

# Dilettant, pelgrim, nar

## De positie van C.W. Mönnich in cultuur en theologie

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The theologian, cultural historian and essayist C.W. Mönnich (1915-1994) occupied a prominent place in Dutch culture in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> He became a public figure in the 1950s and 1960s through his bestseller volume of essays *Pelgrimage. Ontmoetingen met de cultuur* (1953), his contributions to the newsmagazine *De Groene Amsterdammer* and other writings. This study describes Mönnich's cultural practice and in particular its implications for the dynamics of culture and Christianity. It demonstrates that a number of cultural fields cross paths in Mönnich's work, and that he considered neither theology nor Christianity to be static entities. Examination of Mönnich's position in culture and theology contributes to the further understanding of the role of theologians in Dutch culture in the second half of the twentieth century.

My study concentrates on Mönnich's appropriation of four different motifs, namely the dilettante, the pilgrim, the fool and the saint. Examination of literary and liturgical elements in his work illustrates how Mönnich, with his Lutheran and artistic background, gave significance to these motifs. I suggest that they serve Mönnich as 'identities': they are objectified concepts of himself as an actor, selected, developed and constructed in a process of social and cultural interaction.

The study is in three parts. *Part I* comprises an analysis and description of the processes of appropriation of the dilettante and the pilgrim during the 1940s and 1950s, and of the discourses and practices that Mönnich was involved in at the time. In *Part II* the two volumes of essays *Pelgrimage* and *De jongste zoon* (1958) are analysed by means of two models borrowed from literary theory: modernism and existentialism. In addition, Mönnich's preference for 'masking' and 'unmasking' is placed in both a modernist and Lutheran perspective. *Part III* investigates the period from the 1950s onwards, when Mönnich introduced the fool and saint motifs. Again, the processes of appropriation are related to contemporary discourses and practices.

### Part I. The appropriation of motifs: the dilettante and the pilgrim

#### The dilettante motif

The appropriation of the dilettante motif reaches a climax in *Pelgrimage*, where it becomes an artistic 'identity'. The theologian and human being Mönnich reveals

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that he candidly connects culture and the Christian faith. He argues that cultural beings should be compared to the amateur musician, who strives to play the most difficult pieces but is unable to account for his activity. The same holds for the believer who reaches out to God without the legitimization of an expert's authority. Mönnich's 'identity' construction has autobiographical dimensions, since the dilettante motif refers to social, musical and intellectual activities encouraged during his time as a pupil at the Vossius gymnasium. The ties of friendship, and the intellectual and artistic affinity that he felt with Jacques Presser, his former history teacher and a secular Jew, are of special importance. Indeed, the cultural climate of his youth, the social frame of friendship and the experienced affinity are foundations upon which Mönnich's self-perception was based. In particular, the figure of Presser was a lasting influence. The appropriation of the dilettante motif is also grounded in debates on democracy and the role of intellectuals in a changing society. During the interbellum, the famous Dutch cultural historian Huizinga and the historian and modernist essayist Ter Braak discussed the function of the dilettante. Huizinga feared populist tendencies, that would also permeate the humanities, and therefore refused to grant the dilettante a dominant role. His opponent Ter Braak viewed dilettantes as emancipatory figures, who, through their subjective imagination and creativity, might free history from its naïve ideal of objective knowledge. Mönnich tends to adopt Ter Braak's view of the dilettante and incorporates it in his concept of theology and cultural history. Characteristic of this transformation is Mönnich's approach of the dilettante from a Lutheran point of view. Distrust of (religious) experts plays a role here: in the Lutheran liturgy, no one can mediate between the believer and God. Unlike Ter Braak, who ostentatiously took leave of Christianity because it shrouded truth, and who therefore detested liberal church ministers, Mönnich developed theological criteria to criticise the dominant role of ministers.

In the contemporary theological debate, Mönnich criticised Barth and sympathised with the Dutch phenomenologist Van der Leeuw. To a certain extent Mönnich agreed with Barth that God's sovereignty and culture are related to one another as opposites. By means of his concept of the subjective dilettante as a culture lover, however, he criticised the lack of cultural foundation in Barth's theology. Mönnich believed the theologian to be an undeniable part of the culture around him. Here Van der Leeuw served Mönnich as a model. A 'true dilettante', Van der Leeuw combined critical detachment with involvement. In particular, the role of 'involvement' intertwines dilettantism and scholarship. Indeed, according to Mönnich the involved dilettante represents a new type of expert.

