

## The dance of the saints

### Participation and observation in the theology of Conrad Willem Mönnich – a modern Dutch approach

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In the works of the Dutch Lutheran theologian C.W. Mönnich (1915-1994), saints are perceived as members of the community of saints, that is the Christian congregation. In other words, the round dance of the saints and the dance to the table are the same. This article provides an outline of the tension between a Lutheran perspective of participation and a Modernist perspective of observation in view of both the dance of the saints and 'ordinary' dance. The tension with ordinary dance is provoked in a Modernist manner: by a dilettante's performance on a theologian's congress.

A church historian with interest in liturgy, Mönnich renders account of being involved in both Christianity and modern culture. Of great importance for Mönnich is an everlasting actual dimension of Christianity: Christians of all times are in dialogue with the Word of God, which, by means of liturgy, is present today.

In Mönnich's works, the theological research for the meaning of Christian topics in a contemporary context means becoming aware of cultural positions and appreciations. To a great extent this awareness is reached by changing perspectives or roles and attention for unconventional imagination – the dilettante, therefore, frequently occurs in his works. Next to observation (or spectatorship), in this article, consciousness (or awareness) and agility are held for characteristics of a Modernist perspective.

I concentrate on three of Mönnich's works. First, *Reidans der heiligen. Hagiografische verkenningen* (Round dance of the saints. Explorations of hagiography),<sup>1</sup> in which the meaning of the late antique and early medieval life of the saint is brought up in a modern cultural context. The saint is perceived as a dancer and a player in God's play. In the second place, I refer to *Antiliturgica. Enige aantekeningen bij de viering van de kerkelijke feesten* (Antiliturgica. Some notes on celebrating the ecclesiastical feasts).<sup>2</sup> This work shows that liturgy can be conceived as a theatre play, a dance and a feast. The third book I bring up is the literary artistic work *De jongste zoon* (The youngest son),<sup>3</sup> in which the non-liturgical representation of a Christian state of being is questioned. For

<sup>1</sup> C.W. MÖNNICH: *Reidans der heiligen. Hagiografische verkenningen* (Amsterdam 1962).

<sup>2</sup> C.W. MÖNNICH: *Antiliturgica. Enige aantekeningen bij de viering van de kerkelijke feesten* (Amsterdam 1966).

<sup>3</sup> C.W. MÖNNICH: *De jongste zoon* (Amsterdam 1958). The title refers to the 'prodigal son'.

theologians, understanding an artistic dance as something heavenly turns out to be problematic. In an exemplary way, the modern theologian's dilemma is made clear: how to represent Christianity in accordance with its own truth.

## 1. The tourist and the devotee

First, I concentrate on the way in which Mönnich deals with two perspectives on the truth of the life of a saint: the tourist's and the devotee's. By confronting these two perspectives, Mönnich points at the ambivalence of representing Christian truth in a cultural context. In *Reidans der heiligen* the tourist is a traveller with interest in historical questions; the devotee, on the other hand, faithfully participates in ritual.

Mönnich makes clear that, entering a cathedral as a tourist, we do not have the required knowledge "to understand the truth about the saints positioned high above the altar."<sup>4</sup> Their 'stately movement' remains in our memory. We see that they are dancing. However, to come 'nearer' to their lives, reading their hagiography will not help, because reliable 'biographical facts' are seldom found in it. Furthermore, these saints lived in very different circumstances. Mönnich starts out from the insight that in every possible way there is a distance between the twentieth century tourist and the saints. The tourist wants to find a modern entry to them, but their inner motives cannot be experienced anymore. "The consideration that these liturgical figures along the walls, in the windows (...) once were people like us, therefore does not bring them any nearer to us." But there is another perspective on the saints, for

candles are burning for their images, lighted through the devotion of present-day church-goers; people demand help, their intercession; one is on respectful, but by all means familiar terms, sometimes rather embarrassing. But however: the saints seem to be less far away than supposed by the tourist, when he sees their heavenly dance in the sparkling of the mosaic stones or held fast in the rhythm of the lines of the paintings.<sup>5</sup>

Mönnich's interest for both a participation and a tourist perspective on saints and ritual reflects the shift of attention that has taken place in the research on this field in the twentieth century. Instead of a one-sided accent on, for example, scientific naming or the normativity provided by (church) authorities, the attention has been shifted to "the broad process of production, distribution and consumption of culture."<sup>6</sup> This new research perspective implies that the

<sup>4</sup> MÖNNICH: *Reidans der heiligen* 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem* 9.

