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To Leave Your Kindred and Your Father's House

Contemporary Dutch Christian Border Narratives

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ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

In this paper we analyse a collection of essays written by young Dutch people who grew up in the Reformed Liberated Church, a small Christian denomination in the Netherlands. Traditionally, this church is characterised by its inwards nature: members strive to live their lives within the confinements that the church and its institutions stipulate. This has changed over the last few decades and the essays attest to the effects these changes have had on individual lives. We discuss the underlying narrative structure of their accounts and how the authors negotiate different lifestyles and interpretations of the Christian faith on either side of the borders that demarcate the Reformed Liberated tradition. We discuss if—and how—the essays work towards an outcome of ‘discordant concordance’ (Ricoeur) where narrative identities remain whole, despite relatively drastic border crossings in the course of the lives that formed them. We address how these stories give insight into how people use the stories they tell to define what needs to be remembered and forgotten when we cross borders. Finally, we discuss the relevance of these essays and our analysis of them for our understanding of today’s globalised and multicultural societies in which many are in a permanent state of transition.

ABSTRACT IN DUTCH

In dit paper analyseren we een verzameling essays geschreven door jonge Nederlanders die opgegroeid zijn in de Gereformeerd Vrijgemaakte Kerk. Deze kerk werd oorspronkelijk gekenmerkt door haar naar binnen gekeerde karakter en

de leden leefden doorgaans hun gehele leven binnen de grenzen die door de kerk en andere vrijgemaakte instituties bepaald werden. De afgelopen decennia is dit veranderd en de essays in de verzameling getuigen van het effect van deze veranderingen op individuele levens. We bespreken de onderliggende narratieve structuren van de essays en hoe de auteurs ervan omgaan met de verschillende levensstijlen en interpretaties van het christelijke geloof aan beide kanten van de grenzen die de gereformeerd vrijgemaakte traditie omsluiten. We bespreken of—en hoe—de essays naar een eindpunt van ‘discordant concordance’ (Ricœur) toewerken, waar narratieve identiteiten als een geheel gezien worden, ondanks de relatief drastische grensoverschrijdingen die plaatsvonden doorheen de levens die hen gevormd hebben. We gaan in op hoe deze verhalen inzicht verschaffen in hoe mensen de verhalen die ze vertellen gebruiken om te besluiten wat vergeten en wat herinnerd moet worden wanneer we grenzen overschrijden. Ten slotte bespreken we de relevantie van deze essays en onze analyse ervan voor ons begrip van hedendaagse geglobaliseerde en multiculturele samenlevingen waarin velen in een permanente staat van transitie verkeren.

Keywords: Life Writing, Reformed Liberated Church, border experiences, narrative identity, multiculturalism

INTRODUCTION

In autumn 2014, a book titled *Vrij Gemaakt?* was published and caused quite a stir among the more orthodox Christian circles in the Netherlands.¹ It contained 15 autobiographical accounts written by Dutch men and women in their thirties who were raised in the Reformed Liberated Church, an orthodox-protestant form of Christianity that originated in the Netherlands in 1944. In the introduction, initiator and editor Lammert Kamphuis writes that he attempted to include a diversity of voices, seeking a balance between those who are still members of the church, those who have joined other churches, and those who have broken with faith altogether. Furthermore, as Kamphuis explained in an interview with a Dutch Christian newspaper, the reason for collecting these experiences was to share the experiences of “a unique generation”, in the hope that these stories would have a “therapeutic” effect and “encourage those searching [for answers to life’s questions]”.² As such, these essays are public expressions of “individual projects of self-creation”³ and, like all life writing written for publication, they belong to “a genre devoted specifically to the marketing of privacy”,⁴ in which individuals’ felt life experiences are narrativised and presented to an audience.

In an analysis of a collection of life writing by youth of colour in Norway, Marianne Gullestad argues that citizens in contemporary multicultural

Europe “do not stick loyally to one party, organization, church, and so on, but move among them while picking and choosing”.⁵ This has resulted, she asserts, in a “nostalgic longing for an assumed former wholeness”.⁶ The starting point for the authors published in *Vrij Gemaakt?* is exactly such wholeness, which is contrasted with the possibility of ‘picking and choosing’ beyond the borders of the Reformed Liberated community. Like that of the youth in Gullestad’s study, however, their life writing can be read as an expression of the ideal of ‘finding oneself’ in the form of a more personal ‘wholeness’—an ideal set forth by the modern pluriform societies of Europe with their “focus on individuality, autonomy and freedom”.⁷ While extensive research within this context has addressed the cultural identities of Europeans with a migrant background, little attention has yet been paid to those of members of indigenous European communities with ideologies that are, in many ways, the opposite of that pluriformity, individuality, autonomy and freedom. We do not mean to say that communities such as the Reformed Liberated Church are not pluriform, but merely that pluriformity is not one of its ideals or accepted as a reality.

It is precisely because we want to focus on this self-creation process on the borders between a crumbling wholeness (in this case, of a religious culture) and the ideal of ‘picking and choosing’ in contemporary Dutch society at large that we aim to analyse the contributions to this collection as *life writing*. Life writing is—or enables—the narrative presentation of personal experience, focusing on what Mikhail Bakhtin has described as ‘becoming’: a never-ending process through which individuals learn to relate to themselves and their surroundings.⁸ As such, it brings what has been called a ‘reflectionary flexibility’ to the process of ‘identity formation’: life writing is not a mere representation of past experiences, but it implies a careful working through of these experiences, as memories are turned into a story.⁹ As such, it can be analysed as the expression of a “voice that shapes or performs selfhood”.¹⁰ This will allow us to focus on how a process of narrativisation takes place as the authors turn their border experiences into narratives of transition to explain their current beliefs and convictions.

That border experiences lie at the heart of these life writings becomes clear from a common trait of all these texts: they stress how the tradition in which the writers grew up was strongly divided into ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ spaces, both physical and metaphorical. As one contributor wrote, a central characteristic of the Reformed Liberated mentality is that it “demarcates the space in which the triune God places you and in whose story you know yourself to be embedded”.¹¹ Thus, the encounter with what lies beyond that ‘prescribed’ space is almost automatically framed as a border experience. Life writing is used to map and negotiate

the borders, such as the one between inside and outside, that incited the experience that is narrated.