The great value attached to involvement and subjectivity in Mönnich's treatment of the dilettante motif is not without effect on his self-perception as a scholar. He argues that the reality within which a scholar goes about his work is both complex and a source of uncertainty: impartiality is an illusion. Though the scholar may play a role in society as an expert, he must realise that he is not

above reality, and that the expert is always involved and biased. On the other hand, such intellectual and existential uncertainty presents the opportunity to create a new cohesion. In Mönnich's work, the creative exploration of subjectivity and involvement stimulates the theologian's reflective activity: Christianity, society and culture are put into new, ambivalent, perspectives. Mönnich's appropriation of the dilettante indeed reflects the construction of a cultural 'identity'. In his work dilettantism in fact is a metaphor for cultural practice: the dilettante represents the actor's perspective and candidly brings together various and seemingly incompatible elements of his reality. This unrestrained attitude is supported by the fact that, in Mönnich's Lutheran world, freedom is held in high esteem: those who strive for the highest freedom and even lay claim to God's reality, while being declared guilty by their God, are at the same time forgiven, simply because their God cannot do otherwise. In short, Mönnich was apparently able to remain a 'believer' through the dilettante. Faith, an irrational factor, gains a place of its own in his thinking, but is stripped of dogmatism, fixed systems and academic concepts of knowledge.

### **The pilgrim motif**

The pilgrim is a classic liturgical motif. Mönnich does not simply reproduce it, but gives it meanings of his own. His appropriation of the pilgrim therefore tends to deviate from traditional concepts and include travelling and tourism, which were a vital part of his life. Furthermore, the 'reinvention' of Vézelay in the nineteenth century as a place of pilgrimage inevitably lends Mönnich's pilgrimage the allure of traditional practice. He does not simply copy the schemes of traditional pilgrimage, however, and his pilgrim does not visit holy places like Santiago de Compostela or Rome. On the contrary, Mönnich's travels seem to have no specific goal, and in fact the motif reflects an intellectual and religious quest, rooted in Amsterdam, where he grew up and studied, and Maastricht, where he worked as a minister. Part of this quest is the search for renewal of both church and culture, a search strongly inspired by the experience of World War II and the emergence of the international Ecumenical Movement. According to Mönnich, this renewal implied a growing consciousness of individuals, (liberal) protestants included. Again, Ter Braak and his modernist attitude to life serve Mönnich as an example, and this is reflected in the figure of the pilgrim as an anti-dogmatic and detached person embodying intellectual agility. Typical of Mönnich's appropriation, again, is the Lutheran context in which he places the Christian faith. The paradoxical belief that God forgives the guilty is central to his concept of the pilgrim, as it creates insecurity in both intellectual and religious respects. According to Mönnich's conviction, those no longer certain of their knowledge of the faith have become pilgrims. The motif of the pilgrim therefore represents the awareness of the loss of all self-created certainties. Pilgrims are those who have become definitively detached.

