# Comparison of Dutch Urban Communities: Comments and Analysis

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Beginning in 1951 with Oscar Handlin's The Uprooted and continuing through more recent studies of Germans by Kathleen Conzen, Wesfalians by Walter Kamphoefner, Swedes by Robert Ostergren, and Norwegians by Jon Gjerde,[1] scholars who have studied the transplantation of Old World communities to the New World have identified regional ties, ethnicity, nationalism, kin and family networks, religion, and culture as the essential glue for those communities. Among those factors, however, religion emerged as the strongest bonding agent for immigrant groups. Religion provided a core of shared beliefs about the meaning of life, moral guidance, and a defense against a suspicious and threatening secular world, thereby establishing a common group consciousness.

Students of the Dutch immigrant experience have shared the conclusions posited about other groups. Henry S. Lucas observed that "religion determined the pattern of Dutch settlement in America."[2] Jacob Van Hinte wrote, "What held the colonists together was the powerful bond of religion--a bond that showed itself to be stronger, in many aspects, than the one of ethnic identity."[3] In his essay "Religion and Immigration Behavior: The Dutch Experience," Robert P. Swierenga argued that, "Economics explain the 'why' of immigration, but religion largely determines the 'how' of immigration and its effects."[4]

This afternoon-s presentations describe remarkable similarities among the Dutch immigrant populations of the American Midwest and the Canadian Far West. Those who settled in different urban areas shared similar motivations

for emigrating as well as similar goals in building and maintaining their communities. They also demonstrated that their Dutch Reformed faith proved to be the "bone and sinew" of their consciousness and the "focal point" of their lives.[5] Settling in cities at different stages of their urban development, the Dutch sought out their own kind, clustering together and establishing homes, businesses, schools, benevolent associations, and churches. Through ethnic neighborhoods, which Milton Gordon likened to temporary decompression chambers,[6] the Dutch attempted to bridge the Old and the New Worlds and to adjust (to varying degrees) to American culture, seeking in most cases to retain just enough of their "Dutchness" to maintain their distinctiveness. But, how long did the Dutch intend to remain distinct and separate? And could they sustain their separateness while American society exerted constant pressures to conform and assimilate?

During the initial 1840s Dutch colonization of America, Dominie Albertus Van Raalte called for his followers to "live together" for in doing so they could experience strength and unity.[7] Dutch immigrants seemed to heed Van Raalte's call as their rural settlements and urban neighborhoods exhibited common provincial or municipal origins, family connections, and religious/denominational loyalties, thereby preserving an attachment to their homeland, culture, and faith. The Chicago, Edmonton, and Grand Rapids Dutch communities each began with an initial group of immigrants--the pioneer community founders--who consciously chose to live together and to lay the groundwork to attract additional settlers over the years. Consider the sixty families residing in Edmonton ca. 1910-1947 and the twenty-fold explosion over the ensuing thirteen years; the sizeable Dutch enclaves of Chicago which remained intact for generations; or, the Dutch or Grand Rapids who grew from 7 percent (189) of the population in 1850 to 27 percent

(23,348) by 1900, comprising eleven distinct neighborhoods including the densely populated "Brickyard" region.[8] This clustering allowed the Dutch to maintain ethnically distinct institutions and to practice their vulture, thereby providing a buffer against American society.

Another common thread among these urban Dutch was their pursuit of the American Dream amidst new surroundings. The availability of land, the presence of fellow countrymen, and sharing a common culture attracted the Dutch, but the promise of economic opportunity certainly inspired them to remain. In Chicago employment in or ownership of truck farms, building trades, skilled crafts, and later garbage collect5ion held generations of Dutchmen. Among the Edmonton Dutch, an interest in establishing a Dutch Reformed agricultural community drew them initially to the Canadian frontier. For the Grand Rapids Dutch, the promise of employment in skilled trades (primarily in the furniture industry) or as petty proprietors proved quite attractive. In 1900 over 40 percent of Grand Rapids' Dutch workers were employed in skilled trades (up from 30 percent in 1850), while 15 percent (up from 4 percent in 1850) were shopkeepers, retail dealers, and neighborhood grocers.[9]