Analysing life writing like the essays in *Vrij Gemaakt?* allows us to gain insight into a much wider cultural phenomenon, namely that of being in transit, of being in between lifestyles, cultures, ages... It helps us understand how people negotiate what needs to be remembered and forgotten during and after a border experience. What is the underlying structure of such accounts? Do the authors, faced with different modes of being on either side of the border, work towards an outcome in which the fragments of a life spent on different sides of a demarcation still form a whole, and, if so, how? And what motivates their accounts of encounters beyond the Reformed Liberated tradition? Before discussing the essays, we will first give a short historical oversight of the origins of that tradition, after which we will explain how we understand the process of narrativisation through which lives become stories.

FROM CRADLE TO GRAVE: THE REFORMED LIBERATED PILLAR

The Reformed Liberated Church is characterised by an unswerving orientation on its institutions and, at least originally, a strong conviction that it is 'the one true church'. For many years after the schism with the Reformed Church, for instance, it refused to add the term 'Liberated' (meant to designate that it no longer belonged to the Reformed Church at large) to its name, in the conviction that the true Reformed Church had continued through them.

Kamphuis's statement that the experiences recounted in the collection are unique is based on the claim that the generation of Reformed Liberated 30-somethings are one of the last generations in Dutch society to witness both the stability and disintegration of a 'pillar'. This refers to the concept of 'pillarisation', a unique socio-political situation in the Netherlands that became particularly visible in the 1930s and continued well into the 1960s. 'Pillarisation' is a societal process in which all areas of life became organised according to different worldviews.¹² There were roughly four dominant pillars: catholic, orthodox-protestant, social-democrat and neutral-liberal.¹³ The Reformed Liberated pillar constituted a minor pillar, after breaking with the dominant orthodox-protestant pillar in 1944. Its members built their own primary and secondary schools, a Theological University in Kampen and a university of applied sciences in Zwolle, their own student associations, a political party, a daily newspaper, care homes for the elderly and even their own travel agency. In the

pillar's heyday, it was possible to live one's life in exclusively Reformed Liberated circles, from cradle to grave.

A key figure in the formation of the Reformed Liberated Church and consequent pillar in 1944 was Klaas Schilder. He was expelled as professor-preacher by the Synod of Utrecht (1943–1945) because of disagreements on the topic of child baptism.¹⁴ Shocked by the dismissal of such a prominent figure, many members broke with the Reformed Church. Between 1950 and 1970, the Reformed Liberated Church included approximately 100,000 members who constituted, arguably, the more orthodox part of the Reformed Churches.¹⁵ As a result, for a large part of its existence, the church tended to offer an orthodox-protestant theology, conservative in its views on sexuality, marriage, the role of women, homosexuality and abortion. Its general discourse was based on a firm belief in 'objectivity' with the truth of the Bible as the ultimate source of authority, rather than the subjective and inner experiences of human beings.

An important conviction within the tradition is the inseparability of church and institutions. These institutions tend to have an 'inward gaze' and a certain sense of exclusivity, as only church members could participate in them. For instance, anyone could vote for the Reformed Liberated political party, but only church members could join it. Similarly, only church members could teach at the various Reformed Liberated schools. This former stance of exclusivity is one of the biggest bones of contention for the authors in *Vrij Gemaakt?* when they take issue, for instance, with the 'arrogant attitude' of the church they grew up with.¹⁶

With the pervasive secularisation of the Netherlands after the 1960s, the disintegration of the Reformed Liberated pillar seemed inevitable. However, it managed to sustain itself for at least 20 or 30 years after the four dominant pillars disappeared. As a result, the 30-somethings that have seen the pillar crumble have experienced what Kamphuis refers to as a "pressure-cooker secularisation".¹⁷ He notes that the authors have seen the change from a situation in which they were continually surrounded by like-minded people to one in which the various Reformed Liberated organisations were forced to open their doors to others. The pillar's institutions vanished or became parts of larger collaborations with institutions from other protestant denominations. Kamphuis presents the essays as eyewitness reports of this opening up of a formerly enclosed world.

In this light, one should also consider the book's title. It is first a playful reference to the Dutch name of the church [vrijgemaakt], which originally designated its liberation from the Reformed Church. The question mark makes the term 'liberated' more ambiguous and it becomes part of a dialogue. Is liberation—both personal and as a group—possible within the Reformed Liberated Church or does one need to cross its borders to

experience true freedom? Is it even possible to set oneself free of (i.e. completely leave behind) that heritage, or does it always somehow remain? In his introduction, Kamphuis explicitly states that he looked for authors who recognised “the confusion, struggle or crisis” that resulted from the “radical reorientation” inherent in growing up in a closed environment that was quickly opening up to the rest of the world.¹⁸ As such, the book can also be read as an evaluation of the Reformed Liberated pillar as it once was and the borders that demarcated it. Some authors completely reject their heritage, while others still appreciate the role it once played in their lives, look back on it wistfully or even still consider themselves fully part of the Reformed Liberated tradition.

BORDERS AND BORDER EXPERIENCES

A border is not something that exists in itself. There are, of course, natural borders (e.g. rivers, mountains or the space that divides ‘you’ and ‘me’), but these only become demarcations after being identified as such. This is what makes the crossing of borders so threatening and sometimes even traumatic: crossing a border means questioning its existence, its power to keep apart the things it separates. One needs only to observe the often-vehement reaction to transsexuality—which implies the crossing of what many feel to be one of the most fundamental borders in human existence—to realise how border crossing can undermine the sense of security that comes with borders and the order of things they create.

This lack of security is characteristic of what Frans Meijers calls “border-experiences”: confronted with a new situation, our sense of identity is tested.¹⁹ Faced with the border between the known and the unknown, we experience alternative ways of being and recognise the possibility of becoming something different, a potentially bewildering experience that undermines our notion of our ‘self’ as constant and reliable. Of course, the more relevant a border is to oneself and one’s sense of self, the more traumatic its crossing becomes. We barely notice borders that do not mean anything to us. In contrast, crossing the most fundamental of borders can be thoroughly traumatic. Paul Ricœur mentions conversion as an example of the latter, where the old sense of identity no longer suffices and a new one must be found.²⁰ It is a process very like that of translation: the translated poem is the same and yet fundamentally different in the same way that the converted person is both the same and fundamentally changed.

