gradually disappears, even among involved believers.²¹

To function in a postmodern, secularized context, a catechism should engage with the rhetorical situation in its form, through its rhetorical structure and according to its content. Formally, it asks questions, indicating that Christianity is an inquiring religion; different questions may be posed and multiple answers may be generated. Structurally, the order of the questions and the relationship between the questions contributes to a larger conversation that continues throughout the text. Substantially, a catechism suggests a direction, a journey of knowing; its intertextuality provides multiple pathways to Christian texts, past and present; and its mode, albeit polemic (*Strengholt*) or correlative (*'Op Goed Gerucht'*), has the potential to engage with a critical dialogue with contemporary cultural values. The *GC* attempts to engage with its rhetorical situation by its emphasis on happiness, the critical reflection on happiness from the inside of the Christian faith and the invitational mode to trust and discipleship.

Religious texts such as catechisms thus respond to a rhetorical situation in which new articulations and appropriations of the Christian faith are felt to be needed.

20 For the production and reception of *Mere Christianity*, see G.M. Marsden, *C.S. Lewis's "Mere Christianity". A Biography* (Lives of great religious books), Princeton, NJ 2016.

21 See for the background of this 'rhetorical situation': A. Huijgen, T.T.J. Pleizier, R.T. te Velde, 'Christelijk geluk in een seculiere cultuur'.

Religious texts as ‘genre repertoires’

The genre of religious texts is obviously much broader than catechisms and includes sermons, hymns, poems, liturgical scripts, spiritual journals, creeds and other types of texts. To understand the construction of religious texts, we have to look into one other aspect of contemporary genre theory, namely ‘genre repertoires’.

Groups often use different genres to communicate. A set of genres, according to Amy Devitt, ‘functions for the group, and the interactions among those genres affect the functioning of each genre’; the latter is also known as ‘intertextuality’.²² Borrowing from Michael Bakhtin, Devitt further distinguishes between various genre repertoires: ‘a genre repertoire is the set of genres that a group owns, acting through which a group achieves all of its purposes, not just those connected to a particular activity’.²³

The construction of religious texts can be understood as contributing to the genre repertoire that operates within a religious community. They function within a broader set of genres. Hence, a text such as the *GC* does not constitute a singular religious text. It belongs to the larger genre of ‘catechisms’ due to formal and structural features, such as questions and answers. It also interacts with the genre of ‘introductions to the Christian faith’ as it performs a similar social (and religious) action. Finally, catechisms and introductions into Christianity are part of a larger network of texts within the religious community: intertextuality is an important feature of genre repertoires.

The *GC* thus functions in complex intertextual and hermeneutical relationships with other religious texts, such as hymns, biblical texts, creeds and liturgical scripts.

Three examples illustrate how the *GC* as catechism functions within a larger genre repertoire. First, the answer of *GC2* (‘Are you responsible for your own happiness?’) contains an allusion to a popular Christian hymn. There is no explicit reference, but users of the catechism who know the hymn will recognize its lyrics. An allusion touches upon hidden meanings within the religious community; it signals a larger repertoire of religious texts. Next, in *GC50* the question is asked how we may flourish through Jesus Christ. The answer quotes John 14:6, the Biblical verse in which Jesus says ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’. This direct Biblical quotation has

22 A.J. Devitt, *Writing Genres*, Carbondale, IL 2004, 54.

23 Devitt, *Writing Genres*, 57.

important structural implications for the larger structure of the *GC*, and the following questions and answers provide an explanation of the death and resurrection of Christ based upon this Bible verse.²⁴ A catechism enters into a dialogue with the Biblical text. Thirdly, *GC*₂₅ questions the relationship between the Christian creedal statement that God is the Creator of heaven and earth and scientific theories on the 'origins of species'. The fact that this question and answer proved to be very controversial in the reception of the *GC* among orthodox Dutch Christians,²⁵ shows how religious texts interacts with other normative voices, both positively and critically. The notion of genre repertoires clarifies what happens when a newly constructed religious text enters into a contested area.

In sum, in constructing a religious text, genre theory helps to understand different features of form and substance; it explains how religious texts are understood performatively as social action, in relation to rhetorical situations; and it demonstrates how religious texts interact with each other as they are part of larger sets of genres, genre repertoires. 'The genre repertoires of communities define the work of a relatively coherent group, people with complex goals and often well-developed or long-standing ways of achieving those goals.'²⁶ Genre theory thus illuminates the nature and role of religious texts.