A principal measure of a community's ability to retain its population over time is residential persistence, or the proportion of households present for consecutive censuses. Within each community examined here, ethnoreligious elements and economic opportunities contributed to a long-term commitment to places of residence. The Edmonton Dutch community welcomed additional members and continuously established more institutions and organizations to ensure group cohesion and retention of religious identity. The Chicago Dutch, though somewhat more mobile, persisted as fairly homogeneous enclaves for several generations. Within the Grand

Rapids "Brickyard," the Dutch persisted at fairly high rates, indicating the existence of a viable network of support institutions which tied them to their community.[10]

The Dutch of these urban areas reestablished networks of familiar supporting institutions that promoted certain values and behaviors, provided a focal point for common interests, and nurtured a spiritual community. Churches provided spiritual refuge for the immigrants and their descendants. Mutual aid societies financed emigration, assisted the aged and infirmed, and promoted unity. The ethnic press distributed news in the mother tongue. The Dutch Christian school became a vehicle by which religion and cultural heritage was promulgated and preserved. Each of these--like Leo Driedger's four stakes that support a unifying ethnocultural-religious canopy[11]--served to support Dutch (and even more narrowly, provincial and denominational) community life. They were important conduits for the transmission of the ethnocultural and religious values that were the life blood of each individual community.

Common to each Dutch community was the centrality of religion, most evident in the founding and ongoing support of churches. Religion bridged Old and New Worlds, gave life and purpose to immigrant settlements, and promoted group unity. Among the Chicago Dutch Swierenga noted how quickly Dutch Jews and Catholics joined other ethnic congregations or assimilated into the existing American religious community. The Dutch ethnic presence remained, however, because the Calvinists (Reformed and Christian Reformed) insisted on establishing and maintaining church-centered communities. Within Grand Rapids' Brickyard, Henry Ippel noted how three churches (one Christian Reformed and two Reformed) catered to the needs of the most densely populated Dutch neighborhood. The church became the center of the

community as it concerned itself with ecclesiastical issues, personal relationships, and social behavior, including the proper observance of Sunday. Likewise in Edmonton, Van Belle, pointing to the proliferation of religious institutions, concluded that "the preservation and promotion of the Reformed religion is central to their life." Thus, Peter Berger's concept of an overarching "sacred canopy,"[12] one which unified all members of the community under its protective shelter, clearly characterized the Dutch initially in their urban communities.

Of these communities, only two appeared divided by religion. The Dutch of Grand Rapids and Chicago who affiliated with the English-speaking Reformed Church in America were more Americanized--supporting public schools, secular youth organizations, and worldly amusements--and less prone to "ethnic clustering." Critical of Christian day schools, residential clustering, and the retention of the Dutch language, they considered such things as parochial and closed-minded to the Americanization process. Meanwhile, members of the Christian Reformed Church who took pride in their rigid Calvinistic creed saw their belief system challenged by secular society and channeled their adherents, especially the youth, into an ethnoreligious track emphasizing the predominance of the church in daily life, promoting the Christian school, and cautioning against excessive Americanization and worldliness. Henry Lucas noted, "Among the Seceders religion was a far more powerful factor in causing the immigrant to settle near people who shared his convictions . . . . Religion gave form and substance to the Seceders' community life."[13] So, while churches provided important cultural and theological ties for their members, they also contributed to the further denominational and ideological fractionalization of the Dutch.

Based upon Van Belle's descriptions, the Edmonton Dutch, however, exhibited a greater degree of homogeneity than the other urban settlements. Although we do not know from Van Belle's work the extent to which these Dutch immigrated and settled by provincial/gemeente origins or by economic/occupational class, it is clear that their Reformed faith--and particularly their association with the Christian Reformed Church--influenced their tightly knit community life. The high proportion of recent emigrants from the Netherlands and the United States, reminiscent of the American Dutch communities in their early days, necessitated the creation of a complex network of support institutions to maintain their association with homeland and culture. However, just as the other communities experienced the eventual dissolution of the ethnic enclave and increased Americanization over time, Van Belle hints at fractures within the community, noting that the "next two decades . . . will be crucial for determining the extent to which this [Edmonton] community will be able to retain its religio-ethnic identity."[14]

What conclusions can we draw from these case studies of Dutch immigrants in urban environments? And what questions remain unanswered, demanding further analysis, study, and discussion?