Ricœur argues that it is through narrative that we mitigate the crossing of borders and the threat it poses to our sense of self. To cross a border is to create a possible rift in the story of our lives and narrative helps us

maintain a sense of unity throughout and beyond such a transition. In this respect, Ricœur speaks of “narrative identities”: we tell ourselves and others stories to create an identity. According to Ricœur, narrative allows us to do so because it implies emplotment—selecting and linking our life events in such a way that we come to a “discordant concordance”²¹—a unified narrative that tells the story of a life through pointing out its continuities and discontinuities. Thus, narrative may help us negotiate a new narrative identity beyond the border we have crossed. That does not mean that our life stories always present our narrative identities as a unified whole: sometimes a sense of unity is only maintained through introducing its opposite—disruption—in our life stories. This is illustrated by conversion stories where the demarcation between ‘Not I’ and ‘I’ runs right through a life story in the form of a ‘before’ and an ‘after’, with the conversion itself functioning as a clear border between the two. Hence, in our analysis of these essays, we will focus on life events that are presented as rifts, as causes for border experiences, and the types of strategies employed to cope with them.

ANALYSIS

The authors of these autobiographical essays represent their youth and the closed ‘pillar’ of the Reformed Liberated Church as clearly demarcated spaces—sometimes in a very physical way, describing them as specific locations with strict borders. Beyond them are ‘other’ ideas, places and people.

We will first discuss the different types of life events that are represented as border experiences, pointing out the distinction between those that cause the writer to challenge previously held religious convictions and those that challenge faith altogether. Then, we will look at the type of strategies these essays offer to deal with border experiences. What kind of models are offered in these life writings to reach Ricœur’s ‘discordant concordance’? Finally, we will briefly discuss how that is not only achieved through the use of certain strategies, but also in the way in which the authors’ narratives order and present their life events.

LIFE EXPERIENCES THAT CAUSE BORDER EXPERIENCES

Which life events are presented as rifts in the essays in *Vrij Gemaakt*? Because of the unique nature of each essay, these differ widely. Amidst this diversity, however, we found four recurring types of life events that

led to border experiences: *education; sexuality and relationships; contact with alternative forms of Christianity; and encounters with non-religiosity.*

We use the word 'education' in a broad sense here, transcending experiences at primary school or university. We also use it to refer to life events that occurred during the authors' student days (e.g. membership in student associations, either rooted in the Reformed Liberated tradition or of a more general and evangelical nature), as well as books that somehow challenged the authors' previously held convictions. In fact, many of the essays have a narrative structure that is reminiscent of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, in which the main character finds his or her place in the world through following an educational trajectory. Given that this book explicitly focuses on growing up in the Reformed Liberated pillar, this is not surprising.

Education is often where people first encounter ideas from beyond the spaces and voices dominant in their youth. This can even happen within Reformed Liberated education itself. Several essays describe confirmation classes as the scene for border experiences. One author writes that it was during confirmation classes that his "years of aversion to the church as an institute and for the loveless God of the predestination doctrine took off".²² He is most bothered by how doubt and individual thought are ruled out from the start. Answers to questions that young believers may have are not arrived at through critical thought, but deduced from the 'church's true faith'.²³ Similarly, another author writes: "we were allowed to ask questions, but the answers were printed in a booklet".²⁴ This confinement of thought had an unintended effect: the very process of demarcating the Reformed Liberated discourse led to an encounter with its borders and a longing to go beyond them. "In an attempt at rebellion, I put a question mark behind the title—*I Believe*—of every new issue", she writes, referring to the booklets used in her confirmation classes.²⁵

Higher education is regularly mentioned as a phase of poignant border experiences. Even—or maybe especially—those who studied theology at the Reformed Liberated Theological University in Kampen experienced their studies as a series of confrontations with novel ideas. These ideas often challenged previously held notions of truth and falsehood. One author writes how she "was upset and worried about so many grey areas. Is faith not a black and white matter?"²⁶ Another describes how, when volunteering as a bartender at the student club of the theological university of Kampen, he sadly concludes that the late-night drinker he is serving is right when he rants that there is no "firm ground beneath their feet: no God, no Bible, no Jesus, nothing".²⁷

Books often function as catalysts in these life narratives. Transmitting a multitude of voices and ideas, they are pitted against the univocal

upbringing of the authors, in which all was aligned with the reformed interpretation of the Bible. One author illustrates how fiction may play a crucial role in the creation of a narrative identity.²⁸ He describes how he started to read voraciously after commencing his history studies: “I read anything I could lay my hands on. A lot of history books, but also a lot of philosophy and modern literature”.²⁹ An especially pivotal book for him was George Orwell’s *1984*. The notion of ‘doublethink’—to truly believe in something you know is untrue, as the dictatorial regime in Orwell’s dystopian novel constantly demands of its subjects—became the death knell of his already wavering faith. He describes how the destructive effect doublethink had on the body and spirit of the novel’s protagonist reminded him of the reformed teachings of his youth.

Even religious texts can challenge previous convictions. One author discusses how, while studying in Kampen, he read Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics*, a central text for the reformed Christian tradition: “I was [...] surprised by his openness and the curiosity with which he elaborately used other academic disciplines”.³⁰ This openness and curiosity are then starkly contrasted with the university’s approach. Thus, reading a foundational reformed text itself led to a border experience, in which the author became aware of the closed nature of his alma mater and the Reformed Liberated tradition it represents.

The most striking example of education as a border experience can be found in an essay in which the author frames his life story with the concepts he acquired while studying cultural anthropology. Investigating the theme of ‘masculinity’ and how masculinity is demarcated and policed within the Reformed Liberated Church, he concludes that he was not offered sufficiently ‘broad and nuanced’ words to come to terms with gender issues when growing up. He describes the way in which masculinity is defined within the community as suffocating for those who “hold interests that do not typically belong to the masculine domain”.³¹ For the author, such interests became border experiences because they led him beyond the clearly demarcated spaces of masculinity that the church offers—and therefore beyond Reformed Liberated discourse itself.