Personal involvement: Auto-ethnographic reflections

Writing a religious text requires personal involvement. The only source of knowledge for 'writing about writing', however, is the personal experience of the author. That is where auto-ethnography comes in.²⁷ We do not study someone else's process but reflect on our own experience. In our case, this

24 For instance, *GC*₅₁₋₅₄ address reconciliation in relation to Christ being 'the way to God' and connects this with Christ's self-giving and death on the cross; *GC*₅₅₋₅₈ deals with Christ as 'the truth' and explains Christ's resurrection in which God reveals that Jesus is his true witness.

25 See A. Huijgen, T.T.J. Pleizier, R.T. te Velde, 'Christelijk geluk in een seculiere cultuur', n3.

26 Devitt, *Writing Genres*, 57.

27 S. Stahlke Wall, 'Easier Said Than Done: Writing an Autoethnography', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 7 (2008), 38-53; S. Stahlke Wall, 'Toward a Moderate Autoethnography', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 15 (2016), 1-9; S. Stahlke Wall, 'Reflection/Commentary on a Past Article: "Easier Said Than Done: Writing an Autoethnography"', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17 (2018).

reflection is intersubjective, as we engaged in constructing a religious text as a small writing group.

Margot Duncan argues that ‘there is a place in scholarship for shining the light of research where one stands for attempting to know one’s own experience and sharing that knowledge’.²⁸ Duncan cites Schwandt and his notion of ‘being a connoisseur’, namely ‘a kind of heightened awareness or educated perception (...) that comes from intimate familiarity with the phenomenon being examined’. According to Sarah Stahlke Wall, auto-ethnographic methods approach social phenomena through the researcher’s personal experience. These methods ‘are said to offer a new and unique vantage point’.²⁹ Our collaborative project of co-authoring a catechism as professional theologians serves as an example of a social phenomenon as understood by Stahlke Wall. Hence, in describing the construction of the GC we share knowledge that originated in the actual process of writing of a religious text.

The incidents that we reflect upon are assembled using hindsight. According to Mark Freeman, ‘self-understanding occurs in significant part, through narrative reflection with is itself a product of hindsight’.³⁰ In reflecting on six years of writing a new catechetical text, two aspects emerge: *collaborative spirituality* and *dynamic interaction with tradition*. We discuss these aspects through small ‘memos’ of self-observation followed by brief analytic reflections.³¹ They exemplify the personal involvement that Duncan refers to.

Collaborative spirituality

From the start, the project was clearly collaborative. In setting up the project the *roles* in collaboration had to be determined. Though we acted as a team of writers from the beginning, the role of the editorial board and the role of the readers that would provide feedback to drafts of the text had to

28 M. Duncan, ‘Autoethnography: Critical Appreciation of an Emerging Art’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 3 (2004), 13.

29 Stahlke Wall, ‘Toward a Moderate Autoethnography’, 1.

30 M. Freeman, *Hindsight. The Promise and Peril of Looking Backward*, Oxford 2010.

31 In qualitative research the ‘memo’ functions as a bridge between concrete observations (or fieldnotes) and reflections. The memo’s in this article are recorded afterwards in the reconstruction of the process based on dates of meetings, minutes and proof-texts. See for a broader methodological reflection C. Ellis, T.E. Adams, A.P. Bochner, ‘Autoethnography. An Overview’, *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum Qualitative Social Research* 12 (2010).

become clear during the process. Both process and progress were facilitated by publisher Arjen van Trigt from publishing house KokBoekencentrum.

We first got together in Spring 2013 as a large working group, invited by a book publisher to write a new catechism. The group consisted of 8 people. During the meeting we decided to work in smaller groups. Three of us became the 'writing group', responsible for the first drafts of the text of the new catechism. Others would take an editorial role, while people from outside the working group were invited to proof-read drafts. During the second meeting, we started to work on the theological 'entry' of the catechism. Would 'happiness' be an adequate entrance? Or should we opt for a concept like 'identity'? The formal meeting was followed by a rather informal discussion by the writing group, consisting of three theologians, serving different protestant denominations. In the Spring sun, we had lunch in a small restaurant, discussing the theological structure for the new catechism. This first session not only proved to be crucial for the entire text, it also turned out to be decisive for the entire project: would we be able to bridge theological differences and to find a common attitude and urgency to work on this project? (memo Spring 2013)

In the first phase of the project we had to test the levels of our theological agreement and a shared sense of urgency in determining the nature and structure of the text that we were about to construct. Considering the sense of urgency, several motives played a role: *theological* motives (were we able to create a constructive theological text that would engage positively orthodox theology and cultural tensions with Christianity?), *ecclesial* motives (would it be possible to help churches to maintain a pedagogy of Christian faith?), and *religious* motives (is it possible to write short texts that communicate core insights of the Christian faith in a spiritual and educational way to help Christians articulate their own faith?).