1. Just as Van Raalte had called for them to live among each other to ensure their continued unity, the Dutch did indeed congregate together in rural settlements and urban neighborhoods. In both cases, they transplanted institutions which they deemed essential to sustain their ethnoreligious community and which they considered necessary as a hedge against incursions by by the surrounding American society. Over time, however, the Dutch experienced gradual acculturation and assimilation, although many

(especially the Christian Reformed) looked to their Reformed faith to maintain a degree of separateness from the world.

2. Religion clearly served as a unifying factor in these Dutch communities during their formative and developmental years. Churches, accompanied by a broad-based associational life of Christian schools, aid associations, and the like, provided the Dutch who resided in close proximity to one another opportunities to worship and socialize together. In m,any cases, as the small ethnic residential enclaves broke up and their residents dispersed into surrounding areas, the church continued as a principal center of social and religious activity. The former Dutch neighborhoods of Chicago and Grand Rapids have long since lost their residents to the more heterogeneous suburbs and subdivisions (although many enclaves within the suburbs remain). Yet, while the distinct residential cluster may have vanished, ethnoreligious identity continues through the church as members travel from their widespread places of residence to their places of worship. This occurrence, however, is not unusual. Even in a city like Indianapolis, the old Slovene, Jewish, Greek, German, Irish, and other ethnic neighborhoods have vanished. Ethnic identity, however, continues to be associated with and through the churches, and their social events (including the ever-popular annual ethnic food festivals).

3. The Dutch in Chicago, Edmonton, and Grand Rapids all exhibited a fair degree of residential mobility, especially in their movement out of earlier homogeneous enclaves and into more heterogeneous sections of the cities and their surrounding suburbs. The breakup of the old communities occurred with the expansion of economic opportunities, Americanization, and, as Swierenga indicated among the Chicago Dutch, because they simply "fell victim" to neighborhood cycles--development and maturation followed by deterioration and eventual abandonment for newer pastures, and usually

accompanied by upward social and economic mobility. The same was true of the Grand Rapids Dutch. Although they resided in neighborhoods of individuals possessing similar provincial/gemeente origins, occupational backgrounds, or denominational affiliations, after living in the city for a period, many left for surrounding townships, presumably to farm. Others moved in response to the expansion of railroad and industrial corridors and the development of new residential areas. But, in so doing, they broke the tightly woven ethnoreligious bonds that had united them in their initial settlements.

It is clear that, at least among the Chicago and Grand Rapids Dutch, a common ethnoreligious character no longer defines neighborhood as it once did in the communities' formative years (except in cases where they might cluster around a church or Christian school). But, the question is, did the Dutch leave their old neighborhoods, as Swierenga argued, because they "fell victim" to neighborhood cycles? Or, were they reacting to the encroachment of an increasingly diverse society on their homogeneous community? Or, were they seduced by the American Dream and the promises of economic opportunity, which led them to abandon the ethnoreligious cluster for the "economic cluster"? The Dutch community, previously sustained by the pillars of ideology/religion, language, culture, and territory, and protected by an overarching "sacred canopy" today seems to exhibit a greater devotion to an "economic canopy" which, expressed through residential, social, and institutional affiliations, provides meaning and status in contemporary society. Have we, as Professor James Bratt asked this morning, lost our souls and sold out to the dominant culture in our pursuit of wealth and a comfortable lifestyle? Have we allowed the materialism of contemporary society to supplant the ethnoreligious core which formerly focused our

communities, thereby relegating the church and the Christian school to provide simply the "minimum daily requirements" for our lives?

4. Given this conference's emphasis on the interrelationship of ethnic groups, it might be valuable to examine the ways in which the different ethnic groups interacted, borrowed from each other, and contributed to the development of a new character within American society. In a 1992 article entitled "The Invention of Ethnicity," Kathleen N. Conzen argued against the old notion that immigrants simply moved in a straight line from Old World culture to becoming 100 percent Americans. "Ethnicity . . . is a process of construction or invention," Conzen claimed, "Which incorporates, adapts, and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories."[15] This implies that group identities are constantly redefined through an ongoing dialogue between majority and minority cultures and not dictated unilaterally by the host society. As a result, Conzen concludes, "everyone is changed in this dialectical process," not just the foreigner.[16]

5. Peter Berger, in his book The Sacred Canopy, clearly articulated how a group's religion integrated, unified, and provided meaning for their lives. "The world as defined by the religious institution was the world," argued Berger. "To step outside the world as religiously defined was to step into a chaotic darkness, into anomy, possibly into madness."[17] Given the significance of religious institutions to daily life, Berger suggested two options for their continued role in contemporary society--"they can either accommodate themselves to the situation, play the pluralistic game of religious free enterprise, and come to terms as best they can with the plausibility problem by modifying their product in accordance with consumer demands; or they can refuse to accommodate themselves, entrench themselves

behind whatever socioreligious structures they can maintain or construct, and continue to profess the old objectives as much as possible as if nothing had happened."[18] Since the Dutch in all three communities experienced one or both of these characteristics, it seems critical that we examine more fully the role of the Dutch and Reformed thought and faith in modern society.