Like education, moments of sexual awakening—another essential aspect of growing up—are described as border experiences. Some authors discuss witnessing cases of sexual abuse that severely shook their faith in God, but it is in essays where sexuality is discussed in the form of personal experience that it becomes a pivotal border experience. For one author, sexuality is the main issue that led her to leave the faith—and ‘the institute church’ in general—and she therefore makes it the central theme in her essay: “the church constricts me. As an example, I will now describe my sexual quest”.³² She then recounts how, as a child,

sex—or ‘sexuality’ as it was called to make things sound less ‘vulgar’—was declared ‘forbidden ground’.³³ (Note the connotation of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden here.) With that spatial metaphor, growing up—in the form of sexual awakening—becomes a migration and almost necessarily a transgression too: the Reformed Liberated discourse that is represented by this metaphor turns sexuality into a border experience that ultimately results in a movement into that ‘forbidden ground’—and thereby away from the space of origin. Once there—after having sex with a boyfriend at the age of 19—she “started to feel very guilty”.³⁴ But shame was soon replaced by anger because she expected ‘the deed’ to be “something divine, incomparable and blissful. But it was not! [...] I had made too much of a deal out of it”.³⁵ Her personal experience turns itself against the convictions proclaimed by the Reformed Liberated tradition, arguing that sex has obtained a negative connotation: “Such a shame and not how it was meant to be at all”.³⁶ The border experience of the ‘forbidden ground’ and the insights she found there ultimately carried her out of the Reformed Liberated space of her youth.

In the collection’s introduction, Kamphuis explains that the Reformed Liberated pillar really started to crumble because of direct confrontations not only with secular forces in Dutch society, but also with different forms of Christianity. This larger sociological event is mirrored in many of the essays in the form of personal encounters with representatives of different lifestyles or religious views. In one of the most vivid examples, these encounters are directly tied with physical migration. Its author is the daughter of Dutch missionaries. Growing up in New Guinea, she spent her childhood in “a world where God was an obvious presence”.³⁷ Upon her return to the Netherlands—and in an ironic reversal of where Christianity and paganism are traditionally expected to dwell—she “suddenly lived amidst hundreds, no thousands, of real-life pagans”.³⁸ The border experience left her aware that different ways of life than her own are possible: “When I cycled through the city, I asked myself whether the people that I encountered along the way believed in God or not”.³⁹

For another author, such sudden awareness of religious alternatives happened at a festival of ‘charismatic’ Christians, who emphasise the *personal* experience of God’s presence. He experienced a strong contrast with the teachings of his youth: “The Reformed Liberated Church cultivated a strong group-culture—seeking the right path together, for you the same as for me. At the charismatic festival, however, it was about personal calling and spirituality, about one’s personal responsibility and talents”.⁴⁰ This border experience rekindled rather than challenged his faith, but it led him beyond the Reformed Liberated pillar. He ultimately started his own church in the form of weekly meetings with like-minded

friends, “to share food and to explore a daily Bible passage”.⁴¹ This very private “church that does not know anything for sure”⁴² is, in many ways, the complete opposite of the church of “knowing for sure” that he grew up with.⁴³

In two narratives, the encounter with non-religiosity is not personified in an encounter with someone or something else, but takes the form of a sudden realisation: the loss of faith is not the outcome of a certain border experience, but is the border experience itself. Thus, one author describes how, amidst 1000 young worshippers at a church service, he is suddenly struck by “an intense feeling of sobering. I saw the people around me, I heard the music and the words of prayer, but it could not move me. There was no God, no Spirit.”⁴⁴ Another author describes a similar experience, when God suddenly ceased to exist for him when he lay looking at the stars one summer night: “And I looked at the heavens and only saw the pitch black of night”.⁴⁵ These life events create a strong divide between ‘before’ and ‘after’. Both authors can only give meaning to the experience through a quest for the right words. The first found those words in his anthropology studies; the other through writing a “hysterical poem [...] about a frog in a pot full of soup on the stove. The frog tried to climb on a meatball, but every time the animal thought it finally could sit, the meatball turned and it fell. The fire was meaninglessness. I was the frog.”⁴⁶ Thus, in these instances, the authors literally ‘translate’ themselves to account for their border experiences.

STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH BORDER EXPERIENCES

What kind of strategies do these authors employ to cope with these border experiences? In modern European societies, ‘picking and choosing’ when forming one’s identity has become the ideal. This collection recognises this ideal: all the authors end up becoming ‘their own authority’ instead of embracing “a ready-made package of identities and [interpreting] it in a literal way”.⁴⁷ They come to this by dealing with border experiences in roughly four ways: *critical examination* of the Reformed Liberated discourse; *counter-balancing* that discourse; a *complete break* with the Reformed Liberated Church or faith in general; or leading a *double life*. These are not mutually exclusive and may be combined.

The most common strategy in this collection is *critical examination*. When faced with what lies beyond their own pillar and its discourse, the authors reconsider the Reformed Liberated tradition, or even faith in general. This may happen quickly, as illustrated in the sudden losses of faith described above. For many authors, however, the critical re-examination

of their heritage and Christianity in general spans many years, involving a long series of life events and border experiences. One author ends her narrative with a deliberate lack of resolution, a suggestively phrased open ending: "My lips whisper sweet words of longing: approximation, connection, the Other. A new heaven. A new earth. And the sea was no longer."⁴⁸ The sea reminds her of her encounter with the deadly 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, the border experience with which she opens her narrative. For her, critical examination has become a new way of life, rather than a phase of transition between two certainties. We can see this in the essay described above as well, where the author starts his own church in which 'not knowing for sure' is the starting point.