<sup>6</sup> P. POST: Liturgische bewegingen II: personen en patronen. Het tweede Landelijk Liturgiewetenschappelijk Onderzoekprogramma, 2001-2005, in *Jaarboek voor liturgie-*

life of a saint is not just regarded as an offer of devoutness by the Church or as a historical subject, but especially also as a bearer of meaning in the process of giving meaning by which groups and individuals go through and fill in the religious i.e. the liturgical repertoire offered to them.<sup>7</sup>

Mönnich's interest in both a spectator and a participation perspective with regard to Christianity and culture also becomes visible in his societal occupations. From 1943 till 1946 he was the minister of the Evangelical-Lutheran church in Maastricht. After that he held a professorship at the University of Amsterdam, until 1982. A church and dogma historian, he was interested in the way of the church in the midst of culture.<sup>8</sup> Next to his academic work, he frequently took the pulpit, especially in liberal congregations.

The interest in a tourist perspective is evident from the travels he made alone or with students and colleagues. They made bus trips through France and Ireland several times and toured through medieval cathedrals, cloisters and museums. The first journey took place in 1954, a year after Mönnich published *Pilgrimage. Ontmoetingen met de cultuur*<sup>9</sup> (Pilgrimage. Encounters with culture). The book is the result of a travel through France he made on his own in 1953.

In *Pilgrimage*, Mönnich writes about what it means to be moved by faith and by involvement in modern culture at the same time. Both affections ask for a reorientation with a view to World War II. The loss of friends during that era made a deep impression on him.<sup>10</sup> Later in this article I will make clear that the literary way in which Mönnich re-establishes his commitment with culture can be understood from a Modernist point of view.

The preference for self-examination, consciousness of cultural roles and perspectives – moreover, the unmasking of cultural pretensions – and, in particular, sympathy for the dilettante<sup>11</sup> are important indications for Mönnich's affinity with Modernism. Moreover, in the post-war era Christianity's claim for (absolute) truth is continuously disturbed by the cultural context: it is unmasked and put into perspective.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Post on the saints' feasts: Liturgische bewegingen II, 166.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. C.W. MÖNNICH: *De Weg en de wegen: aspecten van de kerkgeschiedenis* (The Way and the ways: aspects of church history) (Amsterdam 1959).

<sup>9</sup> In this article I refer to the 4th, unaltered, impression (Baarn 1989).

<sup>10</sup> MÖNNICH: *Pilgrimage* 169-170.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. *Ibidem* 9.

## 2. A Lutheran perspective on participation in sanctity

In *Reidans der heiligen*, Mönnich confronts the literary genre of hagiography and the truth about saints represented in it with Antique as well as Modern expectations concerning literature and sanctity. Here, I focus on the way in which the saint is presented as a participant, namely, as a player in God's play and as a member of the community of saints.

According to Mönnich, hagiography does not draw characters as classical literature did.<sup>12</sup> It is not the saint's personality that matters, neither in moral nor psychological respect. Of first importance is "man as the player in the drama of the obedience; he is 'persona' in the limited, technical-dramatically sense of the word."<sup>13</sup> Compared to this theatrical dimension, individual personality remains of secondary importance. But it "does help to determine the way, in which the human being plays in God's covenant's play."<sup>14</sup> As an ingredient of the play, man's personality is meaningful. In this manner, an element of history is being honoured; existence is bound to an 'unrepeatable situation'. Hagiography is not written with a view to the personality itself, but to a person's "being with the Lord. Passing through a development is not found in the life of the saint. On the contrary: most of the time the hagiographer wants to show that from the beginning his character stood at the side of the Lord."<sup>15</sup> For instance, from his youth, Anthony is the man who turned his back upon the world. The same holds for Martin of Tours, Benedict of Nursia and Columba; they "do not pass through a proper development."<sup>16</sup>

This aspect of hagiography is strongly accentuated by Mönnich. The saint must be seen as a player – an artist – but the life of a saint is not "the fight of heroes, who are so great that even the gods have to take sides."<sup>17</sup> The personality of the hero does not matter, neither does his inner power: his 'superhuman stature'. "With a frankness, that sometimes touches the lack of shame, hagiographers happen to display the weakness of their characters."<sup>18</sup> As an example, Mönnich takes a story about a Palestinian monk<sup>19</sup> who had to "contend with lewd desires." He went to a brothel in Jericho, in order to 'cool down' his lust. But upon entering, he contracted leprosy. Seeing himself in this condition, he returned to his cloister and thanked God. According to Mönnich,

