

Merit drove out grace: Protestantism and meritocracy re-examined

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Declaration of Authorship

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Abstract

Due to the similarities between meritocracy and the Protestant work ethic – specifically regarding hard work and individual responsibility – some scholars argue that the origins of the former can be found in the latter. This research answers the question ‘Does current Protestant thinking (still) promote meritocracy?’ by comparing the similar cases of the Netherlands and Flanders. This research analyses (1) framing of unemployment in newspaper articles, (2) (counter)indicators of meritocratic thinking in Christian sermons, and (3) expert interviews. The results show that two distinctions are crucial: (1) between Protestantism as idea and the PWE as institutional influence, and (2) between technocratic meritocracy and Christian meritocracy. Through its ideas, Protestantism opposes technocratic meritocracy, while it supports Christian meritocracy. At the same time, ideas as hard work and individual responsibility are present in Protestantism, supporting Christian meritocracy. The PWE – as institutional and ideational force – has indeed supported, and continues to support, technocratic meritocracy.

Table of contents

1.	Introduction.....	1
2.	Theoretical framework.....	3
2.1	What is meritocracy?	3
2.1.1	Meritocratic elements.....	4
2.1.2	What is merit?	4
2.2	Meritocracy and religion	5
2.2.1	The origin of meritocratic thinking.....	5
2.2.2	The PWE and Protestantism	6
2.2.3	Ambiguous work ethic.....	7
2.2.4	The PWE as a universally shared construct.....	8
2.2.5	Protestantism and Roman-Catholicism.....	9
2.3	Meritocracy and deservingness	10
2.3.1	Deservingness	11
2.3.2	Public opinion.....	11
2.3.3	Framing in media.....	12
2.3.4	Relevance of religion.....	12
2.4	The Netherlands and Flanders.....	13
2.4.1	Religion in the Netherlands and Flanders.....	13
2.4.2	Meritocratic beliefs	13
2.4.3	Economic and political factors.....	14
3.	Research question and hypotheses	15
3.1	Hypotheses	15
4.	Methodology.....	17
4.1	Newspaper articles.....	17
4.2	Sermons.....	19
4.3	Interviews.....	19
5	Results and analysis.....	21
5.1	Sermon analysis	21
5.1.1	Protestant sermons.....	21
5.1.2	Roman-Catholic sermons.....	24
5.1.3	Back to the hypotheses	25
5.2	Newspaper analysis.....	26
5.2.1	Framing.....	26
5.2.2	Causal responsibility models	28
5.2.3	Back to the hypotheses	30

5.2.4 The puzzle	31
5.3 Solving the puzzle.....	31
5.3.1 The ethic of mastery and Protestantism.....	33
5.3.2 Protestantism and Christian meritocracy	34
5.3.3 The PWE and technocratic meritocracy	34
5.3.4 Protestantism and technocratic meritocracy.....	35
5.3.5 The PWE and Protestantism	36
6 Conclusion and discussion.....	38
6.1 Limitations	38
7 Appendices.....	40
7.1 Appendix 1: Newspaper articles used.....	40
7.2 Appendix 2: Sermons used.....	45
7.3 Appendix 3: Citations from sermons.....	47
8 Bibliography.....	57

1. Introduction

*Work is a good thing for man because through work man
achieves fulfilment as a human being*
(Pope John Paul II)

Meritocracy promotes the idea that our destiny is in our own hands, as it offers a link between effort and reward (Sandel, 2020; Teklu, 2018). However, it also serves as a justification for rising inequality as a ‘fair byproduct’ of differences attributable to hard work (Kwon & Pandian, 2024). Similar to meritocracy, holding the individual responsible for achieving success through hard work is central to Max Weber’s (1958) notion of the Protestant work ethic (PWE). Therefore, some scholars attribute the origins of the meritocratic way of thinking to the PWE (Sandel, 2020).

However, Weber’s theory of the PWE has been extensively criticized, and meritocracy and the PWE, upon closer look, seem contradictory. This research takes a closer look at the relationship between the PWE – or Protestantism more generally – and meritocracy. It aims to answer the question: **Does current Protestant thinking (still) promote meritocracy?**

The focus of this research is on Protestantism. To clarify the nature of the case of Protestantism, Roman-Catholicism is used as a counter-case. The next chapter offers a literature review and explains what meritocracy is and how it relates to deservingness or desert. It discusses how the argument that the origins of meritocracy can be found in the PWE is defended, amongst others by Sandel (2020).

Chapter 3 sets out the research question and hypothesis. Next, chapter 4 discusses the methodology used. The research consists of (1) frame and content analysis of Dutch and Flemish newspaper articles discussing the unemployment, (2) qualitative content analysis of Dutch Protestant, Dutch Roman-Catholic and Flemish Roman-Catholic sermons, and (3) expert interviews.

Chapter 5 first discusses the results of the analysis. It is shown that the results are not in line with the formulated hypotheses. While it was expected that emphasis on a relation between effort and salvation would be more prevalent in the Protestant sermons, and the negative image framing would be stronger in the Dutch articles, both expectations were not very clearly met. Therefore, the fifth chapter sets out to solve this puzzle, using expert interviews and the literature. I argue that in order to understand the relationship between Protestantism and meritocracy, two distinctions are crucial: (1) between Protestantism as idea and the PWE as institutional influence,

and (2) between technocratic meritocracy and Christian meritocracy. Finally, chapter 6 summarizes, concludes and discusses limitations.

2. Theoretical framework

Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap
(Galatians 6:7)

2.1 What is meritocracy?

Defining meritocracy is not an easy task, as “[t]he concept of meritocracy is unstable as its constituent ideas are potentially contradictory” (Tan, 2008, p. 7). Most works trace the concept back to Michael Young’s (1958) book *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, a satirical dystopian work in which he proposes the formula ‘intelligence + effort = merit’. Even though the term was coined by Young, the origins of meritocratic ideas can be traced back to the ancient works of Confucius and to ancient China (Hobson, 2004; Kim & Choi, 2017).

Generally, meritocracy can be described as an *ideology* or *system* based on two fundamental features: ‘impartial competition’ and ‘equality of opportunity’ (Young, 1958). Both are needed to create a meritocratic system in which individuals advance based on abilities and achievements, rather than economic, social or familial background (Kim & Choi, 2017). Part of this ideal is that people have the opportunity to work their way up from the bottom to the top of society.

At play here are both meritocratic elements (such as work, ambition, and education), and non-meritocratic elements (family wealth, background, and connections) (Reynolds & Xian, 2014). When non-meritocratic elements influence access to opportunities, both fundamental features of impartial competition and equality of opportunity are undermined. Indeed, the meritocratic standard has been criticized for being unattainable due to its erroneous assumption of a fair distribution of social rewards based on merit (Sobczak, 2018). It is argued that social life is too complex for a single meritocratic principle to guarantee a fair distribution of wealth (Sztompka, 2012). An often mentioned reason for this is social exclusion, which excludes people from the social rewards, regardless of merit. Despite this, meritocracy today is typically held in a more positive regard, as a way to an equal society (Lipsey, 2014).

Meritocracy has been extensively criticized, among other things for obscuring the real challenges society is facing (Littler, 2018), for being “a long standing-delusion” that operates as “a 21st-century opium of the masses” (Reay, 2018, p. 325) and for being used as a justification for rising inequalities (Newman et al., 2015).

2.1.1 Meritocratic elements

As mentioned, both non-meritocratic and meritocratic elements are relevant for understanding (the success of) meritocracy. For this research, three elements are particularly relevant: work, responsibility, and reward.

Firstly, the notion of (hard) work plays an important role in meritocracy. In the perfect meritocratic system, hard work is what distinguishes the successful from the unsuccessful. Since it is believed that everybody has the ability to work hard, it is a matter of choice whether you work hard or not (Sandel, 2020). Consequently, the less fortunate are regarded as having *chosen* to work less (Friedman et al., 2024). The (meritocratic) idea that hard work is important for getting ahead is increasingly prevalent in rich, democratic countries (Mijs, 2018; 2021).

Secondly, meritocracy holds that a person is responsible for a particular outcome. This is related to both success, in case of a positive outcome, and blame, in case of a negative outcome. Meritocracy focuses on what individuals have and do, i.e., “people's outcomes appear to be the product of their own inputs: the winners believe they have earned their success, and the losers have only themselves to blame” (Bartram, 2023, p. 765). Meritocratic attitudes toward success emphasize the role of the individual, rather than structural factors, in explaining personal success (Castillo et al., 2023). The ‘losers’ have only themselves to blame.

Thirdly, from intelligence + effort = merit (Young, 1958), it follows that inequality of outcome (e.g., income inequality) rewards differences in intelligence and effort. This explains why income inequality coincides with growing beliefs in meritocracy, specifically in developed, Western countries (Mijs 2018; 2021). Meritocracy acts as a justification for rising inequality as a ‘fair byproduct’ of differences attributable to hard work (Kwon & Pandian, 2024).¹ Merit is not a matter of coincidence, structural factors or aristocracy, it is a reward for one’s effort and intelligence. Further, the lives of the rich and poor are increasingly separated, rendering people unable to see the full extent of inequality present in their society (Mijs, 2021).

2.1.2 What is merit?

Merit implies that one has to deserve her achievements (Mijs, 2016). The meaning of ‘merit’ varies from context to context (Park & Liu, 2014). Therefore, to understand meritocracy it is necessary to understand how merit is defined (Kim & Choi, 2017). Even though advocates of

¹ Kwon & Pandian (2024) distinguish between *instrumental* and *idealized merit* configuration (based on McCall, 2013). The former is more common in Eastern European countries and holds that, besides hard work, social connections are important to get ahead in life. The latter is more common in Central- and Western European countries and it rejects social connections as an important non-merit factor for getting ahead. Eastern European countries also deem *skills* less important for getting ahead (Kwon & Pandian, 2024, p. 5).

meritocracy sometimes imply that merit can be objective and narrowly defined, Park and Lui (2014) suggest there is ‘fluidity’ in what merit constitutes, allowing for variation in its meaning (p. 43). Mijs (2016) gives an overview of different meritocratic traits throughout history, including (bi)sexuality (Sparta), dancing skills (18th-19th century England) and assertiveness (American men, today).

2.2 Meritocracy and religion

Teklu (2018) argues that meritocracy disciplines “a human desire to establish an organic or causal link between the efforts we exert and the rewards we receive” (p. 2). Indeed, Sandel (2020) writes that meritocracy is attractive because it promotes the idea that our destiny is in our own hands. Teklu writes that one way to legitimize the link between effort and reward is through *religion*, an example of this is the Protestant work ethic (PWE) (Weber, 1958).

2.2.1 The origin of meritocratic thinking

Teklu argues that religion also has the capacity to critique and resist meritocracy, by problematising the interpretation of worldly success as merit and adversity as punishment. Others only ‘blame’ religion – specifically the PWE – for the origin of meritocracy. Sandel (2020) argues

the notion that our fate reflects our merit runs deep in the moral intuitions of Western culture. Biblical theology teaches that natural events happen for a reason (...) [T]his way of thinking may seem innocent, even childlike. But it is not as distant as it first appears. In fact, *this outlook is the origin of meritocratic thinking*. (p. 35, emphasis mine)²

The earliest debates on merit were about God’s favour, he explains, and on the question whether this favour is earned or rather received as a gift. Therefore, the role of merit was reinforced by the Church and found its climax in the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and Weber’s PWE.

Weber’s (1958) famously argued that Protestant – especially Calvinist and Puritan – ethics facilitated the rise of industrial capitalism. The Reformation inspired new attitudes and behaviours that were favourable for economic development. This Protestant ethic is grounded in Luther’s *sola gratia*, i.e., the doctrine that man is saved through faith alone and not through good works. Luther contradicted his contemporaries and argued that religious vocation was not superior to economic vocations. Just as priests have a calling (*Ruf*) from God to do their work, so

² As mentioned earlier, the earliest origins of meritocracy can be found in ancient China (Hobson, 2004; Kim & Choi, 2017). Sandel (2020) recognizes this (pp. 27-28), but makes a distinction between traditional versions of political meritocracy (emphasizing moral and civic virtues as merits) and the current meritocratic ethic (emphasizing freedom and deservingness). The latter is rooted in Biblical thinking.

has every man. Building on Luther, Calvin proposed the doctrine of predestination: God has chosen who is elected. This faces man with the question: am I elected? While it was contrary to what Calvin proposed, man started to believe that worldly success indicated salvation (this also referred to as practical syllogism). Therefore, a crucial aspect of the PWE is hard work, and work as a calling, as it proves salvation through the gain of wealth.

Sandel (2020) explains that the PWE “promotes an ethic of self-help and of responsibility for one’s fate congenial to meritocratic ways of thinking (...) [T]he meritocracy of our day bears the mark of the theological contest from which it emerged” (p. 41). Similar to Sandel, Littler (2018) mentions meritocratic thinking that ‘channels’ the PWE (p. 80).

Sandel (2020) argues that the PWE began with an equal tension between grace and merit, but that the latter won over the former: the *ethic of mastery* overwhelmed the *ethic of fortune*. The ethic of fortune recognizes factors beyond human’s control, while the ethic of mastery is centred around human choice. While it is tempting to attribute the victory of the ethic of mastery to secularization – as faith in God decreases, it is replaced by a strong believe in human agency – Sandel argues we are not freed from providential faith. The idea that successful people have earned their success “reflects a residual providential faith that persists in the moral vocabulary of otherwise secular societies” (p. 42). The way success is moralized in our meritocratic societies echoes earlier providential faith, as success reflects superior virtue. Referring to Jackson Lears, Sandel writes: “combining human striving with providential sanction creates rocket fuel for meritocracy. It banishes the ethic of fortune and promises to align worldly success with moral deservingness” (p. 44). In other words, the ethic of mastery did not win out on the ethic of fortune because of secularization. Rather, the residuals of providential faith – the PWE and its moralizing of success – fuel the ethic of mastery.

2.2.2 The PWE and Protestantism

It is important to note the discrepancy between Protestantism and the PWE. Weber (1958) was not interested in what “was theoretically and officially taught in the ethical compendia”, but rather in “the influence of those psychological sanctions which, originating in religious belief and the practice of religion, gave a direction to a practical conduct and held the individual to it” (p. 97). This explains the leap made from Calvin’s predestination and Luther’s *sola gratia* – anti-meritocratic ideas – to the believe that success and wealth is a reflection of salvation – a meritocratic idea. With this, Luther’s radical critique of merit theology – salvation can be bought and earned – turned from a ‘rejected stone’ into the ‘cornerstone’ of a new capitalist religion in the West, i.e., meritocracy (Bruni & Cerrino, 2022).