Authors who did not turn their back on Christianity at large *counter-balanced* border experiences that encompass an encounter with negative aspects of the Reformed Liberated tradition or faith in general with a positive religious experience outside that tradition. These experiences can take the form of a *deus ex machina*, for instance when an author who witnessed sexual abuse at his school describes the fact that he retained his faith—albeit slightly ironically—as a 'miracle'. Or, more explicitly, when another author, after having lost his faith, experiences a moment of heavenly interference in his life. He describes how, after being annoyed by a religious song that he had to listen to repeatedly, he told a friend: "If I encounter that song one more time, I will regard it as a sign".⁴⁹ The next day, he picked up a note in the street and read parts of the song lyrics. "I felt caught, as if Someone had interfered with me."⁵⁰

For most writers, however, the life event that serves as a counterbalance is less dramatic. One was warned that her decision to study theology at a non-Christian university would lead her to lose her faith. In her narrative, that attitude symbolises the closed-mindedness of her fellow Reformed Liberated believers. She found, however, that "contrary to what everyone expected, I did not lose my faith, but for the first time in my life discovered a merciful God I could believe in without cutting myself and my questions short". Nevertheless, the pillar still lost her: "With this realisation, my distance from the church of my childhood grew".⁵¹ Another author describes how he temporarily lost his faith. A new border experience counterbalanced his negative experiences with religion in his youth when he encountered another church: "I heard a different gospel than I was used to. The resurrection became a rebellious act, poverty a curse, and peace and justice concrete and urgent political problems."⁵² Many of the narratives in the collection are conversion stories in which the starting point is a faith that proves unsatisfactory because of the sense of confinement that comes with it. After a certain period of seeking (wandering in the desert, one is tempted to say in this context), the seeker encounters a satisfying form of Christianity.

Leaving the church is a strategy for dealing with border experiences. Because of the definite demarcations that characterise its discourse, the authors clearly experience the Reformed Liberated tradition as something one either belongs to or not: you are either ‘in’ or ‘out’. Out may mean *another Christian denomination*, but it may also mean something more radical: a *loss of faith* altogether. Interestingly, writers who broke with the Reformed Liberated faith, but not with faith in general, never seem to regret their decision, other than occasionally feeling “little more than a bit of nostalgia”.⁵³ Those who broke with Christianity at large represent the nostalgia far more poignantly. One author’s narrative ends in the present: he describes how he visited his family ‘today’ and felt his “exiled eyes burn with nostalgia” upon hearing his mother pray in “a voice that diminished all illusions, all wisdom, all vanity”.⁵⁴ Again, the loss of faith is presented as a physical movement, a migration, when he describes his eyes—and, *pars pro toto*, himself—as ‘exiled’, even though he sits among his religious family members. Another author ends her essay as she began it, describing herself on “birthdays and holidays” as a “stranger in their world” (referring to her family). “One of them, but at the same time not one of them. I cannot feel what they feel, think like they think. I miss a gene that connects them.”⁵⁵

The fourth recurrent strategy, living a *double life*, can be understood as an attempt to evade the sense of loss and loneliness that comes with being ‘out’ of the clearly demarcated Reformed Liberated tradition. It is only mentioned by a few authors and never presented as a solution. One author contributes a dialogue with his 12-year-old self in which his younger self remarks that such a double life is a ‘weak’ move. The ‘grown-up’ author agrees, but argues that his younger self can only judge him so harshly because he does not yet know what it is like: “At the margins of a herd you do these kinds of things. It is impossible not to start living double lives.”⁵⁶ This strategy is always presented as a survival mechanism. It often accompanies longer periods of doubt, during which the author is no longer able or willing to embrace the Reformed Liberated discourse, but cannot, for whatever reason, leave the community.

It might involve a certain negotiation, where the author tries to stay true to their own inner thoughts, but does so in a way that will not cause offence to his or her fellow believers. A young theologian, for instance, describes how, while writing his Master’s thesis and articles in a religious magazine, “I would always write: Christendom, the Bible, the Church says this or that”.⁵⁷ Another theologian writes: “How did I manage to remain in the Reformed Liberated Church until my thirtieth birthday? Simple. I first did so out of conformity and later out of opportunism.”⁵⁸ The opportunism here refers to the fact that he was writing his dissertation at the Theological University in Kampen. In the Netherlands, researchers

working on their PhD thesis are often employed by their universities as research assistants, and revealing his lack of faith would have meant losing his job and the opportunity to graduate. Thus, his double life ended the day after graduation: "I withdrew my membership of the Reformed Liberated Church in Kampen-Zuid."⁵⁹

EMPLOTMENT (BEFORE AND AFTER THE BORDER EXPERIENCE)

As described above, all these essays describe border experiences as either the starting point or the effect of a shift from identity formation as a process of deferring to the authority of a single source to autonomous 'picking and choosing' as a strategy of self-creation. How, then, do these narratives emplot the life events leading up to and following that shift? The context of the stories needs to be considered here. They centre around border experiences because that is precisely the purpose of the book: to narrate the life experiences that lead up to, as the editor phrases it, a "radical reorientation".⁶⁰ The authors may be assumed to be aware of this purpose as they write their narratives. They use emplotment to select and structure their life events in such a way that they lead up to the author's position at the moment of writing: a position *after* that radical reorientation.

The stories are therefore mostly narrated chronologically and imply a clear teleology in which the endpoint is presented as the necessary outcome of a series of life events that started in the Reformed Liberated community. One author explicitly reflects on this narrative teleology when he writes: "Apparently [...] your first life experiences in the then still enchanted world of the church prove to be fundamental for the question of whether to 'stay' or 'leave' at a later stage in your life".⁶¹ Thus, childhood memories are made meaningful from the perspective of the outcome of 'staying' or 'leaving'. Another author writes that at the age of eight he developed claustrophobia when a woman, who sat right in front of him in church, fainted and had to be carried out on a stretcher. Since then, he preferred to sit at the end of a row, afraid of becoming nauseous and throwing up. This childhood fear culminates in his present rejection of the 'formal sphere' of Reformed Liberated Church services in which "the eyes of half the congregation would burn in your back" the moment you stood up to go to the bathroom.⁶² The passing of time is thus structured chronologically, but also spatially: from the middle of the church, to a place close to the door and finally out that door—and out of the community.

Such ordering allows for a reassessment of the univocal discourse of one's youth from a vantage point that values polyphony. This is most

clear in the essay written by an anthropologist, carefully constructed and clearly and explicitly informed by an ethnographic method of analysis. He begins by offering his reader memories of how the physical church he attended as a child was divided into separate spaces for men and women. These divisions are then presented as symbolising *mental* demarcations that function similarly: they separate the male from the female. Such demarcations, he seems to suggest, are foundational for the discourse and therefore need to be heavily policed. Crossing must be punished, as he discovered as a young adolescent, when other Reformed Liberated boys derogatorily call him ‘homo’ because of his interest in theatre and poetry.⁶³ He concludes that the problem was a ‘lack of words’: ‘homo’ was the only available word for a boy who did not fit his peers’ neatly demarcated notion of a ‘man’.⁶⁴

Although the academic character of his analysis is typical of his essay, it is certainly not the only narrative in this book that thematises the distance between the young ‘I’, confined within a Reformed Liberated space that is often, because of its clear borders, represented as suffocating, and an older ‘I’ who has gone beyond that space and gained a new point of view from which new meanings are given to memories. One author presents his essay as an “interview with my 12-year-old self”⁶⁵ and another—who wrote an essay that is among the most damning of the Reformed Liberated community—feels the need to use the third person singular when speaking about her youth. Thus, the border experience is presented as so fundamental that the person before and after is no longer the same. As this and other essays suggest, growing up as a member of this church over the past 30 years inevitably led to such fundamental border experiences.