### Discourses and practices

The significance attached to the dilettante and the pilgrim by Mönnich can be understood in the context of his own social and cultural roles. Firstly, these roles are the outcome of the appropriation of his personal background and liberal education. Mönnich grew up in liberal Lutheran circles, and cultural freedom, particularly in religious matters, always played a role in his world. Theological studies stimulated a liberal outlook, and critical detachment and doubt became the main ingredients of his scholarly attitude. A second aspect, of great importance, is Mönnich's period as a liberal Lutheran minister in Maastricht. During World War II, and shortly after the south of the Netherlands was liberated from German occupation, Mönnich's role as a minister frequently required an element of improvisation, as did his personal life too. Such difficult circumstances required a well-balanced ethical response, and this intensified his reflection as a minister and as an individual. In the footsteps of Ter Braak, he emphasised the importance of critical detachment, which he considered to be an indispensable attitude if his country was to be rebuilt. Mönnich hid Presser's possessions during the war, concealing them between his own theological books and among the Eucharistic silver of his Lutheran congregation, and in hindsight this was an act of great symbolic potential. This improvisational action brought together two types of cultural memory: the ritualised remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection, and the remembrance – hardly established at the time – of the Jews who fell victim to the Nazis. Moreover, Mönnich brought together the religious and the secular, for Presser was a secular Jew. Both aspects were to become important in Mönnich's work. Looking back, his Maastricht years influenced his role in the cultural discourse concerning engagement versus detachment, the former to a certain extent reflected in the dilettante, the latter in the pilgrim. Mönnich's thoughts on the cohesion of the humanities and life itself form a third important factor. After becoming professor of theology at the University of Amsterdam, Mönnich referred once again to the modernist Ter Braak. In his analysis of the human need for certainty, he emphasises the meaning of doubt and intellectual agility. A fourth aspect is Mönnich's role as an expert, a role which commenced in the late 1940s, particularly in Lutheran and liberal-Christian circles. Initially, he legitimised this role by emphasising his personal experience as a minister, in which the uncertainty experienced during the war was a factor of importance. The manner in which Mönnich fulfilled his growing public role corresponded to his appropriation of the dilettante, who is a new type of expert, namely one who is personally involved. His construction of 'identity' was not without a struggle. In the late 1940s, actively involved in the renewal of the Lutheran church order, he was accused by radical liberals of neglecting the liberal-protestant identity. There were objections in Lutheran circles as well, and in response Mönnich published a series of essays entitled *Introspection*, in which he defended his choices. One of his conclusions was to abandon the thought that the ministry and the individual could form a harmonious entity. In hindsight, *Introspection* can be viewed as a

prelude to the cultural self-examination of *Pelgrimage*. A fifth consideration is that Mönnich's construction of 'identity' can be related to his membership of the executive committee of the liberal Christian broadcasting society V.P.R.O. in the 1940s and 1950s. In this role Mönnich also emphasised the importance of contrasts, especially in the debate on cooperation with the Christian broadcasting society I.K.O.R., which, unlike the V.P.R.O., broadcasted on behalf of the churches. A sixth factor, finally, is Mönnich's contribution to the discussion on the relation between the church and Israel. Greatly concerned about both anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism, Mönnich argued in favour of the emancipation of the Jewish people, a viewpoint similar to that adopted by Ter Braak shortly before the war. Mönnich's opinion also reflected the position of Presser, an emancipated Jew *par excellence*.

## Part II. Literary perspectives in *Pelgrimage* and *De jongste zoon*

In the second part of this study, Mönnich's artistic appropriation of the dilettante and pilgrim motifs is analysed by means of literary models. The essay volumes *Pelgrimage* and *De jongste zoon*, in which these motifs mainly appear, are considered in the context of both literary modernism and existentialism. Mönnich's writings contain elements of both movements. In semantic and syntactic respects, modernist characteristics prevail. However, *De jongste zoon* in particular bears resemblance to the existentialist code. I therefore put forward the proposition that Mönnich was a modernist theologian, and that in his day literary modernism was a factor in theology. I also argue that Mönnich's recognition of existentialist values, while exerting pressure on his modernism, does not deny it.

### Literary modernism

Literary modernism in the Netherlands is related to writers such as Ter Braak, Du Perron and Vestdijk, while international figures include Musil, Proust, Gide and Eliot. In the model I have adopted, the movement was manifest in the period 1910-1940. The modernist nature of *Pelgrimage* appears from the use of the semantic fields 'consciousness' and 'detachment'. The essays contained in this volume are presented as a self-examination. The main character comes to the fore as a dilettante with self-knowledge and a pilgrim permanently on his way. His introspection is stimulated by diverse memories and a deep examination of the culture which he encounters on his travels or at home. This examination displays similarities with the modernist field 'observation'. Mönnich's emphasis on the meaning of inconsistency and irresponsible action is also similar to the modernist code and corresponds directly to the *acte gratuit*. In literary modernism, unmotivated action confirms the detached position of characters. In addition, Mönnich's work contains a Lutheran perspective: only those who are inconsistent can come to realise that man can be justified by God alone. The Lutheran doctrine of justification also contributes to Mönnich's preference for 'impossible paradoxes'. Like modernist authors, he frequently points out the

paradoxes of reality, and even considers the consciousness of contradictions to determine the nucleus of Christian identity. The literary forms of essay and dialogue support the intellectual freedom to adopt different points of view, such as that of participant or observer.