As mentioned, Sandel argues that the way success is moralized in our meritocratic societies echoes earlier providential faith, as success reflects superior virtue. Similar to Weber, Sandel seems to be interested in the psychological effects of religious beliefs, on both religious and non-religious people, rather than religious doctrines or personal beliefs.

However, at the same time, Sandel refers to churches today – specifically American prosperity gospel churches – that still promote meritocratic thinking. Sandel seems to draw a straight line from providential thinking – including contemporary Protestant thinking – to meritocracy. There is a

meritocratic hope that the world is arranged in a way that aligns what we receive with what we are due. This is the hope that has fuelled providential thinking from the Old Testament to present-day talk of being ‘on the right side of history’. (p. 213)

Providential faith is not only an echo in a secular society, it is kept alive by meritocratic thinking in church. Vermeer (2022) writes that by referring to the PWE, Sandel shows “that the roots of American meritocracy are of a religious nature, resulting in a harsh religious justification of the actual inequality in American society” (p. 277).

2.2.3 Ambiguous work ethic

The role the PWE plays in promoting, channeling or causing meritocratic thinking should be further investigated, as (1) Weber’s theory of the PWE has been extensively criticized, and (2) meritocracy and Protestantism, upon closer look, seem contradictory.

Firstly, the (causal) relation between Protestantism or the PWE and capitalism has been widely criticized, as there is a lack “overwhelming, or even of moderately strong, empirical evidence for the postulated relationship between Protestantism and the development of industrial capitalism” (Delacroix & Nielsen, 2001, p. 510). Some propose that the relationship might be reversed: the economic interests of some groups – those benefiting from breaking with the precapitalist spirit – have induced the development of the Protestant ethic (Laitin, 1986). Others, most notably Tawney (1926) and Samuelson (1993), have questioned the direction of the causality, arguing that capitalism preceded and encouraged cultural shifts towards (the spread of) Protestantism. Still, Weber’s theory remains extremely influential, and is by many scholars considered to be true, albeit to some extent.

Secondly, theoretically, meritocracy and predestination – a vital part of Weber’s theory – seem to be opposites: in the former hard work pays off, while in the latter it makes no difference. Further,

meritocracy and Luther's *sola gratia* are also opposites, a fact recognized by Sandel (2020) who writes that this doctrine was indeed “resolutely anti-meritocratic”, and yet “paradoxically, the Protestant Reformation he launched led to the fiercely meritocratic work ethic” (p. 39).

2.2.4 The PWE as a universally shared construct

Weber was convinced that Protestants exhibited a stronger inclination toward economic rationalism than Roman-Catholics (Weber, 1958; Modrack, 2008). However, he argued that the PWE values soon became fundamental for the industrial capitalist order, which blurs the Protestant roots of the PWE. It is therefore necessary to consider whether the PWE is still Protestant, or whether it is now a universally shared construct (Modrack, 2008).

Ray (1982) finds that PWE values have become universal among all major religions. In other words, the PWE is no longer Protestant. Norris and Inglehart (2004) find that Protestant societies, compared to other religious cultures, display the weakest work ethic. They conclude that “[a]ny historical legacy, if it did exist in earlier eras, appears to have been dissipated by processes of development” (p. 169). With this, they confirm Weber's (1958) claim that the work ethic “has escaped from the cage” (p. 181). Weber did not claim that personal devotion to Protestantism was necessary for becoming a successful member of the entrepreneurial class, but rather considered it a pervasive *cultural* ethos and basis for capitalist accumulation.

However, there is also evidence for a positive relation between Protestantism and the PWE. It is shown that the PWE (Arslan, 2001) or the belief that hard work leads to success (Niles, 1999) is more strongly among Protestants and regions with a Protestant heritage than their Roman-Catholic counterpart. Others found that people in nations with a Protestant cultural history foster more pro-market economic attitudes (Guiso et al., 2003; Hayward & Kimmelmeier, 2011). This is not due to personal commitment: Abellán (2023) attributes attitudinal differences between Roman-Catholics and Protestant – more on social and political issues, than issues of work (see also Arrunada, 2010) – to cultural and historical legacy, rather than a personal commitment to religion.

In short, the relation between Protestantism and the PWE today is blurry, but there remains to be a difference between Protestant and Roman-Catholics. Due to these ambiguities, this research is aimed to do what Teklu (2018) calls for when he writes that “[a]pplying a variant of Weber's analysis to the contemporary situation may require empirical considerations in particular local contexts” (p. 3). Despite these ambiguities, political attitudes and preferences rooted in confessional traditions persist over time, even in contexts where personal commitment to religion has largely diminished or lost their societal influence (Geser, 2004).

2.2.5 Protestantism and Roman-Catholicism

As mentioned, the meaning of ‘merit’ is dependent on its context (Park & Liu, 2014; Mijs, 2016; Kim & Choi, 2017). It is therefore important to discuss some differences between Roman-Catholicism and Protestantism, as different contexts, specifically on their different valuations of work and poverty.

Protestantism

Calvin and Luther held similar ideas on work, as both emphasized the calling that every man has to work (Eaton, 2013). However, Calvin was more extreme as he regarded work to be “an absolute duty; a spiritual end in itself and the *best* way to please the Lord” (Kahl, 2005, p. 106).

Calvinist Protestantism created two classes of work: (1) work as a calling for the elected and (2) work as punishment for the poor (Kahl, 2005). Although the condemnation of the poor was not explicit in Calvin’s writings, the Calvinist (or Reformed) tradition regards worldly success and wealth as an indication of salvation. Consequently, poverty is a sign of damnation. Kahl (2005) writes that “the poor are sinners and the rich are not. Predestination implied that the community has no positive responsibility *for* the poor; Calvinist moralism implicated the poor needed to be punished and corrected” (p. 107). The poor were to work, as that was every man’s duty, and a moral distinction could be made between those who were unwilling to work and those who were. The distinction between deserving and undeserving poor is thus very important (Kahl, 2005).³

Roman-Catholicism

The most extensive treatment of labour issues in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) are the *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Laborem Exercens* (1981). Social Catholicism developed in the 19th century in Western Europe – specifically France, Belgium and the Rhineland – as a response to increasing poverty due to industrialisation. Initially, Roman-Catholicism responded to the extremes of poverty through almsgiving, adhering to the principle of *caritas* (Kahl, 2005). Indeed, “[t]he desire not only to meet immediate physical needs, but also to fulfil the need for companionship and to recognise the inherent human dignity of the poor, is a hallmark of Social Catholicism” (Kelly, 2023, p. 210).

In CST, labour – as a source of meaning, purpose, and potential – is something intrinsically good for all people (Massaro, 2023). Work is a part of human dignity and, moreover, it is man’s duty to work, because God – in whose image man is created – also worked in his task of creation (Sison

³ It has been suggested that Western, individualistic cultures promote a strong relation between belief in PWE and prejudice towards disadvantaged groups (Rosenthal, Levy & Moyer, 2011, p. 875).

et al., 2016). Importantly, “the primary reason for working is obedience to a divine command (...) Despite [this], human beings will only work if they want, if they freely choose to. Thus, work never ceases to be an invitation or calling” (Sison et al., 2016, p. 515).

The poor should be helped out of compassion rather than legal force (Kahl, 2005). This is in tradition of *caritas*, and the principle of subsidiarity, i.e., “the idea that problems should be solved at the most local level possible” (Kelly, 2023, p. 207). The community – friends, family, employers, the church, etc. – are responsible for poor relief and no discrimination between and judgement about the poor is allowed. Consequently, the distinction between deserving and undeserving poor is not important (Kahl, 2005).

Moreover, the Roman-Catholic tradition sees the poor (the beggar) as closest to Christ. Indeed, in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004), a fundamental work for CST, it is written: “[t]he Church's love for the poor is inspired by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, by the poverty of Jesus and by his attention to the poor. This love concerns material poverty and also the numerous forms of cultural and religious poverty” (para. 184).

In short, where CST integrates work and poverty into a broader social or communal context, based on the principle of subsidiarity and *caritas*, Calvinist Protestantism grants greater value to individual responsibility. In the former, the distinction between deserving and undeserving poor is not important, while in the later it is. Further, Calvinist Protestantism – contradictory to what Calvin wrote – holds that material wealth and success are indications of salvation. Both hold work to be a duty, but for Calvinism this duty seems to be more absolute.

2.3 Meritocracy and deservingness

Since merit implies that one has to deserve her achievements, central to (debates on) meritocracy “is the notion of desert, which entails that people should get only what they deserve” (Teklu, 2018, p. 2). Miller (1999) notes that in contemporary discourse ‘merit’ refers to someone’s admirable qualities, while ‘desert’ refers to instances where a person is responsible for a particular outcome. Thus, *desert* seems to be more closely related to meritocracy than merit is.

Kahl (2005) writes that “[t]here is hardly another welfare state benefit where religion has been so determining as in social assistance, nor are there benefits with roots as old as those of social assistance” (p. 93). Therefore, besides sermons, this research focuses on one form of social assistance – unemployment benefits – and the notion of deservingness.⁴

⁴ This sub-chapter (2.3) is part my research for *POLS5828 - Welfare States in the Current Era: Origins, Issues and Challenges 2024/25 Winter*. Therefore there are strong similarities.

2.3.1 Deservingness

The current growing income and wealth inequality is accompanied by increasing stigmatization of the poor: “[t]he mass public appears less sympathetic to the poor, less generous to the unemployed and less concerned about inequalities” (Taylor-Gooby, 2013, p. 40). People who fail to have paid work are deemed the ‘other’ and defined as ‘underserving poor’ citizens (Coats, 2012). A distinction is made between the ‘deserving’ poor and the ‘undeserving poor’ (Van Oorschot, 2000; Van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017)

Social welfare schemes targeting the old, the sick and the disabled are more popular than those targeting able-bodied people of working age (Coughlin, 1980; for an overview of more studies see Laenen, 2020). This discrepancy can be explained by the notion of deservingness: the old, sick and disabled are deemed more deserving (Larsen, 2006; Van Oorschot, 2000). Van Oorschot and Roosma (2017) describe five dimensions of deservingness criteria: control, attitude, reciprocity, identity and need (the CARIN criteria, originally proposed in Van Oorschot, 2000). Table 1 provides an overview of these criteria.

	When is someone <i>more</i> deserving	The elderly	The unemployed
Control	Less control/personal responsibility over neediness	Lack of control: status is a biologically determined life event	Doubt on degree of control: status stems from structural and/or individual causes
Attitude	More compliant, likeable and conforming to our standards	Public image: grateful and undemanding	Mental picture: deviant, out-of-work youngster
Reciprocity	More reciprocation, i.e., those who have or will contribute to ‘our’ group	Have contributed to society	Have not contributed to society what they could have contributed
Identity	Closer to ‘us’	Easier to identify with, due to personal contact and perspective of being elderly in the future: belong more to ‘us’	More difficult to identify with
Need	Greater (perceived) level of need	Perceived as having special (age-related) health needs	Do not necessarily have extra needs

Table 1: The CARIN criteria of deservingness, including a comparison between the (deserving) elderly and the (underserving) unemployed, based on Van Oorschot (2000), Van Oorschot & Roosma (2017) and Laenen (2020).

2.3.2 Public opinion

In most European welfare states, there are critical debates about the necessity and fairness of redistribution through the welfare state (Van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017). This is not only a matter of political debate, but also one of public opinion. There is a reciprocal relationship between public opinion and policies: the ideas held by the general public are (indirectly) influenced by ideas held by policymakers and politicians and vice versa (Laenen, 2020; Van Oorschot & Roosma, 2017). Public opinion is also influenced by mass-media discussions and portrayals of target groups (Schneider & Jacoby, 2005; Larsen and Dejgaard, 2013). Media images

of the poor seem to reflect the perceptions that are dominant in a society (Gilens, 1999). Indeed, Van Oorschot et al. (2022) write that “the relatively lower level of support for unemployment benefits [compared to support for pensions and health care] does not stem from doubts about the needy situation of the unemployed but *seems to be related to the public images of the unemployed*” (p. 206, emphasis mine). Therefore, in order to shed more light on perceptions of deservingness, this research uses newspaper articles to understand the public opinion on ‘deservingness’ of unemployed people.

2.3.3 Framing in media

Larsen and Dejgaard (2013) suggest there is a causal relationship between mass media and public opinion towards recipients of welfare schemes. The current research analyses media frames, in order to explore public opinions on deservingness. A ‘frame’ is a way of organizing experience, by representing a problem in a specific way (Goffman, 1974). Table 2 presents an overview of the frames (Kendal, 2005; Lepianka, 2015; 2017) and causal responsibility models (Van de Velde et al., 2004) relevant for this research.

The poor are	Frames	Causal responsibility
Deserving	<u>Sympathetic/injustice frame</u> : blame is avoided, as there is a connection between poverty and structural and external problems [1, 2]	<u>Individual fate</u> : poverty is blamed on personal misfortunes, on situations that happen to people through no fault of their own [3]
	<u>Exceptionalism/resilience frame</u> : showing the determination, resilience and perseverance of those who overcame poverty [1, 2]	<u>Social fate</u> : changes and conjunctures such as an economic crisis and migration are at the root of poverty [3]
	<u>Charitable frame</u> : the misery of the poor is emphasized, aiming to stimulate charity [1]	<u>Social blame</u> : social structures are responsible for the presence of poverty: it is society that produces social exclusion [3]
Undeserving	<u>Negative-image frame</u> : the poor are stigmatized, implying a connection between poverty and their own behaviour [1]	<u>Individual blame</u> : the responsibility for poverty is deemed to be the individuals’ [3]

Table 1: Relevant frames and causal responsibility models.⁵

2.3.4 Relevance of religion

Empirical studies have tried to understand cross-national differences in welfare attitudes using the different welfare regimes described by Esping-Andersen (1990). There seems to be more diversity within welfare regimes than between different regimes (Brooks, 2012; Van Oorschot et al., 2022). Consequently, many contextual variables have been studied in order to explain cross-national differences, such as institutional characteristics, economic context, demography, immigration, political climate and cultural context (Van Oorschot et al., 2022).

⁵ [1] Kendall (2005); [2] Lepianka (2015; 2017); [3] Van de Velde et al. (2004).

This research considers another cross-national difference: religion. By selecting the Netherlands and Flanders as most-similar cases, this research aims to shed light on the impact of religion on the prevalence of ‘deservingness’ in unemployment policies.