This notion of growing up as an inevitable border experience is, of course, fundamentally human, but because of the closed nature of the Reformed Liberated pillar (its hermetic character being the most obvious constant throughout the essays), one could argue that they experience this more acutely. This reminds us of Salman Rushdie writing about the merits of migrant literature: “[T]he past is a country from which we have all migrated, [...] its loss is part of our common humanity. [But] the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form.”⁶⁶ In the Dutch context, we could mention the work by Abdelkader Benali, a Dutch author of Moroccan descent, whose early works about young migrants growing up in the Netherlands are permeated with metaphors of inside and outside. In a novel like *The Long Awaited* (2001) or a play like *Unclean* (2004), crossing from the closed spaces of the parental home and the mosque with their one single truth (Islam) to the multitude of Dutch society is represented as moving through a ‘depraved borderland’.⁶⁷ There appear to be very interesting

similarities between the intense way in which migrants and members of the Reformed Liberated Church experience the fundamentally human event of growing up: both lead to a similar use of metaphors of space and the dichotomy of openness versus closedness.

Chronological ordering is helpful when trying to make that point. However, not all the essays are mere chronological accounts of events. Several make a point about the Reformed Liberated tradition by describing the past and present simultaneously. One author describes how they collide during an epiphany he has upon entering his childhood church: "When I walk into the church hall, legion memories announce themselves immediately".⁶⁸ The expository effect is a strong opposition between 'then'—described as 'stagnation', 'enclosurement' or a 'heavy feeling'—and 'now', described as a 'liberated feeling', 'continual process' and 'progressive'. A similar effect is reached in the essay in which the author stages a conversation between his present self and his 12-year-old self. Doing so foregrounds the differences between past and present convictions.

The most striking and complicated time structuring is found in a life narrative which opens with the author describing how she faced the possibility of dying in Thailand during the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. She then jumps forward 7 years to recount the baptism of her first child, after which she describes being diagnosed with a chronic auto-immune disorder a few months later. This is followed by a short sabbatical from work, during which she explores questions of faith. She then abruptly jumps back in time to discuss her childhood experiences. From there, the narrative continues to give a chronological account of several border experiences in her childhood and adolescence. In the final part of the essay, she jumps forward to her present self at the age of 33 and evaluates her current position: "I became who I never wanted to become. Only yesterday I was happily Reformed."⁶⁹ The constant use of flash-forwards and flash-backs cause an instability in the narrative that points to her act of writing 'in the margins'. In other words, she is writing from within a border experience. Unlike the other authors, she does not take a stance that allows her to evaluate the various life events that have led to border experiences retrospectively. She cannot yet see the consequences.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Faced with the pluriformity of a modern European society, none of these authors choose retreat within a univocal unity in which tradition regulates identity. Instead, they opt to embrace the open-endedness of an existence in which identity formation is the responsibility of the

individual. This is the model that—despite the differences between these authors—is provided by *Vrij Gemaakt*? All the essays reject the ideas that a centre outside oneself—the church and its oppressive morality—can make your life choices for you. Instead, the unquestioned unity and complete demarcation of that church and the spaces it dominates are things that belong to the past, things left behind, even by those who continue to be part of the community. Their accounts of border experiences are motivated by desire and curiosity for, rather than rejection of, what lies ‘outside’, beyond the ‘inside’ of the Reformed Liberated tradition. The border experiences, evoked by different kinds of life events, offer opportunities for critical reflection of what lies on both sides of the border. Thus, the lives narrated in these essays are no longer contained by the old ideal of confining oneself to Reformed Liberated spaces from the cradle to the grave, nor is that ideal presented as appealing.

In these life writings, we find instead a markedly different ideal, where ‘not knowing’ becomes a dominant theme and is presented as the good life. If there is a “nostalgic longing for an assumed former wholeness”, it remains just that; never do these authors try to establish a new source that has all the answers, nor do they regard the new model of ‘not knowing’ as all-encompassing.

The authors present this model by structuring their essays so that the Reformed Liberated discourse of their youth is somehow linked to the spaces they found beyond that discourse. They may do so by giving their life writing a chronological structure that clearly divides ‘before’ and ‘after’ one or more border experiences that carried them beyond the discourse of their youth. The past, then, becomes a time and space when certain notions and ways of being could not exist because the Reformed Liberated tradition did not offer the right words; these words are found in the present (although some authors continue to use words and notions from the discourse of their youth to give meaning to the present, even when it lies outside the Reformed Liberated tradition). Some authors represent the growth towards the present as a voyage towards forbidden grounds, other spaces, different modes of being. Others choose a less linear chronological structure and thereby juxtapose Reformed Liberated spaces with ‘other’ spaces more poignantly, either by describing moments where the past and the different present converge, or by suggesting links and ruptures between past and present through literary devices such as flash-forwards and flash-backs.

There is a significant difference between the authors as far as Paul Ricœur’s notion of ‘discordant concordance’ is concerned. Despite the conversions, ruptures and border crossings described, it is striking how clearly most of these essays represent a single life account rather

than a string of disconnected fragments. If the author comes to reflect critically on his or her Reformed Liberated upbringing, the critique is almost always connected to border experiences that occurred early in life. The stories often begin with feelings of unease about the strict demarcations between 'inside' and 'outside' that they experienced in their youth and the plots thus revolve around border crossings. We found that many of these essays suggest that because the Reformed Liberated tradition is so strongly defined by its borders, the youth who starts doubting as a child will almost automatically live a life of border crossings. As such, these stories still form a whole, with doubt and critical reflection as the constant factors. However, while some stories have a clear endpoint—a renewed, albeit critical, embrace of the Reformed Liberated Church or the acceptance of another form of Christianity—other authors lack such a final decision, continuing to roam in stages of doubt and critical reflection, with discordance appearing to be the only concordant factor in the life beyond the Reformed Liberated community.