<sup>12</sup> MÖNNICH: *Reidans der heiligen* 63. As an example for classical literature, Mönnich mentions Theophrastus.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem* 64.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem* 100.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*. The story, taken from John Moschus' *Pratum Spirituale* (dated ca 619), is referred to twice, on the pages 74 and 100.

the elements of this story could perfectly be used for a ‘psychological novel’: a man, “by desire driven against his own conscious will.”<sup>20</sup> However, the hagiographer is not interested in this. “The one thing of importance is the punishing and redeeming interference by God.”<sup>21</sup>

Asking for the historical truth of the lives of these saints, Mönnich states that this does not lie within the narrated material. We cannot know whether the author of the story used ‘subjective representations’ or not. A specific framework of interpretation is necessary.

The only thing we have are the lives of the saints; therefore, the standards for their truth have to be searched for in those writings themselves. We know the origin of those writings: the ecclesiastical-ascetic quarter. The question for their truth is the question whether they remain faithful to the thoughts and representations of their background. Seen from the biblical context, in which the stories were placed, that is the case.<sup>22</sup>

According to Mönnich, “hagiography makes the saint.”<sup>23</sup> The meaning of the saint is constructed in continuation with biblical imagination and within the domain of the Church. For Mönnich, the imagination of hagiography is bound to the dogma of forgiveness, outlined in the Gospel. “The saint belongs to the *communio sanctorum*, the community of saints, and the dogmatically bound word [that is, the forgiveness, EP] ... is the means of communication in it.”<sup>24</sup>

Questioning the truth of hagiography, one should acknowledge this given because,

in the end (...) the dogma of the church sovereignty determines the truth of hagiography. That dogma can be repudiated, but then no criterion is left over for the judging of the truth of the saint’s life.<sup>25</sup>

From this, a connection with Mönnich’s Lutheran perspective on saints, liturgy and the church is easily made. In *Antiliturgica*, Mönnich quotes article VII of the *Confessio Augustana*: “The church is the gathering of saints among whom the Gospel is preached purely and to whom the sacraments are administered correctly.”<sup>26</sup> As becomes clear in other works, in the Word and the sacraments Christ’s forgiving of the impious (*impii*) is of central and sovereign

<sup>20</sup> MÖNNICH: *Reidans der heiligen* 100.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem* 101.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem* 65.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> MÖNNICH: *Antiliturgica* 75. Cf. *Confessio Augustana* VII: The church is the *congregatio sanctorum*, in qua evangelium pure docetur et recte administrantur sacramenta.

importance.<sup>27</sup> Christ is forgiveness; he gives himself to us on his altar. Therefore, sanctity is not the result of the human ascent to God.

The question whether one is sanctified or not, when going to the Lord's table, is, because of the sovereignty of his gift, within the framework of this Lutheran thought of no real importance. Anyhow, one comes to the table as unworthy, and anyhow, one receives the Word, the Word that is forgiveness, but that can be repudiated.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, and of special importance for us, sanctity is conceived within a liturgical context because saints are those who receive remission by means of the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. In this way saints are 'liturgical figures',<sup>29</sup> and hagiography is the 'concentration' of the truth of liturgy.<sup>30</sup>

### 3. Ambiguous truth

In Mönnich's works Christian truth is ambiguous because it is relational. As becomes clear on several places, the lively confrontation with this truth undermines vested images and dogma's. The presence of both ambiguity and antidogmatism in Mönnich's works also shows a sensitivity to Modernism.

