

Dutch religious history digitally revised

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The ReLiC Centre for Dutch Religious History undertakes a revision of long-term developments of religious life in the Netherlands by the use of several big datasets. Some of them have traditional contents but cover wide scopes in time. A database have been built up of all ministers (c. 25,000 persons) of the former Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk between 1555 and 2004, being the official church of the Dutch Republic until 1795 and a leading denomination up to 1960s. In addition the prosopographical analysis of clerical careers, this database offers insights in the political, financial and geographical structures of pastoral care of a major part of the Dutch population thanks to the registration of which authorities elected and paid for the ministers in each locality. The data are linked to the Dutch religious censuses regularly undertaken by the government from 1798 through 1971. Another database concerns the Popular Petition of 1878, signed by more than 300,000 supporters of the School with the Bible. This action can be considered as a first mass mobilization of orthodox Protestants, partly resulting in the 'pillarisation' of Dutch society and culture and in the geographical proliferation of a 'Duch Bible Belt' up to the present day. While combining such big datasets, parallel methods of qualitative data analysis and text mining is now being explored. Besides the well-known services like Delpher, a special cooperation is established with the Digibron project of Erdee Media, which already contains excellent OCR-texts of hundreds of Christian journals since c.1800. Although the present state of this field of e-research is focused on Protestantism, the wide interconfessional and interreligious context is in view, conform the ambition of the coherent historiography of 2,000 years religion in the Netherlands in the handbook of Dutch Religious History by Joris van Eijnatten and Fred van Lieburg (2005). My paper will give (1) an introduction into the digital approach of the research field, (2) an initial inventarisation of relevant datasets being available and in the making with ReLiC and with other institutions and scholars, (3) a presentation of one or two historical cases of general and long-term developments, and (4) a short sketch of perspectives in the context of the booming e-humanities and cooperation of researchers.