On this topic, Abellán (2023) and Alesina and Giuliano (2010) have found that Protestants are less favourable towards government-organized redistribution than Roman-Catholics. Abellán (2023) connects this to work ethic, arguing that Protestants expect individuals to be responsible for providing for themselves and therefore condemn redistribution as it may promote unwillingness to work.

2.4 The Netherlands and Flanders

Finally, there are several contextual factors relevant for this research. In this section, these factors are mentioned, including data on Flanders – or Belgium when this data is unavailable – and the Netherlands.

2.4.1 Religion in the Netherlands and Flanders

In the Netherlands, 42.8% of the population is religious, with 13.2% of the population being Protestant, of which half attend church at least once a month (CBS, 2023). There are numerous churches with Calvinist roots, those with the biggest membership are the *Protestantse Kerk Nederland* (PKN), *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* (CGK), *Gereformeerde Gemeenten* and the *Hersteld Hervormde Kerk* (HHK) (SCP, 2018). Of the Dutch population, 18.2% is Roman-Catholic, with 11% attending church at least once a month (CBS, 2023).

In Belgium, 50.02% of the population is Roman-Catholic. Further, 8.9% of the population attends Roman-Catholic church at least once a month (Otheo, 2023).

2.4.2 Meritocratic beliefs

Further, the beliefs related to meritocracy and the current state of affairs are relevant. According to the Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2023) the Dutch and Belgian hold similar beliefs on topics related to ‘getting ahead in life’ and ‘income differences and public benefits’. What stands out is the differences in the items on ‘perception of society’: Belgians perceive their society to foster more equal opportunities and to grant people what they deserve. This matters because of the dominant ideology thesis (Huber & Form, 1973): inequality is legitimated when people believe everyone has an opportunity to get ahead and when it is believed that a person’s position is a function of individual factors rather than structural factors.

2.4.3 Economic and political factors

There are several contextual factors influencing deservingness opinions. Economic and political factors influence deservingness opinions, while institutional factors have no explanatory power (Jeene et al., 2014).

Regarding the economic factors, the Netherlands has a slightly higher GDP per capita (€54.2 thousand in 2022) compared to Flanders (€45 thousand) (CBS, 2024). Further, unemployment levels are slightly higher in the Netherlands (3.5%) compared to Flanders (3.2%) (CBS, 2024). A higher GDP and higher unemployment levels are both correlated with more support for welfare programs and generous deservingness opinions (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003; Jeene et al., 2014).

Regarding political context, weaker strength of right-wing parties correlates with more support for welfare programs and generous deservingness opinions (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003; Jeene et al., 2014). Considering the last elections, right-wing parties in the Netherlands received slightly more votes. In the Netherlands, 31.05% of the votes for national parliament went to right-wing parties (November 2023), while in Flanders this was 30.5% (June 2024).⁶

Lastly, a lower amount of foreign born people correlates with more support for welfare programs and generous deservingness opinions (Eger & Berznau, 2017). In Flanders, 10.9% of the total population is foreign born (Vlaanderen.be, 2024). In the Netherlands 15.5% is foreign born (Eurostat, 2024).

The higher GDP per capita and lower unemployment levels in the Netherlands indicate a higher support for welfare programs and more generous deservingness opinions. However, the higher percentage of foreign born people and the higher strength of right-wing parties correlates with the opposite. In short, the contextual factors discussed do not lead to a clear expectation regarding differences between deservingness opinions among the Dutch and Flemish people. Therefore, as mentioned, this research adds a new contextual factor, i.e., religion, to shed light on its impact on the prevalence of ‘deservingness’ in unemployment policies.

⁶ Included are parties that qualify as right-wing according to PopuList 3.0 (Roodruijn et al., 2023). In the Netherlands this includes: PVV, FvD, BBB, and JA21. In Flanders this includes N-VA and Vlaams Belang.

3. Research question and hypotheses

All are deserving of social welfare, but some more than others

(Laenen, 2020, p. 2)

This research aims to shed light on the relation between meritocracy and Protestantism. It does so by comparing Flanders, as a region with Roman-Catholic heritage, and the Netherlands, a country with a Protestant (Calvinist) heritage. A comparison will be made based between (1) religious sermons and (2) images of the unemployed, in order to answer the following research question: **Does current Protestant thinking (still) promote meritocracy?**

A three-way comparison is made based on content analysis of religious sermons, between Flemish Roman-Catholic, Dutch Roman-Catholic and Dutch Protestant sermons. Sermons are considered to be the most important aspect of religious life of the congregation (Vermeer, 2015). Therefore analysing sermons grants important information on prevalent narratives and beliefs in the church.

Further, images in newspaper articles of the unemployed and their deservingness are analysed, because there is a causal relation between mass media and public opinion (Larsen & Deigaard, 2013). Strict deservingness criteria and negative framing of unemployed people indicate a higher prevalence of meritocracy.

The results from the analysis of the sermons and the newspaper articles are verified and complemented by expert interviews.

3.1 Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework, three hypotheses can be constructed. Assuming that the Protestant heritage still affects the Dutch context and the Roman-Catholic heritage does so for the Flemish context, the following hypotheses can be formulated for the analysis of the newspaper articles:

1. Since CST integrates work and poverty into a broader social or communal context, while Calvinist Protestantism grants greater value to individual responsibility, it is expected that the Dutch newspaper articles have a higher level of negative-image framing of the unemployed;
2. Because Protestants are less favourable towards government-organized redistribution than Roman-Catholics, it is expected that the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor is more prevalent in the Dutch newspaper articles.

For the analysis of the sermons, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

3. As almsgiving and *caritas* are important principles in Roman-Catholicism, while in Protestantism the duty to work is more absolute and poverty is regarded as blameworthy, it is expected that the notion of merit (or desert), meaning that a person is responsible for a particular outcome, is more prevalent in the Protestant sermons.

4. Methodology

But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage

(Weber, 1958, p. 68)

In order to answer the research question, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of (1) Dutch and Flemish newspaper articles on the image and framing of the unemployed, and (2) Dutch Roman-Catholic, Dutch Protestant and Flemish Roman-Catholic sermons. Then, I conducted expert interviews to verify and complement these results.

While the main focus of this research is Protestantism, and religion in general, I have added the analysis of newspaper articles. The first reason is that both countries have different religious heritages, and this analysis offers insight into the perseverance of this religious heritages. Secondly, news media are consumed by more people than sermons, and offer better insight into public opinion (Larsen & Dejgaard, 2013), increasing the scope of relevance of this research.

4.1 Newspaper articles

This research comprised a qualitative content analysis of newspaper articles discussing the unemployed.⁷ The goal of this analysis is to assess to what extent there is a difference in deservingness opinions between Flanders and the Netherlands. The newspaper analysis consisted of (1) a frame analysis (Van Gorp, 2005; 2010), using the media frames proposed by Kendal (2005) and Lepianka (2015; 2017), and a text analysis in order to identify (2) causal responsibility models (Van de Velde et al., 2004), and (3) the CARIN-criteria of deservingness (Van Oorschot, 2000) (see table 1 and 2).

The focus on *frames* used in newspaper articles offer insight into the differences between the Netherlands and Flanders, as frames make up specific cultural codes, evoking a specific – and often culturally dominant – interpretation of reality (Van Gorp, 2010; Lepianka, 2017). Further, newspapers offer a good insight into Flanders (as opposed to Belgium as a whole), as the federal state structure is reflected in the media landscape due to media policy in Belgium being under authority of the individual communities, i.e., Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels (Raeymaeckers et al., 2020). Since the newspaper articles are in Dutch, they are (almost) exclusively read in Flanders.

The strategy for this research was based on Van Gorp's (2005; 2010) frame analysis approach and utilized a deductive strategy, meaning that a limited amount of predefined frames were used. A

⁷ This method was also used for my research for *POLS5828 - Welfare States in the Current Era: Origins, Issues and Challenges 2024/25 Winter*. Therefore there are strong similarities.

deductive strategy allows for a quantitative aspect: by counting the used frames (and causal responsibility models), an indication is given to what extent different frames are actually applied (Van Gorp, 2010).

This research assumes a relationship between newspaper articles and public opinion. Therefore, similar to Lepianka (2015), the newspapers were selected based on biggest readership, as this potentially resonates best with the broad public. The Dutch newspapers used were *Algemeen Dagblad* (a popular, neutral newspaper) and *De Telegraaf* (a popular, liberal newspaper) (Pleijter et al., 2020). The Flemish newspapers used were *Het Laatste Nieuws* (a popular newspaper with liberal roots) and *De Morgen* (a progressive, quality newspaper) (Evens & Raeymaeckers, n.d.). These newspapers are the most read papers, combining online and offline readership (CvdM, 2024; Hendrickx & Van Remoortere, 2022).⁸ For every newspaper, 25 articles were analysed (100 in total, see appendix 1). These newspaper articles were published between 1/1/2020 and 31/12/2024. This (relatively long) period of five years was chosen as it sheds light on general country effects and because it ensures enough relevant articles (similar to Larsen & Dejgaard, 2013).

The selection of the articles was randomly, rather than on a purposive basis, as this captures best what can be considered to be representative for the chosen newspapers and is therefore most likely to reach readers on a daily basis (Lepianka, 2015). The 25 newspaper articles for each newspaper were therefore chosen by filtering for ‘relevance’ and picking the first 25 articles. The articles were retrieved from *LexisNexis Academic*, by searching for the words ‘*werkloosheid*’ (unemployment), ‘*werkloos*’ (unemployed, singular), ‘*werklozen*’ (unemployed, plural), ‘*bijstand*’ (unemployment aid), and ‘*uitkering*’ (unemployment benefit). Articles shorter than 400 words were excluded. Further, articles with titles starting with ‘*Dit zijn de cijfers*’ (these are the numbers) were excluded, as they consisted of regular and factual updates of new unemployment numbers.

All articles were coded using NVivo. First, all articles were read and coded. Then, for a second check, all citations per code were gathered, to assess once more whether the code was the right fit to the citation. I then sought to find patterns in the data, per code. For example, for the causal responsibility model of social blame I asked who was blamed, and for the charitable frame I made a distinction between articles emphasizing the misery of the unemployed and articles stimulating help/charity for the unemployed. Further, I counted the frames and causal

⁸ The Flemish newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad* has more readers than *De Morgen*. However, *Het Nieuwsblad* is not included in LexisNexis Academic.

responsibility models used. Finally, the CARIN-principles were used to complement the findings of the frame and causal responsibility model analysis.

4.2 Sermons

For the analysis of the sermons, I identified indicators and counter-indicators for meritocratic beliefs and attitudes, based on the theoretical framework set out in the previous chapter (see table 3). This table serves as a theoretical coding system to assess (1) the presence and absence of these topics and (2) the arguments made by pastors regarding these topics (similar to Vermeer, 2015).

Topic	Indicator	Counter-indicator
Neediness	The needy are seen as underserving; Harsh attitude towards the needy.	The community is responsible for the needy; The needy are represented as being close/similar to Christ.
Meritocratic traits	Hard working, self-reliant, individualistic.	Community-minded, grateful, compassionate.
Desert	Prosperity is a reward of virtue; Adversity is the punishment of sin.	Prosperity is a gift of God to be grateful for; Adversity is (divinely and incomprehensibly) determined.
Individual agency	Salvation is an (individual) achievement.	God's grace is an unearned gift; Mercy is the opposite of merit.

Table 3: Indicators and counter-indicators for meritocratic beliefs and attitudes

I selected 30 sermons in total (10 Dutch, Roman-Catholic, 10 Dutch Protestant and 10 Belgian, Roman-Catholic) that were held in the last year (since March 2024). The sermons were divided over the calendar year as much as possible, in order to represent a normal church year (including Christian holidays).

The Dutch sermons were selected using www.kerkdienstgemist.nl for both Protestant and Roman-Catholic sermons.⁹ For the Protestant churches, I only selected Calvinist churches (see 2.4.1). For the Belgian, Roman-Catholic sermons there was no available website or database. Therefore, these sermons were collected from the websites of churches or from Youtube. I used software to transcribe the sermons and then all sermons were then coded using NVivo, using table 3. Every sermon was read and coded twice.

4.3 Interviews

Finally, I conducted six expert interviews, with Protestant and Roman-Catholic theologians/pastors and academics, both from the Netherlands and Belgium. The aim of these interviews was to get an expert opinion on the theological roots of meritocracy, and the current

⁹ The exception here are the sermons from the *Gereformeerde Gemeenten*, which were selected from www.prekenweb.nl, as this website offered transcripts of sermons.

and historical relationship between Protestantism/Roman-Catholicism and meritocracy. The respondents interviewed – in chronological order of interviewing – are:¹⁰

1. Prof. Dr. Em. R. (Roger) Burggraeve (KU Leuven): Flemish priest, moral theologian and Biblical philosopher;
2. Prof. Dr. R. (Roel) Kuiper (TU Kampen/Utrecht): Rector of TU Kampen/Utrecht, Dutch historian and professor of Christian Identity;
3. Dr. C.C. (Niels) den Hertog (TU Apeldoorn): Dutch university associate professor of Public Theology/Ethics and (former) Protestant pastor;
4. Patrick Maervoet: Flemish pastor and regional dean of the pastoral region of Leuven;
5. Dr. J.W. (Joost) Hengstmengel (VU Amsterdam): Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Religion and Theology, philosopher and economist;
6. André van Boven: deacon in a Dutch, Roman-Catholic church.

¹⁰ In chapter 5, I refer to the respondents using the following abbreviations: (1) RG, (2) RK, (3) NH, (4) PM, (5) JH, and (6) AB.

5 Results and analysis

First of all: careful not to stigmatise

(Newspaper article 56)

In this chapter, I first present the results of the sermon analysis, after which I turn to the newspaper articles. I then discuss to what extent the hypotheses were confirmed. In the second part of this chapter, I turn to Sandel's (2020) argument about the Protestant roots of meritocracy, and bring this into dialogue with my results, the conducted interviews, and the literature.

5.1 Sermon analysis

I start by presenting the results of the analysis of the sermons, following the topics presented in table 3, and identifying themes in the data. In appendix 3, more citations from the data are added for every topic.

The main differences can be found in the topic of **desert** and **individual agency**. Regarding the topic of **meritocratic traits**, both Protestant and Roman-Catholic sermons often encourage the congregation to be loving, compassionate, humble, and to serve their neighbours. Regarding **neediness**, both Protestant and Roman-Catholic sermons address the needy and argue that, as a Christian, one has the duty to help the needy.