Collaboration in theological research is becoming more common, including the involvement of practitioners and everyday believers in doing theology.³² At first sight, authoring a religious text does not fit this trend. Sermons, for instance, are usually individual products though they are constructed while listening to many voices, such as commentaries or colleagues. A sermon is usually an individual religious text. On the other hand, collections of hymns (in hymnals) or liturgical scripts (in service books) are typical examples of collaborative editing of religious texts. Authorship of a

32 Roest, *Collaborative Research in Practical Theology*, 291-322.

religious text, however, calls for a reflective exchange of spirituality, next to scholarly and ecclesial motives.

In our personal biographies it is significant to mention the fact that during the project of working on the *GC* each of us moved from parish ministry to full time academic theology. This shift in roles illustrates the balance between writing a religious text to serve religious communities on the one hand and writing an accessible theological text to express pivotal Christian beliefs. Though we did not realize it at the time, we engaged in a project that bridged pastoral and academic theology. Looking backward, the project is similar to Gerald Hiestand's vision of the pastor-theologian, which is extrapolated in relation to public theology by Kevin Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan.³³

In writing the *GC* collaborative authoring of a religious text differs from working with a scholarly text. First, writing for religious purposes calls for a particular style of writing: putting theology into spiritual discourse. For collaboration this means that we had to practice writing spiritual discourse as a team. The decisions involved include the use of religious language and the length and style of the (short) answer that allows for personal mediation or even memorizing. Further, we experimented with a multilayered type of text consisting of language that evidently emerged from the Scriptures, a style that included direct, practical and experiential language, addressing contextual interests and continuity with the teachings of the worldwide church. A religious text aims for religious involvement, a level that we had to arrive at in a team-effort: phrasing sentences and constructing textual structures that could help others in their Christian faith.

Dynamic interaction with tradition

The construction of a religious text entails a specific interaction with the Christian tradition. There is no need to dig deeply into nineteenth century discussions on church authority and confessional boundaries when it comes to scholarly theological production. In constructing a religious text, however, the interaction with tradition is both habitual and transformative. Rather than reflecting critically upon the Christian tradition as a central

33 G. Hiestand, *The Pastor Theologian. Resurrecting an Ancient Vision*, Grand Rapids, MI 2015; K.J. Vanhoozer, O. Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian. Reclaiming a Lost Vision*, Grand Rapids, MI 2015.

task for theology, religious texts contribute to the continuation and transformation of that tradition. This is implied in the following observation:

In our conversations we knew we had to deal with the traditional cores of the Christian faith: prayer, the creed etc. We were aware of the way other catechisms, such as Heidelberg, dealt with these cores relative to their structure. All three, we have been trained in the classic Reformed creeds, their historical origins and current relevance. Knowing the relationship between structure and theological substance, we were convinced that we had to construct a different approach in relating the four cores of faith. These insights could not have emerged from the literature we studied, for instance on the Heidelberg Catechism, but our knowledge of the tradition enabled us to choose for a different order. This was a major structural decision. (memo Summer 2013)

In writing the *GC* we experienced proximity to the Christian tradition as we did use the core texts of the Christian faith, such as the creed and the Lord's prayer. Yet we understood our task also to find new formulations, to use language that reflects closeness to the tradition while simultaneously staying in touch with everyday language. Sometimes, we tried to incorporate various traditions, such as in *GC94* where we combine different names, such as the Lord's Supper, Eucharist and Holy Communion, to signal a diversity of theological views while retaining the longing for unity. A similar move is made in *GC88* where we do not simply reject the plurality of (mainly protestant) denominations but simultaneously call to repair divisions between Churches and to live peacefully in situations of conflict; thus reflecting the connection of the topics of the church and the forgiveness of sins in the Apostles' Creed.