These essays offer insight into how life writing may be used to map one's border experiences, to work through them and offer the result as a model for others. As such, they are part of a long tradition of life writing, especially Christian life writing. However, despite this very specific context, it is telling that Gullestad's article on life writing by Norwegian youth of colour was such a fruitful point of reference in this article. From an analytical perspective, the similarities that we hinted at between the essays she discusses and the ones we discussed above may offer starting points for future research. A comparative study could explore such similarities more structurally, by analysing a corpus of life writing by authors with different backgrounds that all come from closed, univocal communities and live and write in multicultural, polyphonic European societies. We would especially be interested in conducting a study that includes life writings that embrace that other choice—a fundamentalist withdrawal within a univocal wholeness—which is rejected by all the authors in *Vrij Gemaakt?*

Such a study could also clarify whether these authors' context has, as we suggest, equipped them specifically well to deal with border experiences. Some of them seemed to model their essays on biblical narratives of exile, such as the fall of man and the subsequent exile from Eden. They present encountering other forms of knowledge as a move towards 'forbidden ground' and, although they may feel an intense nostalgia for the more secluded life they led in the Dutch Reformed Church, a return from 'exile' is no longer possible. Thus, even though they may now feel that the tradition that they grew up with does not suffice to prepare a

person for life in the contemporary Netherlands, its text-oriented, rational nature still seems to provide them with an analytical stance and narrative models that offer helpful frames to both structure and interpret stepping through the door that closes off ‘your father’s house’.⁷⁰ As such, their essays may offer models for how to live a good life in a society that no longer offers identities as ready-made packages, not only for others with a similar background, but for anyone who has moved from a youth with fixed certainties and clear demarcations to an adolescence and adulthood without them.

It still needs to be established whether they really could function in this way; this could be done by studying how these essays are read. This data is currently unavailable, but could be gathered by asking people from different backgrounds to read and respond to these essays. From a pragmatic perspective, however, this might very well be the social use value of such life writings. As different as their positions in modern, multicultural European society may be, there are striking similarities between these authors and those in Gullestad’s essay, which we could only note in passing. Exploring these similarities could be a rich experience for many who believe that the migrant condition and social experiences of ethnic minorities are unique in their problematics. The similarities between descriptions of border experiences in life writing by ‘indigenous’ Dutch authors and non-native Dutch people (often called ‘allochtones’ in Dutch) indicate that the life experiences of the stranger among us are far less strange than they may initially appear.

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NOTES

- 1 Kamphuis, Lammert, *Vrij Gemaakt?* Kampen: Kok, 2014.
- 2 Cited in Boon, Martin and Gerard ter Horst, 'Lammert Kamphuis en Maaïke Boersma.' *Nederlands Dagblad*, 5 September 2014. All translations of Dutch texts are ours.
- 3 Gullestad, Marianne, 'Tales of Consent and Descent: Life Writing as a Fight against an Imposed Self-Image.' In: Paul John Eakin (ed.), *The Ethics of Life Writing*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004 (227).
- 4 Adams, Katharine, *Owning Up. Privacy, Property and Belonging in U.S. Women's Life Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 (6).
- 5 Gullestad, 2004 (220). One is reminded of the term 'bricolage' here.

- 6 Idem (119).
- 7 Idem.
- 8 Bakhtin, Mikhail M., *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986 (55).
- 9 Mintz, Susannah B., *Unruly Bodies. Life Writing by Women with Disabilities*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007 (2).
- 10 Perreault, Jeanne and Marlene Kadar, 'Introduction: Tracing the Autobiographical: Unlikely Documents, Unexpected Places.' In: Kadar, Marlene et al. (eds.), *Tracing the Autobiographical*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005 (2).
- 11 "Wie stelt een grens aan de ruimte waarin die drie-enige God je zet en in wiens verhaal je je geplaatst weet?" Kamphuis, 2014 (37).
- 12 Dekker, 1992 (13).
- 13 Blom and Lamberts, 2001 (343).
- 14 Dekker and Peters, 1989 (26–7).
- 15 te Velde and Werkman, 2007 (197); Dekker, Gerard and Jan Peters, 1989 (27).
- 16 'arrogante houding'. Kamphuis, 2014 (30).
- 17 'snelkookpan-secularisate'. Kamphuis, 2014 (10).
- 18 'ik [werd] nieuwsgierig naar de [...] verhalen van mensen die in hun nog korte leven een radicale heroriëntatie hebben ondergaan. Het bleek niet moeilijk om mensen te vinden die iets herkenden van de verwarring, worsteling of crisis die het gevolg waren van het opgroeien in de vrijgemaakte zuil.' Kamphuis, 2014 (10).
- 19 Weijers, Frans, 'Loopbaanidentiteit als verhaal.' In: Meijers, Frans, Karine Mittendorf and Gerard Wijers (eds.), *Het onzekere voor het zekere. Kwetsbaarheid als kracht in loopbaan-dialogen*. Antwerpen: Garant, 2014 (26).
- 20 Ricoeur, Paul, 'Narrative Identity.' In: Wood, David (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur*. London: Routledge, 1991 (199).
- 21 Ricoeur, Paul, *Oneself as Another*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 (141).
- 22 'Catechisatie [...]. De diepe afkeer die ik jarenlang koesterde tegen het instituut kerk en tegen de liefdeloze god van de predestinatieleer is hier ontstaan.' Kamphuis, 2014 (74).
- 23 'de ware leer van de kerk.' Idem.
- 24 'Op catechisatie mochten we vragen stellen, maar de antwoorden stonden voorgedrukt in een boekje.' Idem (133).
- 25 "In een poging tot rebelleer zette ik op de kaft van elk nieuw deeltje van 'ik geloof' een vraagteken achter de Meijer titel." Idem.
- 26 'Is geloven dan niet zwart-wit?' Idem (58).
- 27 'We hebben niets om op te staan, geen Bijbel, geen Jezus, niks.' Idem (121).
- 28 Cf. Paul Ricoeur 'Life in Quest of Narrative.' In: David Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*. Routledge, p. 20–33 (1991).
- 29 'Ik las alles wat los en vast zat. Veel geschiedenisboeken, maar ook veel filosofie en moderne literatuur.' Kamphuis, 2014 (75).
- 30 'Als ik Bavink las, werd ik juist verrast door zijn openheid en de nieuwsgierigheid waarmee hij voluit gebruik maakte van andere wetenschappelijke disciplines.' Idem (66).
- 31 'interesse had in zaken die niet enkel in het mannelijke domein lagen.' Idem (114).
- 32 'De kerk beperkt mij [...]. Als voorbeeld beschrijf ik hierna mijn seksuele zoektocht.' Idem (85).
- 33 'Er werd bij ons thuis niet over seks gesproken, dat is ordinair. We spraken over 'seksualiteit'; 'verboden terrein.' Idem (86).
- 34 'Al snel voelde ik mij heel erg schuldig.' Idem (87).
- 35 'het beoefenen van de daad iets hemels, niet te evenaren en zo gelukkig moest zijn.' Idem.
- 36 'Zo zonde en zo niet hoe het bedoeld is.' Idem (88).