### **Literary existentialism**

Literary existentialism is inseparable from the names of Sartre, De Beauvoir and Camus, and was manifest in the period 1935-1960. Influenced by history, writers realised that the time for being noncommittal was bygone, and that what increasingly mattered was the presence or absence of involvement in the social context. With the exception of figures such as Blaman, the Dutch reception of this literary movement was mainly philosophical and theological. As one of few Amsterdam theologians, Mönnich reacted in a literary manner, and his initial response to the popularity of the French existentialists was marked by irony. At the same time, the involvement typified by the participant's perspective, which also applies to the dilettante in *Pelgrimage*, seems to be related to the existentialist value 'engagement'. In Mönnich's work, however, the distance so typical of modernism remains intact. His 'encounters with culture' never really imply choices, but are rather intended to maintain alertness.

### **Reception and theological context**

The theme of 'masking' and 'unmasking' is a vital link between the modernist code and the theological discourse. According to Mönnich, viewed by his social and intellectual environment as a 'playful theologian', wearing a mask or playing a role contribute to the unmasking of religious, moral and intellectual fixations. In my view the dilettante and the pilgrim actually function as such masks. Moreover, these motifs can be understood as temporary and changeable identities.

### ***De jongste zoon***

The case study of *De jongste zoon* underlines the central position of unmasking and role playing in Mönnich's thinking. At the same time, however, his theology proves to be the (detached) reflection on this cultural practice. Through dialogues Mönnich also discusses the meaning of engagement, which results in a lower valuation of the dilettante, whose actions prove to be too gratuitous.

## **Part III. Appropriation of motifs: the fool and the saint**

In *part III* Mönnich's appropriation of the fool and saint motifs is analysed. Their growing importance from the 1950s coincides with the increasing collective consciousness of what had happened to the Jews and with the ongoing democratisation of society, particularly the universities.

### The fool motif

Initially, Mönnich regards the fool as a playful way to mask the seriousness of theology. He also relates the motif to Presser, who had commenced research into the extermination of Dutch Jews. Following the thought of Heine, from whom he borrowed the motif, Mönnich argues that the fool has no solution to the crisis of humanity, and therefore waits for an answer. In the same discourse, he compares Presser to the biblical figure of Job, who is confronted with personal loss; he also compares himself to the friends of Job, who, like theologians, always have something to say. Thus Mönnich concludes that he too should wait for an answer. Another dimension of his appropriation of the fool motif is Mönnich's interpretation of the figure of Don Quichote. Critical of the earnestness surrounding the renewal of the universities in the early 1970s, Mönnich takes the Spanish knight as an example and emphasises the meaning of both renewal and failure. He also began to reflect on the significance of mockery and scepticism. His public performance in these years sometimes resembled the self-appointed court jester, as he pointed out the relativity of power and the meaning of uncertainty. In this period, therefore, the fool motif functions as an 'identity'. Later, in the 1980s, Mönnich again refers to Heine's fool. Now the fool's doubts and questions, and the loss of meaning caused by World War II, are the starting point for an existential and intellectual quest. Mönnich examines the cultural heritage of Western Europe and poses the question whether the lonely fool might find consolation in biblical narratives, and in particular whether the biblical 'stranger' might represent a position the fool can identify with. I consider this complex quest for narrative cohesion as an attempt to relate Presser and his life story, so representative of the fate of the Jews, to the great narratives and motifs of Western cultural history, i.e. to the level of cultural memory. Personally, Mönnich views the consciousness of being continuously involved in narratives as the main difference with Ter Braak. In Mönnich's view, life exists by the grace of narratives; narratives stimulate an ongoing search for meaning, the playing of roles, and therefore (modernist) intellectual agility. Because of the possibility to explore this kind of attitude, Mönnich concludes that it is unnecessary to turn one's back on Christianity as Ter Braak had done.