'Meeting the Other',<sup>31</sup> that is through his word, is the centre of Mönnich's perspective of participation. However, the confrontation with the unintelligible causes unrest. Reason, in particular theology with its tendency towards objectivity, is perceived as a defensive weapon against this. According to Mönnich, theology is a way of disguising the impact of the meeting in order not to be frightened, and, therefore, it is an 'impious business'.<sup>32</sup> This godlessness, however, cannot be avoided. Of importance for a theologian is that the tendency towards objectivity and certainty is recognised. Christian truth remains rather 'flat, vulgar' and 'unintelligible'; one must confess oneself to it, in order to understand God's Gospel.<sup>33</sup>

In *Reidans der heiligen* this ambiguous dilemma is explored by means of the perspectives of the tourist, who wants to understand what is seen, and the

<sup>27</sup> C.W. MÖNNICH: *Manducatio impiorum*, in MÖNNICH & VAN NIETRIK: *Hervormd-Luthers gesprek over het Avondmaal. Explicatio van de consensus over het Avondmaal 1956 tussen de Nederlandse Hervormde en de Evangelisch-Lutherse Kerk* (Nijkerk 1958) 111-137.

<sup>28</sup> MÖNNICH: *Manducatio impiorum* 125.

<sup>29</sup> MÖNNICH: *Reidans der heiligen* 9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem* 44.

<sup>31</sup> MÖNNICH: *Pelgrimage* 65.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

devotee, who lights candles. The tourist's high cultural expectations are unmasked and related to a distanced position of spectatorship. Seeing a devotee, Christian sanctity occurs as a platitude or even a banality. From a spectator's viewpoint, the meaning of the devout practice cannot be understood fully.

The perspective of participation, however, is not unambiguous either. By choosing the pious devotees, who light a candle for a saint, as representatives for present-day involvement in sanctity, Mönnich, in particular, might provoke reformed Christians, since for them such a practice is sometimes 'rather embarrassing'.<sup>34</sup> For them, asking the saints for help – their intercession – is out of question.

Mönnich's way of dealing with sanctity must be understood in relation to his Lutheran background, since the Lutheran tradition also shows ambiguity with regard to saints. The sixteenth century debate about invoking the saints, in which both Luther and Melancton participated, makes clear something about the shaded meaning and position of the saints in the Lutheran tradition. The reformers agree that man, the saints included, cannot reach God by their own means. Even though they have done great deeds or miracles, one cannot call upon saints for help. Only Christ is the mediator of God's mercy. However, as Melancton states in his *Apology* (1531), the *Confessio Augustana* approves of honouring the saints: *Confessio nostra probat honores sanctorum*.<sup>35</sup> This phrase of Melancton is quoted by Mönnich as a motto for his *Reidans* and, therefore, illustrates his affinity with a Lutheran conception of the saints. Nevertheless, Mönnich's example of the devotees who light a candle for a saint makes clear that honouring the saints is neither a distanced, nor a political or theological correct kind of contact. It is a controversial action. By taking the devotees' practice for an entrance to the meaning of the saints, Mönnich shows that theological systematisation, as Melancton's, does not have the last word in this matter.

It might be understood this way: in Mönnich's conception of the 1960's, the honouring of the saints in a modern context has become a confrontation with a rather embarrassing and vulgar truth. At that, it implies the unmasking of both high cultural expectations and theological systematisation. This is reflected in Mönnich's presentation of hagiography for he shows that it is devotional literature: – we may add – a vulgar literature. Those who read this literature and want to understand the true meaning of the saints at least have to understand this. Cultural and theological certainties have to be undermined. As I will show later, in Mönnich's works, the subversion of static truths is frequently brought about by the performance of the amateur and the dilettante. Their expression is controversial and causes unrest because cultural pretensions are unmasked. This preference for unmasking is typical for the literary current Modernism.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. note 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Apologia Confessionis Augustanae* XXI, 4.

In view of the reception of *Reidans der heiligen* by Kees Fens, a Dutch literary critic, his contemporaries recognize Mönnich's honouring of the saints. According to Fens, Mönnich teaches readers how to read. By introducing them to the structure and theological background of hagiography, a literary genre is disclosed that, until then, was regarded as a devotional curiosity.<sup>36</sup>

Mönnich's dynamic conception of Christianity also becomes clear in his representation of liturgy.

#### 4. Liturgy: performance and dance

In the pamphlet-like *Antiliturgica* (1966), Mönnich confronts classic Reformed liturgy with the modern demands for democratisation and participation. As with regard to the saints, an affinity with performing arts that enable participation becomes manifest in this.

In accordance with Ionesco's avant-gardist conception of theatre in his *Antithéâtre*, Mönnich expresses the longing not to allow any spectators in liturgy: all those who are present should be involved in the job that the man at the altar or the pulpit has to do.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, authorized liturgy should be imagined as a dance and a feast.