- 37 'een wereld waar God een vanzelfsprekendheid was.' Idem (28).
- 38 'Ineens woonde ik tussen honderden, nee duizenden heidenen van vlees en bloed.' Idem (29).
- 39 'Als ik door de stad fietste vroeg ik me van mensen die ik onderweg zag vaak af of ze wel of niet in God geloofden.' Idem (29).
- 40 'De Gereformeerde Kerk vrijgemaakt kende een sterke groepscultuur—samen de goede weg gaan, voor jou niets anders dan voor mij—hier op het charismatische festival ging het om persoonlijke roeping en spiritualiteit, om eigen verantwoordelijkheid en je persoonlijke gavenpalet.' Idem (124).
- 41 'om het eten te delen en de Bijbeltekst van die ochtend uit te pluizen.' Idem (128).
- 42 'een kerk [...] die ook niets zeker weet.' Idem.
- 43 'een zeker weten.' Idem (121).
- 44 'een intens gevoel van onttruchtering. Ik zag de mensen rondom mij, ik hoorde de muziek en de woorden en het gebed, maar het kon mij niet raken. Er was daar geen God of Geest.' Idem (117).
- 45 'En ik keek naar de hemel en zag alleen gitzwarte nacht.' Idem (141).
- 46 'een hysterisch versje [...] over een kikker in een pan soep op het vuur. De kikker probeerde op een gehaktbal te klimmen, maar steeds als het beestje dacht te zitten, draaide de bal om en viel de kikker. Het vuur, dat was de zinloosheid. De kikker, dat was ik.' Idem (141–142).
- 47 Gullestad, 2004 (220).
- 48 'Mijn mond fluistert zoete woorden van verlangen: toenadering, verbinding, de Ander. Een nieuwe hemel. Een nieuwe aarde. En de zee was niet meer.' Idem (61).
- 49 'Als ik dat liedje nog een keer tegenkom, dan vind ik het een teken.' Idem (107).
- 50 'Ik voelde me betrappt. Alsof er iemand zich met me bemoeide.' Idem (108).
- 51 'Het tegenovergestelde van wat men vreesde gebeurde: ik verloor mijn geloof niet, maar vond voor het eerst in mijn leven een God waarin ik kon geloven zonder mijzelf en mijn vragen tekort te doen'; 'Met dat besef groeide ook de afstand tot de kerk waar mijn wortels lagen.' Idem (134).
- 52 'Ik hoorde er een ander evangelie dan ik gewend was. De opstanding werd opstandig, armoede een vloek en vrede en gerechtigheid een concrete en urgente politieke eis.' Idem (96).
- 53 'Ik [...] voelde daar weinig meer bij dan wat nostalgie.' Idem.
- 54 'een stem die alle waan, alle wijsheid, alle ijdelheden deed verschrompelen en die mijn verbannen ogen deed branden van heimwee.' Idem (143).
- 55 'Op verjaardagen en feestdagen'; 'Een vreemde in hun wereld. Een van hen, maar toch ook niet. Ik kan niet voelen wat zij voelen, niet denken zoals zij. Ik mis een gen. Een gen dat hen bindt.' Idem (32–33).
- 56 'Aan de grenzen van de kudde doe je dat soort dingen. Dan ontstaan er dubbellevens, dat kan niet anders.' Idem (105).
- 57 'Ik schreef altijd: het christendom, de Bijbel, de kerk zegt zus-of-zo.' Idem: 105.
- 58 'Hoe hield ik het dan toch tot mijn dertigste vol in die vrijgemaakte kerk? Heel simpel. Ik deed het eerst uit conformisme en later uit opportunisme.' Idem (75).
- 59 'Ik [schreef] mij pas uit als lid van de GKV van Kampen-Zuid toen alles achter de rug was, de dag na mijn promotie.' Idem (79).
- 60 'een radicale heroriëntatie.' Idem (10).
- 61 'Blijkbaar [...] zijn je basale levenservaringen in de dan nog betoverde wereld van de kerk nogal fundamenteel voor de vraag of je later 'blijft' of 'moet vertrekken'.' Idem (36).
- 62 'De formele sfeer'; 'de ogen van de halve gemeente in je rug prikten.' Idem (18).
- 63 Idem (114).
- 64 'het gebrek aan woorden.' Idem (119).

- 65 'Interview met mijn twaalfjarige ik.' Idem (99).
- 66 Rushdie, Salman, *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991 (12).
- 67 Cf. Moenandar, Sjoerd-Jeroen, *Depraved Borderlands. Encounters with Muslims in Dutch Literature and the Public Debate*. Hamburg: Peter Lang, 2013 (98–136).
- 68 'Als ik de kerkzaal in loop, komen er direct tig herinneringen boven.' Idem (18).
- 69 'Ik ben geworden wie ik helemaal niet wilde. Gisteren was ik nog gelukkig gereformeerd.' Idem (60).
- 70 Genesis, 12:1. It is worth exploring the continuing influence of narrative models circulating in religious traditions in structuring personal experiences of deconversion. See on this point *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith (Studies in Religion and Culture)* by John D. Barbour. University of Virginia Press, 1994.