### The saint motif

The motif of the saint only functions as an 'identity' within a liturgical setting in Mönnich's work. Pre-eminently a participant in liturgy, the saint represents justification by faith, and indirectly Mönnich's Lutheran perspective. Those who put on this 'mask' of faith, which is a kind of 'model', become part of a religious community that, through its symbols, embraces all time and place, the *communitas sanctorum*. Although Mönnich began to criticise this concept during the 1960s, modifying the 'saint' into the 'righteous', his initial perception is important in order to understand his construction of identities. Mönnich considers the saint to be a *persona* (i.e. a mask or a role in a drama) for whom per-

sonality and inner motifs are of secondary importance. This concept gradually becomes independent in Mönnich's writings, and he assigns it to his own public role, for example. Parallel to this process, he considers the saint to be beyond reality, providing him with an ethical dimension as the morally engaged righteous. Mönnich also transforms the concept of the community of saints to the 'Messianic body', that consists of the righteous. The *persona*-concept undergoes something similar. In his relation to the 'other', the player in a drama must show increasing responsibility. In existentialism, the confrontation with the other also plays an important role. The development of the saint and the *persona*-concept can be related to Presser. When Mönnich evaluates Presser's role as a historian and 'witness', his criterion is in fact that Presser is a *persona*. As a secular Jew, historian and widower engaged in the history of the destruction of the Jews, Presser is thrown into a dramatic situation in which he must make the correct choices. Mönnich's evaluation of Presser has a religious dimension too, since Mönnich calls the historian a 'member of the Messianic body'. For Mönnich this means that the witness Presser exceeds the boundaries between Jews and Christians, and between belief and unbelief, which actually places him next to Christ. Mönnich's growing appreciation of Presser as a moral person parallels and seems to interact with the manner in which he modifies the saint to a morally engaged righteous figure. My study therefore concludes that the significance that Mönnich assigns to Presser affects Mönnich's appropriation of the saint, and that he breaks open the symbolic order of Christianity.

### Discourses and practices

In the debate on democratisation, Mönnich initially employs a modernist perspective, claiming that democratisation implies mental independence. Despite his sympathy with a new generation of students, from the early 1960s his authority, and his artistic and intellectual manner of making religion meaningful, can no longer be taken for granted. As the public debate, especially at the universities, begins to concentrate on political aspects of democratisation, Mönnich attaches great importance to the playful dimension. For example, he is convinced that the Provo movement and its *happenings*, as well as avant-garde theatre, can contribute to the debate on liturgy. Only in the late 1960s, when he attended faculty debates on democratisation, did Mönnich become actively involved in political aspects of university renewal. This move parallels to some extent the above-mentioned shift to a morally engaged theology, in which Presser served as an example. Mönnich actually attempts to fashion his own discipline, the history of Christianity, to Presser's engaged approach. Especially for those practitioners of church history who concentrate on confessional history, he argues, this implies the risk of losing their identity: a theologian's identity should be influenced by the situations in which he is placed, which include modernity. Although Mönnich's theology becomes existentialist, his appropriation of the fool illustrates that he remains more playful than existentialist authors.



## Epilogue

The study of Mönnich's appropriation of four motifs thus demonstrates that three of these are indeed 'identities'. By means of the dilettante, the pilgrim and the fool, Mönnich tells who he is and who he wants to be. He constructs a modernist attitude to life and scholarship. Self-conscious, detached, and aware of contradictions, he addresses culture and religion. In interaction with his social, cultural and societal context, Mönnich chooses terse self-images, which repeatedly refer, though in differing degrees, to the tension between the private and the public. These 'cultural characters', by which Mönnich connects cultural and theological circuits, are masks which veil his person. This study also demonstrates that the masks, initially occurring in modernist and liturgical contexts, reflect various phases in Mönnich's life and work, and therefore reveal the contours of an intellectual biography. Both playful and earnest, detached and engaged, an observer and participant, Mönnich unites in himself issues that he shares with his contemporaries.

Because he composes his own 'identity', Mönnich can be viewed as an exponent of the process of 'depillarisation', which has given the individual the opportunity to choose with regard to his 'identity' and his position in culture. This study brings to light that Christianity and religion as a whole are part of this dynamic process. Implicitly, his appropriation of the four motifs illustrates the cultural dynamics of his theology, and in a wider sense the manner in which he creates new meanings from both cultural and Christian points of view. Mönnich appropriates meanings in interaction with Christian and cultural traditions, but he does so in an eclectic manner: classical motifs such as the dilettante, the pilgrim, the fool and the saint are modified and employed in new contexts.