Take your service book, Lutheran minister, and dream away about all that you know of historical factualities, expert explanations, worries about the style and the practice, until you see something festive.<sup>38</sup>

Mönnich's imagination is clear-cut. The role one gets, is that of a guest – a partygoer. Liturgy is a festive movement to the Messianic meal. It is a dance to the Lord's Table, a movement toward Christ's action – his performance. He “delivers his cross and above it his peace to his servants.” Everything else diverts from this movement, that is life, for movement should be understood as the utmost characteristic of life.<sup>39</sup>

Liturgy and life are dynamically involved in each other. Mönnich refers to article VIII of the *Confessio Augustana* to make clear how this should be thought of. “The sacraments and the Word are working because Christ has ordered them.”<sup>40</sup> Like the individual faithful existence, the existence of the community of the Messiah can be understood only by the obedience to this order.

<sup>36</sup> K. FENS: *Reidans der heiligen*, in *De eigenzinnigheid van de literatuur. Opstellen en kritieken* (Amsterdam 1964) 31-35.

<sup>37</sup> MÖNNICH: *Antiliturgica* 5-6.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem* 9.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem* 87.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem* 82.



The people of the Messiah is not a thing. Perhaps it could be described objectively, sociologically and religiously, according to its linguistic customs and other characteristics (...), but that does not bring us further liturgically and theologically. The people of the Messiah live: that is better, but I can say this only when I belong to it, that is, when I join that life, a person in connection with other persons, servants of the law, partygoers of the Messiah; life is recognized by life.<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, in order to understand Christianity, one has to join the party and dance.

The conclusion of *Reidans der heiligen* fits with this conception: saints must be understood from a perspective of participation. That is why the writers of hagiography place them in the space of the Church, that is, the community of those who belong to Christ as his servants. Truth is bound to the perspective of the performance. "Outside the Church there is no salvation." According to Mönnich, this word of Cyprian holds for the saint "just as much as for the priest and the layman." They all need the Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the penance, for "these are the gifts of Christ." "Out of it, says Christianity, there is no rescue. That is why the saints, in their sacred round dance, come nearer to the people of the Church than the accidental tourist thinks."<sup>42</sup>

So far, it has become clear that in Mönnich's works the meaning of saints and liturgy are brought up in an artistic scenery that enables a perspective of participation. The saint is presented as a player in God's play and as a dancer; liturgy is imagined as a performance, a dance and a feast. In this, Christ is the centre of action. In the following, the tension with a non-liturgical, secularised artistic scenery appears to be depicted in a Modernist manner, namely with the help of introducing the dilettante.

## 5. A Modernist preference for observation

From a literary viewpoint, *Pelgrimage* and, in particular, *De jongste zoon* can be related to the literary movement Modernism. In these works, participation in culture is thematized in a way that reminds of the issues of Menno ter Braak. The occurrence of the dilettante is of particular importance – both in scientific and artistic respect. In literary studies, Ter Braak is held for a Modernist, next to Du Perron and Vestdijk.<sup>43</sup> Ter Braak's Modernism becomes clear from the way in which he discusses the great foreign Modernists, such as Larbaud, Gide, Proust, Joyce and Thomas Mann.<sup>44</sup> (With Du Perron, he was among the first

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem* 83.

<sup>42</sup> MÖNNICH: *Reidans der heiligen* 126.

<sup>43</sup> D. FOKKEMA & E. IBSCHE: *Modernist conjectures. A mainstream in European Literature 1910-1940* (London 1987).

<sup>44</sup> The following is based on FOKKEMA & IBSCHE: *Modernist conjectures* 261.

who identified the Modernists as a group.) Characteristic for the literary movement Modernism (1910-1940)<sup>45</sup> is a preference for observance, detachment and awareness or consciousness. The Modernist is sceptical; he does not commit himself to politics, not to mention religion. Furthermore, Modernists do not believe in definite explanations. One of the most important weapons in their fight against dogmatism is an ongoing intellectual activity: one has to keep moving. Therefore, travelling is helpful; by physical movement one can put things in perspective.