5.1.1 Protestant sermons

The topic of **desert** – considering prosperity as a reward of virtue and adversity as the punishment of sin – is more prevalent in Protestant sermons than in Roman-Catholic sermons. Protestant sermons discuss (1) adversities as a result of sin and (2) the need for obedience.

Firstly, the Protestant sermons discuss adversities being the result of the original sin and that the curse resulting from this sin, still impacts our lives today.

There is a cause, we have sinned. We have given God cause that we are under the curse. And that curse works in us and it lives in us, because that is a living thing, congregation. That is the reality: there is a cause. That curse leads us to destruction. It attaches itself like a leech to the cursed, it renders the strong powerless, it makes the rich poor, irresistible. That curse destroys us.

(Sermon 8)

However, the results of the original sin renders everyone equally cursed. The citations show that the strong become powerless, and the rich become poor. This is rather a counter-indicator for meritocratic thinking: regardless of effort, everyone is equal when it comes to the adversities

resulting from the original sin. In the Roman-Catholic sermons, there is no mention of adversities being the result of (original) sin.

Secondly, however, the Protestant sermons discuss obeying God's commandments as a precondition for being blessed or listened to. A causality is insinuated between adversity and *personal sin*.

Often in the Bible, the Lord shows that he does not hear if, in the meantime, people just keep living in sin and going their own way (...) Sin causes blockage, which is why you don't receive.
(Sermon 4)

So, while the general argument is that salvation is initiated and caused by God, the sermons do mention initiatives man should undertake to receive mercy and salvation. In other words, the Protestant sermons show that personal effort and obedience is important for salvation to a certain extent:

When Jesus talks about clean and unclean, it is about who you are as a person. How you live, how seriously you take your faith in God, and how you treat your fellow man. (Sermon 3)

The Lord demands love and obedience. This should manifest itself in our actions. (Sermon 4)

However, concerning **individual agency**, the Protestant sermons argue that man is only able to decide his own fate to a certain extent. Beyond this extent, it is God who decides. Man does not deserve salvation, based on his own 'unclean' nature or deeds:

Celebrating Lord's Supper actually implies that you say, I can't do it without Jesus. It's not up to me. I need bread of grace. (Sermon 1)

Rather, God's initiative is needed for salvation.

To open a sinner's heart to the Gospel requires heavenly intervention. (Sermon 7)

Therefore, merely obeying is not enough to receive salvation.

Even if we were to live according to the law (...) blameless, (...) then that curse still remains on us (...) Christ, says Paul (...) Christ, no, not you, but Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law. (Sermon 8)

The Protestant sermons literally use the word 'work' or 'labour', to explain that work/labour does not suffice to get salvation. Moreover, the belief that hard work will lead to salvation is actively rejected.

Those commandments are not there for salvation, because then they are dead works. Those commandments help us to serve God and our neighbour. (Sermon 5)

‘Dead works’ refers to the Levitical commandments written in the Old Testament: customs and sacrifices that the Jewish people were to uphold in order to be washed clean of sins. In this sermon, it is argued that those Levitical commandments are ‘dead’ works and that Jesus refers to them “as an encouragement to stop being saved by works in particular” (Sermon 5).

This also becomes apparent in the many references to Pharisees, known for their strict obedience to Jewish laws. The Protestant sermons discuss Jesus’ rejecting the Pharisees and their law-abiding convictions.

[The Pharisees] talk about Christ, about the cross of Christ, but add: You must first be circumcised. That is the frenzy in that, congregation. That is the disobedience! (Sermon 8)

In other words, the Protestant sermons emphasize both the need for obedience, and the need for God’s initiative. God’s initiative is needed because of man’s faulty nature, which is discussed in nine out of ten sermons.

Do you take into account that humans are sinful humans, that they therefore make mistakes? Because you can trust someone completely, but you actually already know that people fail. (Sermon 1)

A major theme in the Protestant sermons is that being a Christian means that you will suffer in this world, both because ‘worldly’ people regard Christians in a negative way, and because Christians are confronted by their own imperfections.

And that too is Jesus. (...) When he is involved with you, He not only shows you the beauty of your life, but then He does not shy away from and is honest to also confront you with several less beautiful sides of your life. (Sermon 3)

The life of God's children is a road in which there are certainly moments of rest and of encouragement and of progress, but also moments of plodding, of headwinds, of setbacks. (Sermon 6)

This suffering does bring people closer to God, and is therefore also regarded as a blessing.

But see that suffering in your life, see the trouble, see the sorrow, see the shame as opportunities to be faithful to your Creator. Not to run away from Him, but to go to Him and say: ‘Lord here I am. I cannot do it alone’. (Sermon 9)

In the Roman-Catholic sermons, there is only 1 mention of suffering due to being a Christian.

5.1.2 Roman-Catholic sermons

While the topic of desert and individual agency were most prevalent in the Protestant sermons, the Roman-Catholic sermons emphasize (1) the positive features of human nature and (2) the differences between Christian society and non-Christian society.

The sermons discuss human's faulty nature and the mistakes they make, but then emphasize the positive side: God is still willing to have a relationship with man despite his mistakes. In general, human nature is regarded more positively than in the Protestant sermons.

But he creates you and he sees you, and he wants you simply because he finds you beautiful. Beauty. Radiance. That's what he sees in you, and that's why you are there. (Sermon 24)

Contrary to the Protestant sermons, regarding **individual agency**, there is no direct mention of a link between sinfulness and undeserved *salvation*. Rather, the sermons emphasize an underserved *relationship* that is initiated by God, despite people's mistakes.

First screw up and then come back and be welcome too. That sounds too nice. Too soft. Almost inhuman. (Sermon 29)

There is a strong emphasis on the difference between Christian life and values, and the life of 'normal' society. Christians are called to distinguish themselves for 'normal' society, in order to be a witness of God and the Bible.

But what about the value of attention of time and of love? In a society focused on a reward in the here and now, that might also be hard to understand. (Sermon 21)

Especially at a time when the world is so full of problems full of dangers. That we show each other that Jesus asks us to love one another instead of going to war. That we are there for each other and not that the other should be there for me. (Sermon 27)

Dutch Roman-Catholic sermons

Like the Protestant sermons, the Dutch sermons emphasize personal effort as a precondition for salvation, more than the Flemish sermons.

You didn't join a club and that's it. Baptism repeatedly asks for confirmation to want to be a disciple, to immerse yourself in it and to see what is God inviting me to on the path of my life. (Sermon 25)

Notably, the Flemish Roman-Catholic sermons did not mention personal effort once as an important precondition for salvation.

Further, it is argued that individual believers have a *choice* to answer God's initiative for salvation.

The gospel never forces people. God never forces people, but God holds out his hand, as it were, and people have a choice whether to take that hand or not. A free choice to take that hand to want to be a disciple of Jesus. (Sermon 25)

Flemish Roman-Catholic sermons

The topic of gratefulness and community-mindedness is hardly discussed in the Dutch Protestant and Roman-Catholic sermons. This stands in contrast with the Flemish, Roman-Catholic sermons that do mention gratefulness as an important attitude/trait for a Christian.

That ultimate bond with Christ is so beautiful. That we want to perpetuate that every week. The faithfulness. The connection. That draws us away from hopelessness to hope. And we can't help but celebrate that connection. (Sermon 11)

5.1.3 Back to the hypotheses

These findings partly confirm hypothesis 3, which stated that it was expected that the notion of merit (or desert), meaning that a person is responsible for a particular outcome, is more prevalent in the Protestant sermons. Obedience and personal effort play a greater role in the Protestant sermons, compared to the Roman-Catholic sermons. The need for obedience could be considered a meritocratic element (Reynolds & Xian, 2014), as it is personal effort or work that allows individuals to advance. However, in contemporary society obedience is not considered to be a meritocratic trait per se, as traits that partly oppose obedience – such as assertiveness and self-reliance – are regarded to be more meritocratic (Mijs, 2016).

The emphasis on the opposite of (the effect of) obedience is also more prevalent in the Protestant sermons: Luther's *sola gratia* still echoes in the Protestant sermons. This becomes apparent in the explicit rejection of merely obedience and work being enough for salvation.

Next, the Roman-Catholic sermons emphasize the positive features of human nature, while nine out of ten Protestant sermons emphasize man's faulty nature. This faulty nature – and sin and adversity in general – is the result of the original sin, granting everyone equally faulty.

Both Roman-Catholic and Protestant sermons discuss the distinction between Christians and non-Christians. The Protestant sermons extensively discuss the suffering of Christians in a non-

Christian world, while the Roman-Catholic sermons call for Christians to be different from the non-Christian world, by being loving.

In the Dutch context, compared to the Flemish, there is (1) a greater emphasis on personal effort for salvation, and (2) a greater emphasis on God's initiative for salvation and man's choice to answer this initiative. Finally, gratefulness is more prevalent in the Flemish sermons.

In short, the prevalence of the notion of desert in the Protestant sermons indicate similarities to meritocratic thinking. As Sandel (2020) argues, the first debates about merit were about God's favour, and on the question whether this favour is earned or rather received as a gift. This question remains relevant, as can be seen in the sermons. However, the question of this favour seems to be answered in an anti-meritocratic manner: work does not result in salvation. Further, when it comes to God's favour, everyone is equal regardless of effort: God's favour is unearned due to human's sinful nature. Further, Protestant sermons mention to a far greater extent that (1) man's nature is faulty and (2) being a Christian means suffering.

5.2 Newspaper analysis

Next, I turn to the results of the newspaper analysis, analysing them using the CARIN-principles (table 1), the frames and the causal responsibility models (table 2).

5.2.1 Framing

Table 4 displays the four frames used in the newspaper articles.

Framing		The Netherlands	Belgium
Charitable frame	Misery of the unemployed is emphasized	18	13
	Stimulating help/charity	5	8
Exceptionalism and resilience frame		8	9
Sympathetic and injustice frame		17	18
Negative image frame	Opposing the negative image	6	15
	Supporting the negative image	10	17

Table 4: Results of the newspaper analysis regarding the different frames.

The **charitable frame** can be divided into two indicators: the emphasizing of the misery of the unemployed, and discussing the need for and value of helping them. The former was more prevalent in the Dutch articles:

Many people got mangled. Lives were disrupted. They received no or the wrong benefits for years, got into financial trouble. (Article 21)

She has found applying for welfare benefits where your whole life is turned inside out to be dehumanising. (Article 23)

The need for and value of helping the unemployed was more prevalent in the Flemish articles, stressing the **needs** of the unemployed:

Therefore, we need to get people back to work as soon as possible. By increasing the pressure a bit, but also by helping them. We don't let them down. (article 64)

Jobseekers (...) need certainty in a world that is becoming increasingly chaotic and complex. As a government, we need to be a trusted guide: this is your situation, these are the possibilities, this is the best path for you and we are going to help you. (article 68)

For both the Netherlands and Flanders, the **exceptionalism or resilience** of the unemployed is stressed by creating an image of unemployed people who have been searching and applying for a job for a long time, by emphasizing their (administrative) struggles and by painting a picture of being unemployed as a ‘fight’.

They then struggle through all kinds of procedures and administration. (Article 68)

So far, Marnix Martens (62) has sent out at least 150 letters of application, but without success. (Article 72)

Often these are discouraged unemployed people: they once looked for a job but gave up the fight. (Article 97)

For both countries, the **sympathetic and injustice frame** is prevalent, primarily emphasizing that the laws and regulations are too strict, complicated or unfair, or discussing other injustices, such as discrimination.

The world view embedded in that law is that people on welfare would be lazy. But large groups of people have been left to their own devices for a very long time in the past. (Article 37)

This also applies to other groups within the long-term unemployed: people from migrant backgrounds or with a disability also encounter - often unconscious - prejudices from employers, giving them too few opportunities. (Article 52)

Some, primarily Flemish, articles clearly oppose the **negative image frame**.

We need to stop stigmatising people in vulnerable positions, such as the long-term unemployed, he believes. (Article 54)

First of all: careful not to stigmatise. (Article 56)

Who wants to work, can work: to debunk that cliché, trade union ACV followed jobseekers for a year who apply a lot but fruitlessly. (Article 72)

Other articles support or reinforce the negative image of unemployed people. Again, this is to a greater extent the case in the Flemish articles.

And my cousin lies at home on the couch all day and gets her benefits paid neatly every month! Surely the world cannot keep turning like this. (Article 58)

People receiving unemployment benefits for 20 years, I cannot understand. You can't tell me they can't find a job. (Article 73)

Similarly, concerning the CARIN-principle of **reciprocity**, ten Flemish articles mention that those who receive unemployment benefits are expected to do something in return, as a sign of solidarity to society. Only one Dutch article mentions this. A Flemish article writes:

The underlying reasoning was that whoever receives benefits can thus also give something back to society. If the unemployed person refused to do so, he would receive a sanction from VDAB and even risk losing his benefit. (Article 80)

Consequently, unjustifiably receiving unemployment benefits – e.g., by lying to the authorities – means that solidarity to society is undermined. One Flemish article writes:

So he chooses to fool society instead of assuming responsibility over his own life and work. (Article 56)

5.2.2 Causal responsibility models

Table 5 below shows the results regarding the causal responsibility models.

Causal responsibility models		The Netherlands	Belgium
Individual fate		17	6
Social fate		5	1
Social blame	Total	23	19
	Employers are blamed	8	12
	The government is blamed	17	9
	Other	2	2
Individual blame		10	13

Table 5: Results of the newspaper analysis regarding the causal responsibility models

The **individual fate** model is more prevalent in the Dutch articles, mentioning illness, age, citizenship status, bankruptcy, and stress resulting from debts as reasons for unemployment. Concerning the CARIN-principle of **identity**, both Flemish and Dutch articles emphasize the

diversity of people that are unemployed, from stay at home parents, to status holders and caregivers.

The **social fate** model is not very prevalent in either Flemish or Dutch articles, but the Dutch articles do use it a little more, mentioning the corona- and euro crisis as causes of unemployment. The **social blame** model is prevalent in both Dutch and Flemish articles. The Dutch articles blame the government, government agencies and strict regulations and laws to a greater extent, while the Flemish articles blame employers. One Dutch article writes:

The truth is that those who calculate are sometimes better off not working at all. In our country, it is better to be a victim with benefits and all the allowances and associated financial arrangements that go with them, than to go to work for the same money or slightly more.
(Article 31)

A Flemish article mentions:

New research from UGent shows that the problem certainly does not lie with the jobseeker alone. If an applicant is unemployed for more than a year, the interest of employers drops sharply. 'They are all looking for that sheep with five legs' [i.e., a jack of all trades]. (Article 52)

This also concerns the CARIN principle of **control**. Both Flemish and Dutch articles mention causes outside of the control of the unemployed as a reason for their unemployment. What stands out is that twelve Flemish articles mentioned that longer unemployment means a decreased chance of finding a new job, while only one Dutch article mentions this. In the Dutch articles there is more emphasis on age, especially young age, as a reason for unemployment.