Constructing a religious text thus requires a dynamic interaction with the Christian tradition. Historical and contemporary positions, creedal and contextual truths, normative voices and nuanced openness regarding contested issues.

In order to function within religious practices, religious texts need to both express and guide these practices. Without becoming formal credal statements, they function as 'confessions': providing language in today's world for the life of faith, joining together believers and thus having the potential to create and maintain communities of faith. This is also a very critical function and effect of religious texts.

The interaction with tradition is a hermeneutical enterprise. It brings earlier formulations of the Christian faith into conversation with contemporary systems of meaning, science and human experience. In this

exchange between past and present, we were aware of two positions. The position of repetition: repeating what has been said, but that would make a new text obsolete. The position of radical reformulation: moving beyond the past, implying that older formulations are not apt for today's church and expression of Christian faith. More than hermeneutics, though, the interaction with tradition is a spiritual activity: it is the experience of feeling connected with earlier generations and centuries of Christians, knowing that to some extent they read along. Hence, in the construction of religious texts, tradition is approached with hermeneutical and spiritual sensitivity.

The creative interplay of performativity, spirituality and hermeneutics

The orientations on genre theory and the brief ethnographic reflections demonstrate that in constructing a religious text performativity, spirituality and hermeneutics constantly interact.

Religious texts are designed to evoke spirituality. In order to contribute to, to maintain and to transform religious practice, they aim for religious responses (performativity), they express and shape a religious attitude (spirituality), and they exemplify intertextuality and anticipate interpretations (hermeneutics). Let us consider these aspects briefly, illustrated by two questions of the *GC*, compared with a classical and a contemporary catechetical text.

Performativity: Aiming for religious responses

In constructing a religious text, the issue of what religious language 'does' does not just reflect a mere pragmatic approach to language. It is ultimately about the question whether the text succeeds in sustaining the religious awareness of individual believers and of believing communities.

Let us take the plurality of religions as an example to understand how catechetical texts invite to a religious response. Jos Strengholt asks the question 'If there are so many religions (...) why do you think your religion is true?'; the 'Doorn Catechism' asks the question whether God is the same as Allah?³⁴ The *GC* deals with other religions only in relation to the Christian belief that God is triune (*GC*22). The three catechisms invite

34 J. Strengholt, *Kleine Catechismus voor Freethinkers*, Heerenveen 2013, 123-124. Van der Deijl, De Jong, Spijkerboer, *Doornse Catechismus*, 46.

to different responses: one religion is the true religion (Strengholt); the Doorn Catechism invites to consider different aspects of Christianity and Islam, the uniqueness of Christ, but also the attraction of Islam spirituality; the attention of the user of the *GC* does remain within the topic of the Trinity and does not invite the reader to think about the theology of religions (Strengholt) or to open the reader for the spirituality of Islam (Doornse Catechismus). This is a limited perspective on plurality; yet in its limitation the text aims for a response that a Trinitarian understanding of God sufficiently addresses the uniqueness of Christianity among the religions.

The performativity of religious texts ultimately aims to shape the religious consciousness of the user of the text. The text aims to direct our attention to the realities that are articulated; for religious texts these realities are existential, they concern the relationships between us, God and the larger world. Here performativity moves into spirituality: religious texts aim to sustain and guide spirituality.

Spirituality: Shaping a religious attitude

Religious texts embody spirituality. Spirituality is a complex phenomenon, understood anthropologically as the search for meaning, theologically as a longing for God, or specifically Christian in a Trinitarian articulation.³⁵ Rather than finding a common denominator, it may be sufficient to stipulate that spirituality refers to a combination of affective, ultimate and transcendent aspects of human experience. In Christianity, religious texts consist of references, metaphors, and other linguistic devices to express experiential realities that concern God and salvation. Multiple genres – prayers, devotionals, sermons, hymns – create a genre repertoire that expresses, sustains and maintains religious communities.