Ter Braak's admiration for Modernist authors is apparent even in his vocabulary. An example of his preference for observation may be found in a review of Thomas Mann's *Bekentnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull*: "Here the hero is a *spectator* and so participates in the action only because he is a modest antenna, because he registers..."<sup>46</sup> Ter Braak admires the Modernist features of Mann's works; he sees him as a representative of 'a spectator culture.'<sup>47</sup> In the act of 'onlooking', the 'desire for beauty' and the instinct for 'orderliness', which frequently appear as conflicting forces in Ter Braak's works, are 'united'.<sup>48</sup> The spectatorship is related to a position of 'neutrality' and "unites the interest for action with a lack of action of one's own."<sup>49</sup> Probably, this 'synthesis' related to spectatorship and 'moving neutrality' is the only one Ter Braak could accept.

In several of his works, the unmasking of 'eternal truths' can be found. In *Het tweede gezicht* (The second face),<sup>50</sup> his preference for dilettantish artistry perfectly illustrates the distanced character of his cultural commitment. The essays in this book (first published between 1932 and 1935) are to be understood as "a protest against intellectual naiveté." Ter Braak is not searching for

great artists, great philosophers, great statesmen, great experts, but for the creatures, hidden behind the masks of their cultural role and very often grown together with it, so that they regard it as sacrilege when one speaks of a masquerade.<sup>51</sup>

In particular, the rise of National Socialism in the 1930's brought him to a sharp analysis of contemporary cultural values:

<sup>45</sup> Here, I refer to the reconstruction as made with hindsight by FOKKEMA & IBSCHE, esp. 1-47. 'Modernists' did not create a distinct profile for themselves as a movement.

<sup>46</sup> M. TER BRAAK: De toeschouwer als oplichter, in *Verzameld werk* 4 (Amsterdam 1950) 142.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem* 146.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem* 142.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem* 142.

<sup>50</sup> M. TER BRAAK: *Het tweede gezicht* (Amsterdam 1963).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem* 5.

The first face of European civilization certainly is one of the most honest masquerades ever shown; because before an artist faces that his dedication to art might answer to a less cultural name and before a philosopher renounces his words, from which he derives his prestige, relatively much has to happen. A world war, for example, does not teach this people anything.<sup>52</sup>

Ter Braak can be held for an exemplary representative of Dutch intellectual secularisation because of his 'Afscheid van Domineesland' (Farewell to the ministry's land, 1931).<sup>53</sup>

In 1985, Mönnich referred to Ter Braak's issue with an article titled 'Geen afscheid van Domineesland' (No farewell to the ministry's land).<sup>54</sup> Ter Braak has given Mönnich a thought that stayed with him; in 1946, when he became a professor, Mönnich already quoted his works.<sup>55</sup> This clearly points at the importance of Ter Braak's position for Mönnich. 'Geen afscheid van Domineesland' shows that there is an important difference. To make clear both the resemblance and the difference, a closer introduction to the dilettante is necessary.

For Ter Braak, with his agile mind, the dilettante served as a model to undermine the pretentious masquerade<sup>56</sup> and also to provoke the dogmatic position of, for example, the historian Johan Huizinga.<sup>57</sup> As already mentioned, in Mönnich's works the dilettante is also of importance. *Pelgrimage* is the result of a traveller's experience and written with the pretension of a dilettante. Here, however, *De jongste zoon* will be closely examined.

In this book, Mönnich draws several situations in which the question of the representation of Christian truth is related to unpretentious artistry. Especially the chapter 'The miracle',<sup>58</sup> summarized below, shows what kind of confusion an amateur artists' performance might cause. Through their dilettantish and authentic expression, feelings of unrest rise among the theologians present, but they also cause some of them to dance. Through the unrest and the participation, cultural roles and pretensions are unmasked. Furthermore, the event causes some theologians to start a dialogue which makes them conscious

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem* 6.

<sup>53</sup> M. TER BRAAK: Afscheid van Domineesland, in *Verzameld werk* 1 (Amsterdam 1950) 163-169.

<sup>54</sup> C.W. MÖNNICH: Geen afscheid van Domineesland, in W.N.A. KLEVER (red.): *Filosofische theologie* (Baarn 1985) 172-192.

<sup>55</sup> C.W. MÖNNICH: *Het verzwegen dogma* (The concealed dogma) (Amsterdam 1946) 6.

<sup>56</sup> M. TER BRAAK: Diderot's dilettantisme, in *Verzameld werk* 6 (Amsterdam 1950) 563-566.

<sup>57</sup> M. TER BRAAK: Huizinga voor de afgrond, in *Verzameld werk* 1 (Amsterdam 1950) 332-347.