Young people are the first to suffer during a crisis anyway. Many of them are on temporary contracts and therefore easy to discharge. (Article 13)

Ten Dutch articles and thirteen Flemish articles use the **individual blame** model. However, the tone of the Flemish articles is more harsh, and there is a greater emphasis on 'lazy' individuals who are able to work but refuse to do so:

Those who do not have a good reason for not turning up are not willing to work and do not deserve unemployment benefits. It is a story of rights and duties. Period. (Article 78)

Maybe just those [non-working] people should be rewarded with reduced rates. And especially the long-term unemployed, who do not want to work but are perfectly capable of doing so, really sanction them instead of just threatening. (Article 94)

Similarly, there is a difference in the **attitude** of the unemployed that is described in the articles. Thirteen Dutch articles describe the unemployed as motivated, persevering and job-seeking, while nine Flemish articles do this.

Lastly, both Flemish and Dutch newspapers discuss **the meaning of work**. Both emphasize how work is a way of socializing, meaning making, and being part of society.

Because work is a positive thing, he says: it keeps us involved in society and strengthens our identity. (Article 68)

Both Dutch and Flemish articles also discuss the (financial) benefits of work for society. To a greater extent, the Dutch articles (five in total) emphasize how work is the best way for individuals to escape poverty.

5.2.3 Back to the hypotheses

These findings contradict the first hypothesis, which stated that the Dutch newspaper articles were expected to have a higher level of negative-image framing. In the Flemish articles, both support and opposition for the negative image are more prevalent. Further, regarding individual blame, the tone of the Flemish articles is harsher. In the Dutch articles, the causal responsibility model of individual fate is more prevalent, indicating that the unemployed are regarded to be less blameworthy. However, it should be noted that the Flemish articles call for help and charity for the unemployed to a greater extent.

This means that the expectation of more negative framing in the Dutch articles – and with it more meritocratic thinking – is not confirmed, because negative framing is more prevalent in the Flemish articles, and the tone of these articles is harsher. It should however be noted that the opposition for the negative frame and the call for charity to the unemployed is also more prevalent in the Flemish articles, indicating more polarization around the issue of unemployment in Flanders than in the Netherlands.

The second hypothesis held that the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor was expected to be more prevalent in the Dutch articles. Regarding this, the results are ambiguous. On the one hand, the Dutch articles emphasize the misery of the unemployed (charitable frame) and paint a picture of a more motivated and persevering unemployed person (CARIN-principle of attitude), opposing the hypothesis. Further, the Flemish articles emphasize the CARIN-principle of reciprocity to a great extent: receivers of unemployment benefits are expected to give something back. Following the idea of the CARIN-principles, this idea of reciprocity deems the

unemployed person to be less deserving. This indicates a stricter distinction between deserving and undeserving in the Flemish articles, rather than the Dutch articles.

However, regarding control, the Flemish articles emphasize that unemployment can be outside of the control of the unemployed. As mentioned in many articles, employers have prejudices about long-term unemployed people, resulting in less willingness to employ them. Here we see that the Flemish articles are more sympathetic towards unemployed people, regarding the CARIN-principle of control. In short, the second hypothesis is neither confirmed nor contradicted, as the results are ambiguous.

As mentioned in chapter 4, the analysis of the newspaper is meant to offer insight into the perseverance of the different religious heritages in the Netherlands and Flanders. Since confirmation of the first and second hypothesis would indicate perseverance of religious heritage (see 2.2.5 and 3.1), the results indicate that the effect of religious heritage is limited. There is one exception: the Flemish articles call for help and charity for the unemployed to a greater extent, adhering to the Roman-Catholic principle of *caritas*.

5.2.4 The puzzle

The results of the analysis of the sermons and the newspaper articles raise a few questions in need of answering, before turning to answering the research question. Firstly, the Protestant sermons both support and reject the relation between hard work and salvation. While support indicates meritocratic thinking, and is in line with the PWE, rejection indicates the opposite. Secondly, regarding the newspapers, the Dutch newspapers do not display a higher level of negative-image framing, as was expected.

In what follows, I will use the results from the expert interviews and existing literature to understand (1) the support and rejection of the relation between hard work and salvation in the Protestant sermons and (2) the lower prevalence of negative image framing in the Dutch articles. I do this by bringing my results into dialogue with Sandel's (2020) claims. I argue that a distinction between ideas and institutions in general, and Protestantism and PWE in specific, is crucial. Further I distinguish between technocratic meritocracy, and meritocracy in Christian thinking.

5.3 Solving the puzzle

As mentioned in chapter 2, Sandel (2020) argues that both the PWE and contemporary Protestantism promote meritocratic thinking. Sandel writes about the US and indeed, the relation between religion and prosperity in the US today seems clear: religion accounts for almost a third

of the GDP (Grim & Grim, 2016). The US is a deviant case compared to other advanced, industrial countries, holding a much more traditional value system, and having higher levels of religiosity and national pride (Inglehart & Baker, 2000).

On an *ideational* level, this could mean the relationship between Protestantism and meritocracy in the US is also a deviant case, different from the Netherlands and Flanders. The argument that Protestantism supports meritocracy through ideas would then seem to be true in the US. In other words, the PWE has become part of a *culture*, without the necessity for personal beliefs in doctrines as predestination and *sola gratia*.

However, the *institutional* effect of the Reformation and Protestantism, rather than the number of its adherents or its cultural effects, explain the effect of Protestantism on prosperity (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Garcia Portilla, 2019; 2021) and competitiveness (Becker et al, 2016). This is, among other things, due to its focus on education and human capital (Becker & Woessmann, 2009).

Institutions, as the rules of the game (North, 1990), and especially *informal* institutions are persistent (North, 1997). Indeed, the long-run effects of the Reformation are best understood when considering them together with the institutional changes they caused (Becker et al., 2016). These institutional changes include changes in “political, legal, and social institutions, resulting in the ascendancy of parliaments, the secularization of law, increased emphasis on education, and the precursors of the welfare state” (Becker et al., 2016, p. 21).

This means that the influence of Protestantism on meritocracy – both in the US and Europe – is exerted through institutions rather than adherence to religion. This undermines the claim that Protestantism as a belief today significantly supports meritocracy, and shifts our focus from ideas to institutions. It is here, I believe, that my research responds to Sandel’s claims.

I argue that two distinctions are to be made in order to understand the relationship between Protestantism and meritocracy. Firstly, between Protestantism as belief or idea, and the PWE, as an institutional or cultural influence.¹¹ Secondly, two types of meritocracy should be distinguished: technocratic meritocracy and Christian meritocracy. I propose the following overview:

¹¹ It should be noted that it is challenging to investigate the effect of religious beliefs on any outcome, as beliefs are adopted and internalized as an individual choice (Nunziata & Rocco, 2024). Therefore, the interviews serve as a proxy to investigate Protestant and Roman-Catholic beliefs.

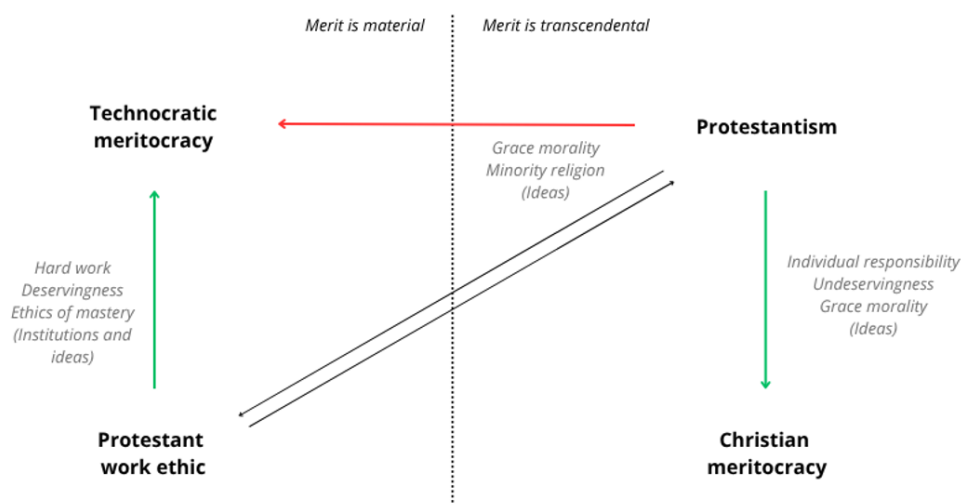


Figure 1: Overview showing the relation between Protestantism, the PWE and two types of meritocracy. The grey text shows that Protestantism exerts influence through ideas, while the PWE does so mainly through institutions. Further, green arrows indicate support, while red arrows indicate opposition.

5.3.1 The ethic of mastery and Protestantism

As discussed in chapter 2, Sandel argues that the residuals of providential faith – the PWE and its moralizing of success – fuel the ethic of mastery. The interviews confirmed that holding on to the normative framework of Christianity without the personal conviction to the Bible, i.e., a cultural understanding of religion such as the PWE, has great potential to fuel meritocracy (interview RK, NH, JH).

You can make a distinction between theology and a cultural conception. That cultural conception can perhaps come very close to (...) meritocratic thinking. (RK)

We have inherited the normative framework from Protestantism, but we have lost that it came from the gospel. And then it gets harsh. (NH)

However, the meritocratic ethic of mastery assumes a link between effort and success that is absent in Protestantism: while hard work and good works are encouraged, the eventual blessing comes from God (interview JH). This explains why there is both an emphasis on obedience in the Protestant sermons, and a clear anti-desert narrative.

Thinking in terms of merit was not strong in Protestant circles. Hard work was called for, but ultimate success (blessing on labour) was not linked to merit. That came from God. (JH)

Sandel blurs the line between the PWE, with its ethic of mastery, and Protestantism. Rather than responding to Protestant faith, Sandel responds to its cultural understanding.¹² While the interviews showed that there certainly is meritocracy present in Protestantism (and Roman-Catholicism), this is different from what Sandel calls the ethic of mastery. The difference is that the former opposes a link between effort and success, while the latter relies on it.

5.3.2 Protestantism and Christian meritocracy

Protestantism – separated from the PWE – fuels a specific kind of meritocracy. *Christian* meritocracy consists of the belief that man is born with God-given talents to cultivate to the best of his abilities (interview RK, RB) and a personal responsibility that followed the loss of mediation by the Church after the Reformation (interview RK, RB). The ‘merit’ in this meritocracy is religious rather than material, which is the difference with technocratic meritocracy. Merit is transcendental, and reward is not immediate. Work is intended as a form of serving and gratitude (interview RK). In this Christian meritocracy, one’s value does not depend on being successful, but on being a human created by God (interview RB, NH, AB), as emphasized in the Roman-Catholic sermons.

Importantly, there is meritocracy both in Protestantism and Roman-Catholicism (interview RB, RK). As previously discussed, the Protestant sermons both support and oppose a relation between work and obedience on the one hand, and merit on the other. The merit discussed is religious merit. Against meritocratic thinking, it is emphasized that every man is equally undeserving of merit, due to their faulty nature. It is here that Protestantism and Roman-Catholicism seem to differ. Both the interviews (interview RB, AB, PM) and the sermons confirm that while Protestantism emphasizes man’s faulty nature, Roman-Catholicism emphasizes man as created in the image of God. While the latter is also part of Protestantism, there is a difference in the prevalence of this idea in the sermons. Following the principle of *caritas*, Roman-Catholicism offers solidarity and help to the needy regardless of who they are. In this way, both Protestantism and Roman-Catholicism oppose meritocratic thinking, but in different manners.

5.3.3 The PWE and technocratic meritocracy

The religious ideas of Christian meritocracy became secularized, resulting in an economic version of meritocracy (interview RB, JH).

¹² A good example of this is the secular interpretation of a parable in Matthew which has led to the term ‘Matthew effect’ (Merton, 1968). Burggraeve (2023) explains how this (secular) understanding of the parable does not do justice to the original meaning.

The traditional interpretation of religious meritocracy is secularised, becoming an economic or secular meritocracy. (RB)

With this, there is a loss of community. The question ‘How can I serve my neighbours and the world’, changed into ‘How can I serve myself?’ (interview RK). In other words, this secularized religion (PWE) gave rise to a different kind of meritocracy.

As Sandel argues, the PWE supports technocratic meritocracy. The PWE echoes in our secular society through its moral vocabulary of hard work and deservingness. As mentioned, the interviews confirm that a cultural/secular understanding of Protestantism, such as the PWE, holds the ingredients for meritocracy: personal responsibility, the duty to cultivate talents, etc. Taking away the idea of *transcendental* merit, leaves a moral vocabulary for previously religious ideas.

PWE, as *institutionalized* Protestantism, is present both in the Netherlands and in Flanders, despite different levels of religiosity. While having different dominant religious heritages, Belgium and the Netherlands have the same state religion¹³ (i.e., none) and legal origin (i.e., French) (Barro & McCleary, 2005; La Porta et al., 1999; Garcia Portilla, 2019). So while Protestantism as belief or idea might not be present at the same level, both countries show similar signs of institutionalized PWE.

This then explains why the Dutch newspaper articles do not show a higher level of negative-image framing and the results vis-à-vis deservingness are ambiguous. The harsher tone and the focus on reciprocity in the Flemish articles, could be explained by the fact that Flemish perceive their society to foster more equal opportunities and to grant people what they deserve (European Commission, 2023).

5.3.4 Protestantism and technocratic meritocracy

Sandel argues that Protestantism today contributes to meritocratic thinking. The interviews and literature argue for the opposite, i.e., Protestantism today opposes meritocratic thinking, specifically through its notion of grace.¹⁴ Grace – or mercy – as the opposite of merit, gives religion the capacity to critique and resist meritocracy (Teklu, 2018).

¹³ The key aspect of a state religion is the presence of a monopoly position of one favoured religion, e.g., through limitations on entry and through subsidies (Barro & McCleary, 2005).

¹⁴ While Sandel does not address the potential of Protestantism opposing meritocracy, he does recognize this possibility in interviews (e.g., in an interview with First Church in Cambridge, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGO1jp6IwX0>).