6. In his study of the Edmonton Dutch, Van Belle raised numerous interesting questions about the Canadian Dutch which merit further examination. Until a detailed demographic and community-wide analysis, similar to those generated on the Dutch of Chicago, Grand Rapids, Holland, and Pella, can be completed, however, we will not be able to posit any additional conclusions or obtain any deeper understanding of the behavioral characteristics of the Edmonton Dutch, except that which may be revealed by their Reformed faith.

Since the Dutch in America, except in certain isolated areas, have been a fading presence over the past decades, it is important to examine and compare the experiences of Dutch Canadians, especially as they experience the declining number of new immigrants and the increased pressures of assimilation and accommodation, with those of the Dutch American communities. Nearly a decade ago, Herman Ganzevoort called Dutch Canadians "the disappearing ethnic" because, he claimed, they saw little need to retain their traditional ethnic community amidst the "Canadian multi-cultural mosaic."[19] He noted that the Dutch saw no real value in retaining their language or culture to maintain their distinctiveness and were more willing to sacrifice their ethnicity for economic advancement, thereby ensuring easier adaptation and assimilation. "With the exception of Christian Reformed activists, who have sought to make Calvinism relevant to

Canadian society," argued Ganzevoort, "Dutch culture seems to have had no serious impact on the Canadian scene."[20] So once again, religion, not ethnicity, appears to be the sustaining feature of Dutch culture. If Van Belle is right that the Edmonton Dutch "never were particularly fond of living next to each other . . . [but] are more interested in locating within the vicinity of the Christian school their children attend," then maybe the Dutch Canadians have indeed reached the point of Dutch Americans where ethnic affiliation is less important than it originally was, and where religion continues to serve as the principal bond of a much wider community.

## Conclusions

From the beginning Dutch colony founders Albertus Van Raalte and Hendrik Scholte expected their followers to become American citizens and to participate in the American dream of a good life. They did not, however, accept American religious practices fully and uncritically; rather, they promoted a Reformed faith that emphasized their people's distinctiveness in American society. Differing views of Americanization in later years, however, prompted divisions among the Dutch--one faction (Reformed) espoused adaptation to the American way of life; the other (Christian Reformed) urged continued separatism by supporting Christian schools and Dutch language churches as the means to slow Americanization.[21]

Regardless of the divisions among the Dutch, the church, apart from all the institutions valued for the maintenance of ethnic community, continued to be the center of Dutch community life for generations. A shared faith and participation in a nurturing religious community provided familiarity, spiritual continuity, and refuge in a disruptive world. Especially for

recent immigrants the Dutch church offered welcoming shelter and protection during their adjustment to the new society.

But, given the effects of urban settlement patterns and neighborhood cycles, and the demise of the original homogeneous ethnic enclaves over the years, what now is the unifying factor (if there is one) among the Dutch? The bonds of language and the residential clustering by provincial origin or occupation no longer play the roles that they did in earlier days. The Dutch also no longer dominate certain jobs (like skilled positions in Grand Rapids' furniture factories) which previously provided a common reference among their people. Gone are the ethnic communities of old that provided the necessities of life down at the corner. The contemporary Dutch, however, seem to be clearly characterized by their common middle class orientation, evident in their upward mobility and material success, their occupations, and residential locations. It is very apparent that the Dutch have assimilated into and become a part of the diverse society, although they can still occasionally be singled out by the "NL" insignia on their cars' bumpers or the windmills and kissing Dutch boy and girl in their front yards.