<sup>58</sup> MÖNNICH: *De jongste zoon* 27-51.

of the cultural implications of their job and thoughts. So, their claim on truth turns out to be a cultural one.

Besides, close reading of this chapter learns that even dogmatic thinkers – they know all the answers – are brought up as dilettantes. This paradox can be understood as a humorous and even Modernist criticism of Ter Braak's farewell to Christianity.

### **The miracle<sup>59</sup>**

During an international and rather boring theological congress, some of the participating theologians turn out to be amateur musicians and artists. In the evening they surprise the other 'representatives' of the Church with their authentic contributions. A Polish member of the synod stands up and plays Glazounow on an old piano; an American, "who always agreed with everybody and who, with joyful optimism, knew the answer to all questions and the reconciliation of every contradiction," puts upon the stage an imitation of Groucho Marx. The performances hurt because in the Romantic music the audience recognises its loneliness. And when the delegates laugh about Marx, they laugh about themselves. With their authentic engagement the artists cause a *démasqué* of the delegates; in a painful manner, the gap between representation and authenticity becomes tangible. The laughter of the man imitating Marx causes 'fear' and feelings of 'alienation' because the utmost 'freedom' of humanity is felt. At last, a violin player – "his face makes one think of the last portraits of Gustav Mahler" – and a piano player appear. The 'miracle' is going to work, the narrator tells us. The intensity of their interpretation of Schubert's *Sonatina* (opus 137, 3) jumps over to the other guests and even causes some of them to dance. There must be an 'angel' at work because earlier that week the 'legitimacy' of performing 'classic Vienna Masses' in public worship was discussed and rejected by all representatives. And now, this little *Sonatina* is accepted without questioning. Furthermore, in several contributions sharp speakers had referred to all kinds of features and traits of present-day man. They had concluded happiness wasn't available for a Christian "because of his sad helplessness and evil pride." The only thing that could make a Christian happy was "the expectation and nothing but the expectation of the last things." But now the representatives come to realize that the experience of participating in the little 'round dance' at the end of the *Sonatina* does not fit with these outlines. The sudden happiness caused by the artistic eruption confronts them with the insight that it is not possible to come to a 'self definition' with the help of 'strictly adapted outlines'. In their dance, the representatives appeared to be not that 'helpless' as they had supposed they were. According to the narrator, only an angel could cause such an 'inconsistency'. The delegates have 'recognised' and 'accepted' a co-representative as their 'brother' and taken over his dance. However, the exact meaning of this recognition and this being 'carried away' is left open, for, as the narrator tells us, the only one who could know the meaning – the angel – has gone.

For two of the theologians, remaining in the lounge of the hotel, such an end does not suffice. They have seen a miracle and are 'disturbed' by it, "more than they are willing to acknowledge." They start a dialogue: a discussion about

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem* 28-30.

continuity and discontinuity between participation in artistic features of Modernity and Christian identity. They discuss the value of authenticity with regard to Christian representation. One of the partners holds on to the discontinuity: this theologian knows he is “a representative of his Lord.” He believes a new identity has been given to him and although the old one is “prickling and irritating”, he can not and should not let go of it. He must stay linked to the ‘old life’ because renewed and set free, he is sent in the reality of the old life to ‘represent’ his Lord. A deadlock in the conversation occurs when this theologian refuses to acknowledge the angel and the miracle. From his perspective the cultural artist they witnessed was a kind of seduction – an attempt to lead him away from being a representative of the new life. The other theologian responds to this by saying that at least now he understands the attitude of his colleague. They agree the best thing would be to go to sleep because there is nothing left to say.

Then the narrator focuses the attention to the violin player and gives insight in his thoughts. He already went to sleep earlier. With his considerations, he undermines the sense of his colleagues’ discussion

It had not been for mysterious reasons that he had chosen Schubert this evening. Sober minded, he had considered: that little Sonatina is easy on the ear, it will make all the difference to these people, and for such a relaxed evening it is digestible enough. Old person? New person? That did not have anything to do with these notes, did it? That belonged somewhere else.<sup>60</sup>

Some fundamental questions concerning Christianity and culture are, more or less explicitly, expressed in this summary. Is there a relation between an authentic amateur performance and the Christian representation of ‘old’ and ‘new’ life? Is it possible to express these states of being in a dance and, in this case, on a congress? Or do the old and new life belong to another field, such as Christian liturgy?