Catechisms are part of this Christian genre repertoire; like other texts that embody spirituality they contribute to shaping religious attitudes. For example, in *GC*₃ we ask whether everybody should search for his own happiness. The answer runs as follows: ‘No, because I share with all other human beings in brokenness, shortages and guilt. The most beautiful things

35 R. Venter, ‘A Trinitarian Approach to Spirituality. Exploring the Possibilities’, *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71 (2015), 7; N.F. Uwland-Sikkema etc., ‘How Is Spirituality Part of People’s Meaning System?’, *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 10 (2018), 157-65; J.-P. Fortin, ‘Spirituality as Lived Interpretation. A Transformative Encounter between Two Traditions’, *Religious Studies and Theology* 35 (2016), 37-51.

in life are ephemeral, even the best is toil and trouble. True joy lies in God, the source of life, and in Jesus Christ, the light of the world.' This answer – but here the authors speak – embodies spirituality in multiple ways: (a) personal engagement (the use of 'I'); (b) a not so optimistic anthropology because humanity is in need for redemption; (c) happiness is understood in terms of finding joy in God; (d) an eschatological vision beyond this life is implied and located in the source of life and the light of the world; (e) the text calls for an excentric spirituality: true joy and ultimate life is found elsewhere and not in our inner being or in some ideal state of the world; (f) the language connects to the Christian language of sin and guilt; (g) on a deeper level – made explicit in footnotes to the text of *GC3* – the answer alludes to various biblical texts. The text thus articulates a distinct Christian spirituality; it shapes the religious attitude of its users.

Hermeneutics: Intertextuality and interpretations

GC3 is also a clear example of the role of hermeneutics in religious texts. The first hermeneutical aspect is intertextuality. Being part of a 'genre repertoire', the text of the *GC* is part of a network of texts. We already mentioned several examples of allusions and quotations from biblical texts, hymns, prayers and liturgical scripts that found their way into the *GC*, either explicitly quoted or assumed in the semantics or structure of the answers. The genre repertoire of religious texts is deeply hermeneutical. Hence, *GC3* explicitly mentions a dominant metaphor in the New Testament for Christ ('light of the world'), quotes Biblical wisdom, taken from the book of Psalms (Ps. 90) and the book of Ecclesiastes (Eccl. 1), and assumes the confessional idea of sin and its effects running through all humanity. The *GC3* is thus a text among other texts.

Further, hermeneutics is also at stake when the Christian faith is articulated in contemporary language and is culturally contextualized. Take for instance the choice for 'happiness' in the *GC* as a central theme. The 'genre repertoire' of a religious community thus consists of texts that are contextual renderings of the Christian faith, at least at the time of writing. Certain interpretations by users of the religious text are anticipated.

Usually the genre repertoire consists of a mixture of all sorts of texts, not only in terms of genre, but also from the perspective of time. New texts, such as the *GC3*, need to be woven into the fabric of existing texts, older and younger, in order to contribute constructively to religious practices.

Conclusions

Kathryn Tanner argues that theology has to meet people where they theologically are. This fits a rather common set of characteristics of religious texts: they aim to help believers, and among the driving dynamics are the ability to connect theologically, to speak a commonly shared religious language, and to contribute to maintaining or improving religious practice. This calls for an engaged theology.

Writing the *GC* challenged a distinction that governs current scientific discourse in Western theology. The distinction between scholarly publications and publications or for the general public construes a gap between science and faith. Newer scientific paradigms, however, stress the significance of engaging religious practitioners, communities, and believers with the theological academic enterprise;³⁶ lived religion contributes to theological discourse.³⁷ These approaches generate new perspectives on the similarities and differences between theological and religious texts. The construction of the *GC* was a hybrid form of doing academic theology and writing popular theology. Hence, we understand both the outcome as well as the process of writing the text as ‘theology’.

Religion is in the repertoire. Insights from genre repertoires contribute to overcoming the separation of academic and popular theology. The *GC* aims to combine an engagement with religious convictions and experiences of everyday believers, normative credal and Scriptural texts, theological texts and academic theological articulations. The hermeneutics of intertextuality, moving between various levels of theological abstraction and engaging with lived spirituality illustrate religious texts as ‘genre repertoire’. Everyday believers and academic theologians contribute equally and distinctly to the repertoire. Religious experience is thus located in the production and reception of the entire textual repertoire.

The fragmentary auto-ethnographic reflections on writing the *GC* proved to be a fruitful first attempt to reconstruct the theological enterprise empirically and to study the construction of religious texts. A systematic collection and analysis of data on practicing theology clarifies the complexity, creativity and multilayered process of the production and reception of religious texts. The writing of a catechism is just one particular case.

³⁶ H. de Roest, *Collaborative Research in Practical Theology. Engaging Practitioners in Research on Christian Practices*, Leiden/Boston 2019.

³⁷ C. Marsh, P. Slade, S. Azaransky (ed.), *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, New York 2016.

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