Chen (2015) distinguishes the moral principle of meritocracy, from the moral principle of grace. Even though Chen is hesitant to use a term with such historical and religious baggage, he writes that the morality of grace “best captures the antithesis of the meritocratic ideology: a spiritual perspective of nonjudgment and abundance; a foil to an economic perspective of measurement and scarcity” (p. 26). Grace morality rejects the meritocratic ideal of deservingness through merit and the admiration of success (Chen & Bland, 2022; Chen, 2015)

Chen (2015) writes that “grace morality is not synonymous with religion” and that “there are ways that secular and humanistic thought can tap into a similar perspective” (p. 250).¹⁵ It can result in less focus on the economic aspects of life, accumulation and advancement, and in support for redistribution (Chen, 2015). Further, the forgiveness that is part of grace morality can lead to less judgemental and hostile politics. Grace morality can also “serve as an antidote to the rule-bound thinking of modern bureaucracies” (Chen & Bland, 2022, p. 168) and lead to more human policies and institutions. Finally, it could give rise to an ‘economy of grace’ in which redistribution does not depend on deservingness (Chen, 2017). In short, grace morality can oppose meritocracy.

Protestantism favours a grace morality of the ethic of mastery. Despite the grace morality not being exclusively religious, Protestants might exhibit a strong morality grace, as individuals belonging to a minority religion show stronger adherence to their religious principles (Nunziata & Rocco, 2014; 2016; 2024). Modernization and secularization do not relegate religion to the private sphere (Casanova, 1994), it rather incentivizes Christians to remobilize in order to make their message heard (Vollaard, 2013). This is specifically true for Protestants belonging to a minority, compared to Roman-Catholics (Nunziata & Rocco, 2014; 2016; 2024). This stronger adherence to religious principles might explain why both obedience and grace were emphasized in the Protestant sermons.

5.3.5 The PWE and Protestantism

Lastly, much has been written about the relationship between Protestantism and the PWE. Weber was not interested in Protestantism itself, but rather in its psychological effects, leading to a specific work ethic. As mentioned, the Protestant sermons displayed both a higher support and opposition of a causality between hard work and blessing. Rather than (psychological) effects on

¹⁵ As Chen (2017) writes, the concept of grace is not unique to the Christian religion, as it is part of many other religious traditions (p. 43).

an individual or cultural level, this indicates the influence the PWE has on the Protestant church and its sermons.¹⁶

The interviews confirm that the church today is influenced by the PWE and (technocratic) meritocracy (interview AB, RK).

We live in a culture that is individualistic and the church is also becoming permeated by it. (AB)

The Christian world is now a minority culture, part of a broad culture in which trends influence Christian thinking. (RK)

More broadly, the culture of the PWE seems to influence both Roman-Catholicism and Protestantism. The analysis of the newspapers showed that the effect of the different religious heritage is limited. What seems to be a more powerful distinction is the one between the minority Christian culture, and the majority non-Christian culture. This explains why the Roman-Catholic sermons emphasize the difference between Christian and non-Christian society. This could also explain why the Protestant sermons mention the suffering that accompanies being a Christian today: holding a minority belief, Protestants undergo a specific kind of suffering. As one sermon writes:

Many believers face a very particular and specific kind of suffering in one way or another.

Suffering because people say to you (...) you should be ashamed of being a Christian. (Sermon 9)

Finally, worth mentioning is that the Protestant religious heritage does seem to have an effect on the Dutch, Roman-Catholic sermons. The topic of gratefulness and community-mindedness is hardly discussed in both the Dutch Protestant and Roman-Catholic sermons. Further, both Dutch Protestant and Roman-Catholic sermons emphasize personal effort. Both the lack of attention to gratefulness and community-mindedness, and the emphasis on personal effort are more in line with Protestant heritage, than with Roman-Catholic thinking.

¹⁶ Other examples of this are the affinity between Pentecostalism and neoliberal capitalism and the rise of prosperity theology (Kirby, 2019).

6 Conclusion and discussion

In the end, merit drove out grace

(Michael Sandel, 2020)

This research has answered the question: Does current Protestant thinking (still) promote meritocracy? I have argued that in order to understand the relationship between Protestantism and meritocracy, two distinctions are crucial: (1) between Protestantism as idea and the PWE as institutional influence, and (2) between technocratic meritocracy and Christian meritocracy. Using these distinctions, the research question can be answered in a nuanced way as follows.

Through its ideas, Protestantism opposes technocratic meritocracy, while it supports Christian meritocracy. The former is done by opposing a morality of grace to a morality of meritocracy. At the same time, ideas as hard work and individual responsibility are present in Protestantism, supporting Christian meritocracy. The PWE – as institutional and ideational force – has supported, and continues to support, technocratic meritocracy. According to the PWE and technocratic meritocratic thinking, hard work pays off as merit is understood to be material. According to Christian meritocracy, hard work does not matter for the ultimate, transcendental merit. Furthermore, this research has shown that religion – specifically minority belief – is an important contextual factor in the research on deservingness opinions and meritocracy.

When Sandel (2020) writes that merit has driven out grace, and that the ethic of mastery has overwhelmed the ethic of fortune, the battle against meritocracy seems lost. Indeed, meritocracy seems to have influenced every sphere of civic life (Bruni & Cerrino, 2022). However, opposing ideas can be powerful. This does not exclusively regard religious ideas and actors, as the morality of grace can be (and has been) extended to secular and humanistic thought (Chen, 2015). This research has addressed one of the many ideas with the potential to oppose technocratic meritocracy.

6.1 Limitations

Due to limited time and the limited scope of this research, a few limitations should be addressed. Firstly, rather than looking at individual ideas, this research looked at religious ideas. However, in order to know to what extent religious ideas support and oppose meritocracy, it is also necessary to know to what extent these ideas are held by religious individual. I tried to solve this by using the interviews as proxy for (individual) religious ideas. However, in the future, it would be better to explore the ideas held by (ordinary) believers, rather than experts and theologians.

Secondly, the amount of sermons analysed were limited. Especially for the Protestant sermons this is a limitation, as there are many differences among Protestant churches in the Netherlands. I tried to solve this by using sermons from four different, Calvinist strands of Protestantism. However, in the future a similar research would benefit from analysing more sermons, covering a broader range of Protestant churches and ideas.

7 Appendices

7.1 Appendix 1: Newspaper articles used

AD

1. Recordaantal vacatures en toch werkloos? Hoe kan dat?
2. Werken moet altijd meer opleveren dan uitkering
3. Amsterdam hoopt bijna 4500 langdurig werklozen te verleiden met financieel extraatje weer aan het werk te gaan
4. 'Mag je naast je uitkering bijverdienen?'
5. Geef asielzoekers mogelijkheid bij te dragen
6. Aantal kinderen met ouders in de bijstand daalt flink
7. Echt een tijdje goed werkloos zijn, dat is nog niet gemakkelijk
8. Iets minder groei. Maar is dat zo erg?
9. 'Je bent je leven kwijt, maar volgens het UWV niet ziek genoeg'
10. Werk over grens kost Frankrijk miljarden
11. Bijstand gekort om hulp ouders
12. Vrouw moet 7000 euro bijstand terugbetalen
13. Meer mensen zoeken werk
14. 'Geef ik mijn schoonmaker loonsverhoging?'
15. Hoe zit het met de duur van de WW?
16. Zelf ontslag nemen en toch een uitkering
17. De economie blijft kwakkelen, maar dat is niet heel erg
18. CPB: meer groei en meer werkloosheid
19. 'Mijn salaris wordt aangevuld met een gedeeltelijke uitkering'
20. De WIA-uitkering moet vanuit de basis anders
21. UWV gaat ook de mist in met medische beoordelingen: uitkering klopt niet
22. Migranten zijn keihard nodig
23. Selma is langdurig werkloos: 'Liever voor altijd in de bijstand dan deze opnieuw aanvragen'
24. Kabinet wil meer 'menselijke maat' in bijstandsregels
25. Werklozen stromen veel sneller door naar een baan; slechts klein percentage komt in de bijstand

Telegraaf

26. Bijstand loopt langzaam leeg, meer werklozen vinden baan
27. 'Stilte voor de storm voor de bijstand'

28. Column: langdurig werklozen opgesloten in bijstand
29. Column: waarom meer migranten met miljoen arbeidskrachten aan zijlijn?
30. Meer mensen komen uit de bijstand, maar wel toename jongeren met uitkering Cijfers CBS
31. Werken zou lonender worden, maar Van Rij heeft het niet eens geprobeerd Column
Annemarie van Gaal
32. UWV verrast over daling van werkloosheid 'We kijken wel met spanning uit naar de winter'
33. Hogere werkloosheid door nieuwe rekenmethode
34. Banen zat, maar werkloosheid onder jongeren neemt toe: 'Generatie-Z veeleisend, te duur en wiebelig'
35. Bloemschikker met 42.000 volgers op Instagram die 'alleen knutselde' moet bijstand inleveren
36. Langdurig werklozen aan de slag krijgen blijkt zeer moeilijk 'Het aantal welwillenden in de bijstand is bedroevend klein'
37. Hoe trek je bijstandstrekkers van de bank? De Amsterdamse vs. de Rotterdamse aanpak van langdurig werklozen
38. 45-plus komt weer moeilijk aan het werk: 'Bijstand voelt als gevangenis'
39. Bijstand is 'veelvoorkomende bron van schulden': 286.000 mensen hebben bijstandsschuld
40. Krapte arbeidsmarkt biedt werkenden 'gouden kans' op vragen hoger salaris CBS : Laagste werkloosheid sinds medio jaren zeventig
41. Column: meer banen dan werklozen is het nieuwe normaal
42. Coronacrisis kost 322.000 banen Hoge verborgen werkloosheid door noodsteun van kabinet
43. Bijna half miljoen mensen zit uitzichtloos op de bank Hoe kan dat met zoveel vacatures?
44. 5 vragen: hoe koelen we de arbeidsmarkt af?
45. Verwachting Nibud: zo treft corona uw portemonnee Zonnige CPB-koopkrachtplaatjes geven vertekend beeld recessie
46. Stiekeme gokker verloor alles, maar moet bijna €115.000 aan bijstand toch terugbetalen
47. Personeelskrapte? Aantal mensen in de bijstand neemt toe
48. Erfenis er te snel doorheen gejaast: korting op bijstand terecht
49. Werkloosheid loopt iets op in laatste maand van 2021 Cijfers CBS met nieuwe rekenmethode:
50. Eindelijk weer groei van economie, maar 'historisch krappe' arbeidsmarkt zorgt voor hoofdbrekens

De Morgen

51. 'We zitten niet meer op de piek van de krapte op de arbeidsmarkt': werkloosheid kent plotse knik omhoog

52. 'Een langere periode niet gewerkt hebben, doet werkgevers twijfelen of een sollicitant voldoende flexibiliteit heeft'
53. Coalitievormers, kijk naar Nederland. Wij staan nu eenmaal wat verder in het trekken van lessen uit infantiele activeringsgedachtes
54. Ons werkloosheidsstelsel is al streng genoeg
55. 'We hebben de boel eerst tien jaar om zeep geholpen en zijn dan veertig jaar bezig geweest om dat te repareren'
56. Moreel dilemma: 'Een goede vriend krijgt onterecht een uitkering. Moet ik hem daarover aanspreken?'
57. Experts twijfelen al langer, nu wil cd&v verplichte gemeenschapsdienst op de schop
58. In de volkshuizen van Franstalig België: 'Ik heb 14.000 euro moeten betalen om te werken. En mijn nicht zit thuis en krijgt netjes haar uitkering'
59. Een op de vijf sociale huurders is werkloos maar kan wel werken: boetes voor wie zich niet inschrijft bij VDAB
60. Wat zijn de politieke partijen van plan met de uitkeringen en ons pensioen? Vier voorstellen onder de loep
61. Meerwaardebelasting of niet: De Wever krijgt coalitiepartners niet overtuigd
62. Van Hool-délégués over het faillissement: 'Leidinggevend en die vroeger foeterden op werklozen zoeken nu zelf werk'
63. Het is onrechtvaardig dat er bij de gepensioneerden en de werklozen 6 miljard gezocht wordt
64. 'Wij willen geen extra vermogensbelasting. Neen, ook geen verschuiving. Niks, nada'
65. Armoede is gedaald tijdens de pandemie: 'Die positieve evolutie kan snel voorbij zijn'
66. 'Stemmen op PS was al die tijd een evidentie. Maar PS is PS niet meer': op de markt in Quaregnon, dieprood PS-land
67. Steeds meer studenten vragen financiële bijstand: 'Nog meer uren werken is onmogelijk te combineren met voltijdse studies'
68. VDAB-bestuurder Wim Adriaens: 'Ik geloof niet in het verhaal dat je eerst gezond moet zijn voordat je weer kunt werken'
69. Geen zin om fulltime te blijven werken tot je 67ste? Expertten schetsen verschillende 'uitbolscenario's'
70. Vlaanderen heeft dringend 90.000 extra werkenden nodig: VDAB wil ook hervorming van pensioen en uitkeringen in ziektestelsels
71. Mannaert casht naar schatting 28 miljoen met verkoop Club-aandelen zonder een cent belasting te betalen: van een gouden handdruk gesproken

72. 'Het is vernederend. Die stigmatisering, daar heb ik het heel moeilijk mee': na 150 sollicitatiebrieven nog altijd niet aan de slag
73. 'Als iemand zijn pensioen gedurende 30 à 40 jaar heeft opgebouwd, kan de overheid niet zomaar doen alsof de oude regels nooit hebben bestaan'
74. Stop met het criminaliseren van jongeren en gezinnen in armoede
75. Van Quickenborne stelt voor om vrouwen te straffen voor scheeftrekkingen in de samenleving, én de ongelijkheid te vergroten

Het Laatste Nieuws

76. Als werkloosheidssteun na 2 jaar stopgezet worden, dreigen 138.000 Belgen uitkering te verliezen
77. Kansen op arbeidsmarkt dalen al na zes maanden werkloosheid, zegt onderzoek UGent. Arbeidseconoom Stijn Baert: "Uitkering al na drie maanden doen krimpen"
78. Recordaantal werklozen financieel gestraft: "Schors onmiddellijk de uitkering van iedereen die zomaar zijn kat stuurt"
79. Waarom Waalse regering werkloosheid in tijd wil beperken. Boekhouder José is al 14 jaar werkloos: "1.400 euro uitkering, dat is niet genoeg"
80. 37.000 werklozen komen in aanmerking voor de verplichte gemeenschapsdienst, maar slechts 'handvol' mensen voerden effectief uit
81. Arizona dreigt mes te zetten in uitkeringen. Van lagere pensioenen tot strengere voorwaarden voor werklozen: deze 8 plannen liggen op tafel
82. 10.032 werklozen verliezen uitkering tijdelijk, 1.705 definitief: VDAB tikte nooit meer mensen op de vingers
83. Audric krijgt 1.800 euro uitkering zonder ooit gewerkt te hebben. Hoe kan dat? "Soms zijn het effectief zotten die werken"
84. ABVV voert actie tegen verplichte gemeenschapsdienst in Genk: "Geef mensen volwaardige banen"
85. Honderdduizenden vacatures en toch 41% langdurig werklozen. Werkexpert: "Dit staat slecht op je cv"
86. ABVV: "Langdurig werklozen willen werken, maar begeleiding VDAB schiet tekort"
87. Wat vinden de andere partijen van het Open Vld-voorstel om de minimumpensioenen te verlagen voor wie meer dan 2 jaar werkloos is?
88. Nieuwe regels voor tijdskrediet en thematisch verlof: hoe zal je dat merken en wat als je extra vrijaf wil in de zomervakantie?