The Dutch face a particular dilemma regarding their role in contemporary society. Both religion and the church are reputed to serve as important unifying and socializing forces among the Dutch (especially those of the Christian Reformed background), although they certainly play a less substantial role in Dutch community life than in previous generations. If religion has indeed been reduced in priority and lost its central guiding role in community life, is Van Belle then correct when he concludes, "the rejection of this religion spells the demise of this religio-ethnic community"?[22] If, as Van Raalte said, we [the Dutch] need to reside among

each other in order to maintain our unity, how can we then address the broader society and approach and understand our diverse neighbors? While Van Raalte's words--"in everything we need each other"--may have been critical for the early colonization period, we should certainly be challenged to determine whether those words are equally applicable in today's complex and culturally diverse world and whether those words can be interpreted as being exclusive and separatist or inclusive. Our good neighborliness and the future of inter-ethnic relations will most certainly depend upon the definitions we accept and the actions that we take.

**ENDNOTES**

1. Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1951); Kathleen Conzen, Immigrant Milwaukee, 1836-1860: Accommodation and Community in a Frontier City (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976); Walter Kamphoefner, The Wesfalians: From Germany to Missouri (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Robert C. Ostergren, A Community Transplanted: The Transatlantic Experience of a Swedish Immigrant Settlement in the Upper Middle West, 1835-1915 (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Jon Gjerde, From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway, to the Upper Middle West (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

2. Henry S. Lucas, Netherlanders in America: Dutch Immigration to the United States and Canada, 1789-1950 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1955; reprint ed. Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), p. 473.

3. Jacob Van Hinte, Netherlanders in America: A Study of Emigration and Settlement in the 19th and 20th Centuries in the United States of America, Robert P. Swierenga, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 579.

4. Robert P. Swierenga, "Religion and Immigration Behavior: The Dutch Experience," in Philip R. VanderMeer and Robert P. Swierenga, eds., Belief and Behavior: Essays in the New Religious History, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 164.

5. Randall M. Miller, "Introduction," in Randall M. Miller and Thomas D. Marzik, eds., Immigrants and Religion in Urban America, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), p. xv; John Bodnar, The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 144-68.

6. Milton Gordon, Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 105.

7. Albertus C. Van Raalte, Holland in Amerika; Of de Hollandsche Kolonisatie in den Staat Michigan, January 30, 1847 (n.p., 1847). Translated by Rev. G. Vander Ziel under the title Holland in America, of the Dutch Colonization in the State of Michigan, January 30, 1847. Typescript, Colonial Origins Collection, Calvin College Archives.

8. David G. Vanderstel, "The Dutch of Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1850-1900: Immigrant Neighborhood and Community Development in a Nineteenth Century City" (Ph.D. diss., Kent State University, 1983), Table 2.2, p. 50.

9. David G. Vanderstel, "Dutch Immigrant Neighborhood Development in Grand Rapids, 1850-1900," in Robert P. Swierenga, ed., The Dutch in America: Immigration, Settlement, and Cultural Change, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985), p. 137, Table 6.5.

10. In his study of Holland, Michigan, Gordon W. Kirk, Jr. concluded that "ethnic homogeneity and religious commitment" offered permanency, stability, and security for the Dutch. Gordon W. Kirk, Jr., The Promise of American Life: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century Immigrant Community, Holland, Michigan, 1847-1894 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1978), pp. 52-53. See also discussion of citywide persistence rates of the Grand Rapids Dutch population in Vanderstel, "The Dutch of Grand Rapids, Michigan," pp. 266ff.

11. Leo Driedger, "Nomos-Building on the Prairies: Construction of Indian, Hutterite, and Jewish Sacred Canopies," Canadian Journal of Sociology 5 (1980): 341-356.

12. Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

13. Lucas, Netherlanders in America, p. 475.

14. Harry A. Van Belle, "The History of the Reformed Dutch in Edmonton," unpublished paper, 1993.

15. Kathleen Neils Conzen, et al. "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the USA," Journal of American Ethnic History (Fall 1992): 4-5.

16. Ibid., pp. 31-2.

17. Berger, The Sacred Canopy, p. 135.

18. Ibid., p. 153.

19. Herman Ganzevoort, "The Dutch in Canada: The Disappearing Ethnic," in Robert P. Swierenga, ed., The Dutch in America: Immigration, Settlement, and Cultural Change (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985), p. 224.

20. Ibid., p. 237.

21. See: Elton J. Bruins, "Americanization in Reformed Religious Life," in Robert P. Swierenga, ed., The Dutch in America: Immigration, Settlement, and Cultural Change (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985), pp. 175-90.

21. Van Belle, p. 15.