The preface to *De Weg en de wegen*<sup>61</sup> makes clear these questions are, from Mönnich’s point of view, of the utmost importance to bringing the church up in the cultural debate. In this study “the church is caught sight of as the new people of God, that moves through the old world to the Promised Land of God’s future.”<sup>62</sup>

Mönnich’s personal involvement in ‘old’ and ‘new’ life becomes clear from *Pelgrimage*. As mentioned above, this book reflects the re-thinking of life and culture in the post-war era. Here, I focus on the way in which Mönnich portrays his ambivalent memory of the years in Maastricht. He writes: “God has become someone else since then”. “What did I know of God when I arrived at Maastricht?”<sup>63</sup> The time in the south was idyllic, indeed, but it was a ‘masquerade’.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem* 50.

<sup>61</sup> See note 8.

<sup>62</sup> MÖNNICH: *De Weg en de wegen* 9.

<sup>63</sup> MÖNNICH: *Pelgrimage* 170.

The holiday, the dream. In Maastricht I did receive that as a gift. I loved it, that is, I was committed to it with the peace of my being. I lived in this idyllic world, I worked from it and the pain of those years I took up in it. It was the harshest time of the occupation that I spent in this idyllic world. The time of great fear and grief of which one could not think, but that was hidden behind each thought, behind each word, behind each action.<sup>64</sup>

*Pelgrimage* is a 'self-examination'.<sup>65</sup> Mönnich realizes life cannot be represented from an idyllic-religious perspective because behind every peaceful sign there is a dark reality. Faithful feelings of peace are no longer innocent. At the same time, he thanks God for the idyllic reality. Here, we see the tension between old and new life. Only a sovereign God connects these two, as in liturgy. Old life has not finished for the old 'material' is taken up in a new 'construction':

I did not live in accordance with what I received, I know that. However, I did meet God's love, I cannot approach it, I cannot repay it, I cannot answer it, I am no good for it. God is too big for me ... I feel like an old-fashioned, nineteenth century ornament ... What God makes of me is not very stylish, an iron construction in the form of stonework, something like the former station of Bruges, with its pretty gothic covering. God looks very much like a nineteenth century contractor. Otherwise, I, precisely I, would not have lived in an idyllic world these years, precisely these years.<sup>66</sup>

These words seem to touch a lack of shame. However, as in the life of a saint, that occurs to be the just expression of the way in which God treats people. The 'new' construction, therefore, remains hardly understood.

Some conclusions about resemblance and difference between Mönnich and Ter Braak can be made. For both, the dilettante is important because he causes unrest. By his performance, cultural and religious pretensions are unmasked. Absolute truth is put into perspective. For Mönnich, however, the perspective of liturgical participation is one of the possible perspectives. Whereas Ter Braak left the domain of the Church once and for all and solely preferred the perspective of the spectator, in Mönnich's works, on his search for truth, the spectator is confronted with an actual performance. In this confrontation the limits of understanding Christian truth from an observational viewpoint become clear. Christianity's truth can only be found by participating in its liturgy. However, the spectatorship remains because Mönnich knows that, after about an hour, liturgy comes to an end. The feast is 'complete' and, at the same time, 'unfinished'. "In heaven, there is a dance; for a while we joined it, for the

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem* 169.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem* 12.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem* 170-171.

time being that is enough. Eternal worship is not our part yet.”<sup>67</sup> In modern culture, Christians get to know themselves as faithful and secularised at the same time.<sup>68</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

According to Mönnich, the truth about Christian sanctity cannot be understood without the dramatic movement outlined in liturgy. The saint's new state of being is a role in the play between God and his people; in liturgy the play of forgiving of the impious is performed. Theology is to become conscious of what it means to play a part in this play.<sup>69</sup> This implies the permanent shifting between two perspectives: actual participation in liturgy and consciousness with regard to the boundaries of the play. These boundaries indeed can be felt in liturgy: a ritual has a beginning and an end. For Mönnich, a performance is temporarily and, therefore, Christian truth remains ambivalent and problematic until the youngest day. In this belief, both a Lutheran and a Modernist perspective can be recognized.

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<sup>67</sup> MÖNNICH: *Antiliturgica* 15.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. MÖNNICH: *Manducatio impiorum* 132-133.

<sup>69</sup> MÖNNICH: *Geen afscheid van Domineesland* 172-192, p. 192.