89. Zijn werkloosheidsuitkeringen te hoog? Werkexpert: “Probleem is dat uitkeringen te lang op zelfde niveau blijven”
90. Kapper Yves is technisch werkloos na zinkgat in Sint-Truiden, maar kreeg al drietal panden ter beschikking: "Enorme solidariteit gezien"
91. 1 op 5 sociale huurders is werkloos, maar kán wel werken: “Hopelijk zijn boetes motiverend”
92. Geen stempelgeld meer na twee jaar, is dat een goed idee? Professor Baert: "Werkloosheid is niet ons grootste probleem"
93. West-Brabant kijkt met menselijk oog naar de bijstand, minister wil weten hoe het werkt
94. DEBAT VAN DE DAG. Moet de financiële kloof tussen werken en niet-werken groter worden? Dit is jullie mening
95. Aantal werklozen in ons land historisch laag: “Maar bedrijven luiden de alarmbel”
96. “Wij willen niet enkel 500 euro verschil voor werkenden”: Open Vld lanceert voorstel voor pensioenwijziging
97. Wie is ‘harde kern’ leefloners die al jaren inactief is? Onze geldexpert Stijn Baert legt uit
98. Meer dan een half miljoen Belgen langdurig ziek: wat zijn de gevolgen voor je loon, voordelen en pensioen?
99. OCMW’s Halle-Vilvoorde luiden alarmbel: “Vakbonden moeten investeren in bereikbaarheid”
100. Zoveel kosten de verkiezingsbeloften van CD&V: minder lasten op arbeid en minder asielzoekers opvangen

7.2 Appendix 2: Sermons used

Protestant Churches Netherlands

PKN			
1	Gereformeerde Kerk Gameren-Zuulichem	05-05-2024	https://kerkdienstgemist.nl/stations/311/events/recording/171489420000311
2	Gereformeerde Johanneskerk Sint Jansklooster	22-09-2024	https://kerkdienstgemist.nl/stations/631/events
3	Gereformeerde Kerk Poortvliet	23-02-2025	https://kerkdienstgemist.nl/stations/1573/events/recording/174030120001573
CGK			
4	C.G.K. Maranatha Drogeham	26-01-2025	https://kerkdienstgemist.nl/stations/76/events/recording/173788020000076
5	Chr. Geref. Kerk Aalten	27-04-2025	https://kerkdienstgemist.nl/stations/152/events/recording/174573900000152
Gereformeerde Gemeenten			
6	Gereformeerde Gemeente Vlissingen	21-07-2024	https://kerkdienstgemist.nl/stations/604/events/recording/172157040000604
7	Ds. C. Harinck	22-07-2024	https://www.prekenweb.nl/preek/27617
8	Ds. H. Hofman sr.	09-12-2024	https://www.prekenweb.nl/preek/27779
HHK			
9	Hersteld Hervormde Gemeente Abbenbroek	04-08-2024	https://kerkdienstgemist.nl/stations/48/events/recording/172275660000048
10	Hersteld Hervormde Gemeente Ede	08-03-2025	https://kerkdienstgemist.nl/stations/654/events/recording/174154140000654?media=video

Roman-Catholic Churches Flanders

11	R.K. Parochie Sint Willibrordus	01-12-2024	https://www.samenwillibrordus.nl/uitzendend-gemist/
12	Maria Lichtmisviering vanuit de St.-Benedictuskerk	01-02-2025	https://www.mijnparochie.be/vieringen/viering-en-gebed/
13	Elisabethparochie in Dendermonde	11-08-2024	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spk0w9GeoyY
14	Sint-Andrieskerk	08-09-2024	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkfm8Ja4hnw
15	Kerk Jette	13-10-2024	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gREZCKTq1Q
16	Parochie Heilige Geest Antwerpen	27-07-2024	https://heilige-geest.be/27-28-juli-2024/
17	Mariaparochie in Buggenhout- Lebbeke	26-01-2025	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAB6ePggOCg
18	Sint-Pieterskerk, Leuven	23-03-2024	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pc9bJ0vTFqw
19	Kerk in Waregem	31-03-2024	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9GQGwmjpw

20	Parochie Heilige Geest Antwerpen	21-09-2024	https://heilige-geest.be/21-22-september-2024/
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Roman-Catholic Churches Netherlands

11	Kerk Jette	06-04-2025	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bi6x0NRBms8
12	Maria Lichtmisviering vanuit de St.-Benedictuskerk	01-02-2025	https://www.mijnparochie.be/vieringen/viering-en-gebed/
13	Elisabethparochie in Dendermonde	11-08-2024	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spk0w9GeoyY
14	Sint-Andrieskerk	08-09-2024	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkfm8Ja4hnw
15	Kerk Jette	13-10-2024	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gREZCKTq1Q
16	Parochie Heilige Geest Antwerpen	27-07-2024	https://heilige-geest.be/27-28-juli-2024/
17	Mariaparochie in Buggenhout-Lebbeke	26-01-2025	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAB6ePqgOCg
18	Sint-Pieterskerk, Leuven	23-03-2024	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pc9bJ0vTFqw
19	Kerk in Waregem	31-03-2024	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9GQGwmjpW
20	Parochie Heilige Geest Antwerpen	21-09-2024	https://heilige-geest.be/21-22-september-2024/

7.3 Appendix 3: Citations from sermons

Topic 1: Desert

Indicator 1: Adversities are a result of (the original) sin

Protestant sermons: adversities are a result of Eve's original sin and the curse resulting from this sin, still impacts our lives today. These citations show that a <i>causality</i> is argued between the original sin and subsequent adversities.	
7	We love the darkness more than the light. After all, the light discovers our evil works. A closed heart. Our fall into sin <i>brought that about</i> .
8	There is a cause, we have sinned. <i>We have given God cause that we are under the curse</i> . And that curse works in us and it lives in us, because that is a living thing, congregation. That is the reality: there is a cause. That curse leads us to destruction. It attaches itself like a leech to the cursed, it renders the strong powerless, it makes the rich poor, irresistible. That curse destroys us.
10	We all reap our fruits from that to this day. No, It wasn't just a fruit. It was not just a fruit that separated, it was our choosing the evil one over Him who gave us life and who Himself is life. (...) This is not the life you were created for. <i>This is the result of listening to evil</i> (...) Therefore the earth's soil, the earth's kingdom is cursed for your sake.

Indicator 2: Obeying God as a precondition

Protestant sermons: obeying God's commandments is a precondition for being blessed or listened to. A causality is insinuated between adversity and (personal) sin.	
2	So for all those people who honour, serve and uphold the Lord, there is that divine cherishing of God the Father.
4	And whatever We pray, we receive from Him, because we observe His commandments and do what pleases Him. Often in the Bible, the Lord shows that he does not hear if, in the meantime, people just keep living in sin and going their own way (...) Sin causes blockage, which is why you don't receive. But then he also answers your prayers. On the path of heartfelt repentance, of breaking with sin.
5	If you deny Christ then you don't have the Holy Spirit either, and then the thorns and thistles come up in your life (...) And by those thorns and thistles, of course, are meant the transgressions of the commandments.
8	For a cursed man - and this is lived, this is experienced in the heart - a cursed man is a lost man. Having broken God's law and being guilty of all God's commandments.
9	If you commit offences and as a result, people speak badly of you, then you owe it to yourself (...) Then they speak ill of us not because of the name of Christ. But because we make it our own, because we make it our own.

Dutch Roman-Catholic sermon: there is only one mention of obeying God as a precondition for being blessed.	
30	Sacrifice in all humility of what you have, no matter how little, then God will favour and answer you.

Counter-indicator 1: Adversity as a lesson

Protestant sermons: adversities teach Christians to rely on God, and it brings people to God. This is a counter-indicator of desert, as it shows that adversities are (divinely and incomprehensibly) determined by God.	
6	That storm is not created by chance. It is not fate, but that storm comes from the Lord (...) But that storm even though I don't understand the how and the why completely. But it was a means of the Lord. To teach me the secret of grace more deeply.
7	The Lord sometimes allows drastic things to happen, serious illnesses or deaths, that determine people's impermanence. Then Calvin says something that has become a very famous saying: 'This is how God brings people into the field of interest.' It makes people reach for their Bible; it makes them attend a church service; it makes them pray.

Theme 1: Being a Christian means you will suffer

Protestant sermons: suffering inevitably accompanies being a Christian. Three sermons refer to the same text in the Bible, where Jesus says that whoever wants to follow Him, must deny himself and take up his cross, i.e., suffering.	
1	Jesus had already warned him. If you want to follow me, you have to take up your Cross. Because being a disciple of Jesus is not just fun, it also means resistance and suffering.
4	If anyone wants to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. And so says he who bore the heaviest cross, the cross of curse.
9	For the Lord Jesus says: whoever wants to follow me must deny himself and take up his cross.

Protestant sermons: there is suffering because Christians are victims of how 'worldly' people see them.	
6	The life of God's children is a road in which there are certainly moments of rest and of encouragement and of progress, but also moments of plodding, of headwinds, of setbacks.
9	Many believers face a very particular and specific kind of suffering in one way or another. Suffering because people say to you (...) you should be ashamed of being a Christian. They speak badly of you. People say to each other, hey, those believers are strange. They should actually be ashamed.
	Christians are a very easy victim. The target of ridicule because they don't hit back and they don't curse back and they don't use violence.

Protestant sermons: Christians suffer because of their own brokenness, in the face of God's perfection.	
3	And that too is Jesus. (...) When he is involved with you, he not only shows you the beauty of your life, but then he does not shy away from and is honest to also confront you with several less beautiful sides of your life.
8	I wish that one day you will be alone in the world in the face of God's highness and holiness. That (...) you will no longer dare to lift your eyes to heaven. You must cry out with the leper: unclean, unclean, disgusting and damnable and reprobate before God (...) You then experience that you are lonely and shifted, persecuted by misery and seized by death.
9	And that is why Paul says in Romans 3: We have all sinned and lack the glory of God. In other words, we have every reason to be ashamed of ourselves.

Protestant sermons: suffering is a <i>blessing</i> and an <i>opportunity</i> that brings you closer to God.	
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4	My obedience and my loving, so flawed and so stained. My heart condemns me. But then there is only one way: the way to the cross, to look at Jesus there.
7	The Lord sometimes allows drastic things to happen, serious illnesses or deaths, that determine people's impermanence (...) It makes people reach for their Bible; it makes them attend a church service; it makes them pray.
9	Now you have reproach and shame by the world. But Peter says, from God's perspective you are blessed, you are blissful. That defamation that the world inflicts on Christians is a sign that they belong to God's family. But see that suffering in your life, see the trouble, see the sorrow, see the shame as opportunities to be faithful to your Creator. Not to run away from Him, but to go to Him and say: 'Lord here I am. I cannot do it alone'.

Flemish Roman-Catholic sermon: there is only 1 mention of suffering due to being a Christian.	
17	But witnessing today is not easy. For we are easily, especially in our highly secularised society and in particular yet also in our country, mocked for a while or occasionally.

Individual agency

Indicator 1: Personal effort is important for salvation

Protestant sermons: while the general argument is that salvation is initiated and caused by God, the sermons do mention initiatives man should undertake to receive mercy and salvation.	
2	So for all those people who honour, serve and uphold the Lord, there is that divine cherishing of God the Father (...) [God is] so full of love and mercy for those who fear him, and those who honour him, those who acknowledge him as God, those who serve him.
3	When Jesus talks about clean and unclean, it is about who you are as a person. How you live, how seriously you take your faith in God, and how you treat your fellow man.
4	The question, then, is whether you are a child of the Lord if you can continue to live in sin. Yes, everyone sins, we stumble every day. But a child of the Lord sighs under it and brings his sins to the Cross.
8	But it is so difficult and yet so necessary to go to Him as a cursed person. I believe that this is the way, according to Holy Scripture, to obtain that acquired salvation.

Dutch Roman-Catholic sermons: also mention personal effort as an important precondition for salvation, but to a lesser extent than the Protestant sermons.	
23	Repent and straighten your crooked paths. Fill the gaps that make you feel you can't go any further. Overcome the mountains and hills that block your view of Him who is our future.
25	You didn't join a club and that's it. Baptism repeatedly asks for confirmation to want to be a disciple, to immerse yourself in it and to see what is God inviting me to on the path of my life.

Indicator 2: Obedience is necessary for salvation

Protestant sermons: obedience to God's commandments is necessary for salvation.	
2	Perhaps you say: God created me, I was baptised, I was confessed. Then you are automatically his child and he is my father? Then it's all right, isn't it? Well no. Without the Son, no Father. Whoever disobeys, the Son has God not as a father, but as a ruling judge.

4	The Lord demands love and obedience. This should manifest itself in our actions. And that in turn ensures boldness in approaching the Lord. The Lord demands obedience in loving.
5	It is sometimes a misunderstanding to think that a Christian no longer needs the commandments, because Jesus himself says that the Holy Spirit brings those commandments to us.

Counter-indicator 1: Man does not deserve salvation

Protestant sermons: man does not deserve salvation, based on its own nature or deeds. Rather, man is 'unclean' and the salvation brought by Jesus was therefore underserved.	
1	Celebrating Lord's Supper actually implies that you say, I can't do it without Jesus. It's not up to me. I need bread of grace.
2	We deserve punishment for our defiance (...) That is God's love and that is God's mercy. He allows judgement to come down on the Son. And that is love to the extreme.
3	For Jesus, that uncleanness of people is no impediment to their fate, quite the contrary. For that he has come and for that he will soon give his life.
6	God sent his son into the world to seek the lost and seeking. To save the unsaved.
10	Redemption once and forever, undeserved.

Roman-Catholic sermons: mention the mistakes that people make, and how God despite of this continues to take care of humans. However, contrary to the Protestant sermons, there is no direct mention of <i>salvation</i> . Rather, the sermons emphasize that a <i>relationship</i> is initiated by God, despite people's mistakes.	
13	Fortunately, our chance is not immediately lost when we cannot immediately recognise God. We also see this in the desert with Elijah. God remains patiently present.
22	I am just a sinful human being. Exactly those people God chooses for important tasks (...) Because God knows that there is something good in every human being. And those People, he calls to do good things (...) God almost always calls People who don't think themselves good enough.
24	It is not for nothing that we begin Holy Mass with a penitential act (...) And then before we take communion, we say again: Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come to me (...) Lord, who am I that thou shouldst come to me?
29	First screw up and then come back and be welcome too. That sounds too nice. Too soft. Almost inhuman.

Counter-indicator 2: Only obeying is not sufficient

Protestant sermons: merely obeying God's commandments is not enough. Man is not able to obey all rules.	
1	Jesus is not going to sit and figure out what all went wrong (...) But Jesus goes the straight to the point: do you love me? Because that is what it is all about if we are to be able to move forward together. Then it's about that bond of love.
3	"As long as you stick to the rules, you will do well". But is that perhaps the disappointment, or also perhaps Jesus' frustration.
6	For if it depends on me, I am lost.
8	No one is justified before God by the law, for the just shall live by faith (...) Even if we were to live according to the law (...) blameless, (...) then that curse still remains on us (...) Christ, says Paul (...) Christ, no, not you, but Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law.

Protestant sermons: discuss Jesus' rejecting the Pharisees and their law-abiding convictions.	
3	Those Pharisees, for them it is vital, because they want to dedicate their lives to the God of Israel, they want to be law-abiding. [According to them,] man's job is to follow those rules.
8	The Pharisee in the heart, even of God's children, may be silenced for a moment, but he has not left. That Pharisee continues to work. They talk about Christ, about the cross of Christ, but add: You must first be circumcised. THAT is the frenzy in that congregation. That is the disobedience!

Dutch Roman-Catholic: countering the importance of obedience	
29	As long as you follow the rules then success should be guaranteed, but it doesn't work like that at all.

Counter-indicator 3: Without God's initiative, there is no salvation

Protestant sermons: despite the need for obedience, the initiative for salvation lies in God's hands.	
7	That is where conversion begins. It starts with taking heed to the message being preached. (...) It makes people reach for their Bible; it makes them attend a church service; it makes them pray. God prepares, as it were, the heart.
	To open a sinner's heart to the Gospel requires heavenly intervention.
	God opened her heart. The LORD did it, that is paramount.
8	How do you get that faith? He gives it. What richness! It is all a gift of grace.
9	The power is not in us, the power is in Him.

Dutch Roman-Catholic sermons: man has a <i>choice</i> to answer God's initiative for salvation.	
25	The gospel never forces people. God never forces people, but God holds out his hand, as it were, and people have a choice whether to take that hand or not. A free choice to take that hand to want to be a disciple of Jesus.
	More and more, faith and wanting to belong to the church requires a conscious choice: yes, I want to.
28	But we are not tied down (...) Keep thinking about who you are, what your vocation is, what your path through life is, what your faith is. 'Keep thinking, keep making choices,' He says to the disciples then, and to us. How wonderful that we have a faith where we are allowed to think for ourselves. More than that, to be challenged to it!
29	I don't have to do anything, but I am allowed to do a lot (...) But I can choose to do that, can't I? I get to choose whether to respond to that other person's expectations.

Theme 2: Work

Protestant sermons: work/labour does not suffice to get salvation. Moreover, the believe that hard work will lead to salvation is actively rejected.	
5	Those commandments are not there for salvation, because then they are dead works. Those commandments help us to serve God and our neighbour.
8	Christ is the acquirer and applicator of salvation. Don't expect it from yourself, don't expect it from your tears, from your works.

	Christ accomplished that work [of redemption] (...) May it be an education for those hard workers (...) Perhaps there are also (...) those frenzied people today, who constantly want to do something extra, who are constantly trying to meet the Lord with something of their own. That has to become a sin before God. Because everything we want to contribute and add is to the dishonour of the Crucified One, that is to the dishonour of Him Who redeemed us. Christ has redeemed us.
	I wish you to experience that the flesh, that your work, including your religious work, cannot fulfil God's law and cannot be subject to it. What then remains? That leaves a cursed man; that leaves a curse-worthy man; that leaves a hell-worthy man; that leaves an opened hell and a holy and righteous God.
10	[Adam] will no longer eat from the trees of the Garden and in the sweat than presses from his face, he will eat bread. Only with hard work can he earn a living from now on.

Protestant sermon: above, work refers to trying to <i>earn</i> salvation. On actual labour, one sermon writes:	
6	They are people working diligently to maintain and also expand their businesses. Is that something wrong? Is it wrong to work hard? (...) No, it is not wrong.
	Depicted here is a group of people who are just doing the job. What they are called to do.

Meritocratic traits

(Counter)Indicator 1: Lack of gratefulness

Protestant sermon: only two sermons mention gratefulness	
6	The Lord deserves their thanks (...) Then joy comes to you, congregation, when the Lord is mightier than the storm.
8	But now we are so grateful and so happy that nothing needs to be added, because everything, everything is accomplished in Him.

Dutch Roman-Catholic sermon: one sermon mentions gratefulness	
24	And that is also something He puts in your heart. That you don't let the shadows of life dull you, but keep getting revived. What can I be grateful for?

Flemish Roman-Catholic sermons: mention gratefulness as an important attitude/trait for a Christian.	
11	That ultimate bond with Christ is so beautiful. That we want to perpetuate that every week. The faithfulness. The connection. That draws us away from hopelessness to hope. And we can't help but celebrate that connection.
12	When you receive such a baby and see it born, that it is not yours alone (...) So we look a little higher still and say: God, thank You, that You are the giver of life to each of us. Today we say together with Simeon and Hannah in the temple: God, thank you for this great gift of life for our children and for Your life.
13	Jesus is and remains the bread that gives life. Let us receive him joyfully.
14	Freedom, sister and brothers, is a gift we can be grateful for.
16	So where do we get the strength to let love guide us anyway? In the Gospel, we heard that Jesus only allows the loaves to be distributed 'after saying a prayer of thanksgiving' (...) And with that, we know where we can get the strength to be led by love (...) By allowing ourselves to be led by his words and deeds of love, peace and joy.

Counter-indicator 1: A Christian is loving, compassionate and humble

Protestant sermons: often encourage the congregation to be loving, compassionate, humble, and to serve their neighbours.	
1	Because that's what it's all about. If we want to be able to move forward together, it's about that bond of love.
	In a relationship, you don't suffice by setting up some sort of court of law with each other and then start looking for the culprits. In fact, the question is always, can we move forward together? Are you there for me? Can I rely on you?
	But it makes no sense to see the other as an adversary. Can you also see the other as an ally? In which the enemy is not the other, but the conflict is the enemy.
3	What can you do so that the bad that dwells inside you does not get a chance and does not come out, but the good does? (...) Do not envy, but grant. Do not snatch, but share. Do not distrust, but trust.
4	Loving that takes self-denial. When you love God and your neighbour. Then you don't always want to prove yourself right, you want to bow down to each other.
5	And now remember that Jesus himself explained that those commandments are there to serve God and to serve one's neighbour.
6	Then I can no longer steer my own course, choose my own destiny. But then He is the one who steers. Who determines. Who leads.

Roman-Catholic sermons: often encourage the congregation to be loving, compassionate, humble, and to serve their neighbours.	
15	Perhaps it could be that a new family is developing there. Where people are trying to form a community. Where people are trying to find how that communal connection, could distil itself into responsiveness, into tolerance.
16	So let us certainly not oppose what God gave us at creation, but let us truly be guided by the endless working of the power of God's love and peace for us and for our fellow human beings.
20	Start, He says, by being the smallest of all to serve and advance others.
21	The more you let go and the smaller you make yourself as a person, the richer you will be with God.
25	The good ways he wants to point out to go, the good ways of faith and hope and above all love also for fellow human beings who may believe differently from you or not believe.
27	That we show each other that Jesus asks us to love one another instead of going to war. That we are there for each other and not that the other should be there for me.
30	The biggest obstacle to this is your ego. God has your best interests at heart, but that requires complete receptivity of your heart.
	Sacrifice in all humility of what you have, no matter how little, then God will favour and answer you.

Theme: community

Roman-Catholic sermons: a contrast is made between the Christian community, and the worldly society.	
15	But from our testimony, from our being, from our deepest impact. Just being there. That people might one day say: what is going on there in that church of St Peter?
17	But witnessing today is not easy. For we are easily, especially in our highly secularised society and in particular yet also in our country, mocked for a while or occasionally.

21	But what about the value of attention of time and of love? In a society focused on a reward in the here and now, that might also be hard to understand.
23	That one world order is that of the Roman occupying power with high priests and Jewish kings merely as pawns. The other world order is that of God leading his people.
25	And today, today in our society of our country and Western Europe, that conscious choice has become increasingly important. More and more, faith and wanting to belong to the church requires a conscious choice: yes, I want to. How can in a good way In today's world, with all the challenges our world brings. How can I be a witness there? Witness to the joy of the gospel.
27	Especially at a time when the world is so full of problems full of dangers. That we show each other that Jesus asks us to love one another instead of going to war. That we are there for each other and not that the other should be there for me.
28	But also in our times. Where we as a church are somewhat banished from society and social debate. That there is hope for us too and that we should especially stop focusing on what is no longer there.

Protestant sermons: Christians are to love their non-Christian neighbours in their personal sphere.	
4	Loving your neighbour, not with words alone, but also with deeds. That can be loving in the family, in the church, in the classroom, at work, among your colleagues. All the words we speak about and with each other, our doings and doings, is that infused with the love that is from God?
6	Are we like this too? When we are at work, when we are caring for our family, that our thoughts go out to who God is, how great, how wise, how powerful and how good He is?
10	To love our wives as Christ loves the church. To be priests in our families. In all the brokenness, in all the unruliness. At work. In the church. Through suffering to believe that everything will cooperate, that all this happens so that the works of God, are revealed precisely in it.

Theme: human nature

Protestant sermons: sermon an image is sketched of humans and human nature being unclean, wounded, and in need of help.	
1	Do you take into account that humans are sinful humans, that they therefore make mistakes? Because you can trust someone completely, but you actually already know that people fail. The gospel speaks of failing people, so failing disciples being given another chance.
2	So one gust of wind and we are gone. We are brittle like grass, fragile like reeds, like a flower in the field and that is the image for our temporality.
3	To use an image [of humans] that I think fits this text. Think of an apple that looks good on the outside. But if you cut that apple open, there are rotten spots inside.
	But what does that heart hide? Jesus says (...): What dwells in the heart? Bad thought, forbidden sex, murder, insult, pride and stupidity. And also cheating, stealing, snatching, lying, being mean, being jealous of others, and being ashamed of nothing. All that badness makes a person unclean.
4	And you don't naturally possess that love.
5	But actually that is a harking back to those [dead] works of the old Testament (...) And a man tends to do that.
7	This is the way it is with ALL our hearts! Naturally closed to the work of the Lord.

	By nature, the door is locked on all human beings. Our hearts are closed, the entrance is barred. We do not want God to be King over us.
8	But according to the spiritual sense of the law, we are all transgressors, all are under the law. We are all transgressors of God's law.
	Us - those are the children of wrath, those are cursed, those are cursed.
	You must cry it out with the leper: unclean, unclean, disgusting and damnable and reprobate before God.
9	And that is why Paul says in Romans 3: We all have sinned and lack the glory of God. In other words, we have every reason to be ashamed of ourselves.
10	Now the way to the tree of life has been opened for people who are mortally wounded. And we all are. We lie dying.

Roman-Catholic sermons: more emphasis is put on the beauty of man.	
16	This is not an impossible task, because God created us in His image and likeness of love and peace.
24	Nature of itself is wonderful and so is God. And so are you, because you are his creation. But he creates you and he sees you, and he wants you simply because he finds you beautiful. Beauty. Radiance. That's what he sees in you, and that's why you are there.
29	And why? Because in the eyes of the eternal One, we have a lot to offer.

Neediness

Indicator 1: The needy need assistance

Protestant sermons: addressing the needy and argue that, as a Christian, one has the duty to help the needy.	
1	Because you often have public opinion against you. Because why commit to this kind of people [i.e., prisoners]? Surely it is their own fault that they are sitting there? Can't you just let them sit there for now. But then I think, yes but wait a minute, we have a gospel which constantly undermines that thinking.
	The gospel always brings nuisance to our thoughts. The gospel speaks of visiting prisoners as a diaconal act. As something a Christian is expected to do.
3	Jesus is all about people. Especially vulnerable people who have come to realise that life is not fixable. People who have sometimes been hit hard by life. To save them.
4	After all, you can't say you love the poor in Africa without also helping them, can you?

Roman-Catholic sermons: idem	
16	But are we equally strong in experiencing love when it comes to tensions in our family, in our parish, in our environment? And equally strong in taking care of the sick, the old, the poor? And are we guided by the power of love when it comes to strangers or people we cannot stand? And so we can go on, for countless are the circumstances in which love is not always easy to live out. And equally innumerable are the situations where we have to make a real effort to be guided by love, and not by aversion, one's own rightness.
20	Can we address and be close to a person who is suffering or threatened with suffering? Could we do that differently and better?
22	We are all called to pull back on dry land people who can barely get their heads above water. We are called to fish up people overwhelmed by grief.
Protestant sermon: represents the needy as being close or similar to Christ.	
1	And then I hear Jesus say, I was imprisoned and did you visit me?

	And if you did that for one of the least, you did it for me
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Protestant sermon: harsh attitude towards 'sham believers'	
9	And who the sham believers were. Make-believers who drop out in the long run. Who don't want to belong to that club that the world refers to as losers. They don't want to belong to the group that many people think is just weird. They don't want to pay the price that comes with following Jesus.

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