

**Zeitschrift:** Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte = Revue suisse d'histoire religieuse et culturelle = Rivista svizzera di storia religiosa e culturale

**Herausgeber:** Vereinigung für Schweizerische Kirchengeschichte

**Band:** 99 (2005)

**Artikel:** Recent Dutch religious history and the limits of secularization

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-130351>

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# Recent Dutch religious history and the limits of secularization

James C. Kennedy

«Never so often has God been in the news,» remarked the Reformed theologian G. T. Rothuizen in August of 1967. He continued:

Look at communist countries like Red China [--] that country is religiously speaking incredibly busy. Think of their catechism, of the red book of Mao Zedong [...] of the two hours daily spent reading out of Mao's Bible [...] And then think of the aggression – all of it in any case completely religious.

And think, too, of the psychedelic: the love of consciousness-raising drugs that are supposed to bring us to unity with the cosmos. Yes, I am thinking of LSD, of marijuana en hashish. They have their own heaven and hell. They can make you deeply unhappy, and they reportedly make it possible for you to experience unknown anxieties and joys. [The Dutch beat poet] Simon Vinkenoog is [its] chief priest. And love is more «in» than ever.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth reflecting on Rothuizen's rather colourful remarks. In the first place, they were written at the height of the secularization thesis, and by no less than the author of *Eleanor Rigby, or: the Death of God*, who spoke of the «religionlessness» of the contemporary age. Sometimes we tend to think, insofar as we are «post secularists», that the prophets of the Age of Secularization were blind to the variety of religious phenomena around them, stuck as they were in conventional understandings of religion and assuming its inevitable demise in the face of modernity. But Rothuizen, even as he affirmed the reality of «secularization» – which he defined as «a bit of dechurching» and «a bit of legitimate dechristianization» – hardly denied that religion was alive and well in the contemporary world. Indeed, Rothuizen employed a rather expansive definition of religion. Since the late 1980s, scholars of religion have stressed in Jamesian fashion the «varieties of religious experience» to show that the world has not secularized, but that secularization adherents had defined religion too tightly. But it is important to note that the contemporary emphasis on religion as more than organized religion, stretches back to at least the Romantics, and included some prophets of secularization in the 1960s.

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Rothuizen in George Puchinger, *Christen en secularisatie*, Delft 1968, 312–313.

Few of us today, perhaps, would name first and foremost Rothuizen's examples of religiosity. This is, of course, what also makes his views more interesting: Rothuizen's utterance illustrates to historians of religion that the very definitions and examples of religion are always changing. This in turn reminds us how difficult it is to define religion across time, and how careful we must be to pay attention to how historians before us have used the term.

There is no better place to study this question than the Netherlands. Until forty years ago, the country could be classified as strongly religious, with at least half of its population attending church on a weekly basis and the same amount voting for a confessional party, Catholic or Protestant. Dutch Protestants were more «religious» than their German or Swiss counterparts, and Dutch Catholics in their loyalty to Rome surpassed their German and Belgian coreligionists. Since then, religious observance, particularly among Catholics, has plummeted. The Netherlands, perhaps more than most countries, seem to fit the model of rapid secularization, even considering that the country was hardly alone in the rapid religious changes that took hold in much of Europe during the 1960s.

### *The secularization of the Netherlands*

It is difficult to deny the power of the secularization thesis, both in its conceptual explanatory power and in its resonance in articulating individual experience.<sup>2</sup> Consider the following recollection from a Catholic parish priest in the provincial city of Amersfoort:

It was 1966 and one of the priests [...] had gone on visitation rounds. He was back at eight o'clock, deeply disappointed [...] He had been to four addresses and had on every occasion had the door slammed in his face, with the comments «not necessary» and «we don't want anything to do with you». You may know that we drank a few rounds to deal with the disillusion.<sup>3</sup>

It remains striking to what extent both the popular and the scholarly literature of the post-war Netherlands, particularly in the sociology of religion, has continued to focus on the decline of adherence to organized religion, and, to a lesser extent, to the decline of faith, particularly its orthodox forms. «[T]he decline in church membership is an unmistakable indication of the secularization of Dutch society,» the Social and Cultural Planbureau reported in 1999, and continued: «With secularization advancing at such a pace, the Netherlands has quickly become one of the «normal» countries of north-western Europe [...].»<sup>4</sup> This line has been taken over by political historians as well, such as Herman de Liagre Böhl, who, in speaking of the 1960s, wrote (also in 1999): «Secularization could no longer be stopped. In 1958 some 76 percent of all Dutch were members of a denomination, but the percentages since then have been in steep decline, especially among

<sup>2</sup> Steve Bruce, *God is Dead. Secularisation in the West*, Oxford 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Bouman (ed.), *Al veertig jaar. Geloven in de toekomst, 1958–1998*, Amersfoort 1998, 52.

<sup>4</sup> Carlo van Praag/Wilfried Uitterhoeve, *25 years of social change in the Netherlands. Key data from the Social and cultural report 1998*, Nijmegen 1999, 115.

the young. Religious organizations, too, slowly but surely imploded.»<sup>5</sup> Note the teleological element evident in both accounts: «advancing» secularization, «slowly but surely». The authors, of course, are making an important and incontrovertible point: the high number of ex-church members in the Netherlands is an important indication of a declining ecclesiastical presence in Dutch life, and churches as «embodiments of belief» (to borrow a phrase from Willem Frijhoff for an earlier period<sup>6</sup>) are hardly unimportant cultural manifestations of religion. But to what extent scholars of religion should primarily interpret the recent religious past on the basis of such statistics – and the «secularization» thesis that often accompanies it – is another question, of course, a question to which I shall return in a moment.

What cannot in any event be ignored is how the secularization thesis itself (in its many permutations) has had a huge impact on how religion has been culturally constructed and understood in the Netherlands since the 1960s. In the United States, for example, the prevailing story of religion since the 1960s has not been secularization, but the ever-increasing diversity of American religion. Although such a teleological interpretation of developments is not without its critics (see, for instance, Philip Jenkins who argues that American religion is becoming more conventionally Christian over time<sup>7</sup>), it has become part and parcel of an unfolding national history, in which «diversity» is a central concept. Not so in the Netherlands, where «depillarization», «dechristianization», «emancipation», «secularization» and – accompanying all of this – «modernization» as key concepts have created a rather different «master narrative» of the recent past. The Netherlands thus seems to fit into a historical European pattern of «dechris-tianization» that stands in contrast with the «christianization» of America, with its cultural climate of «voluntarism, revivalism and pluralism», as Hartmut Lehmann explains it.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, much of this interpretation of the past stems from important developments in the Netherlands since 1950. Half a century ago, the Netherlands could be accounted among the most religiously observant countries in Europe. Its sizeable Catholic flock (nearing 40 percent of the total population) was among the most loyal in Europe to the institutional church, with very high rates of attendance at Mass (sometimes reckoned to be over 80 percent weekly). Moreover, Protestant church participation was bolstered by the presence of a very sizeable group of theological conservatives, often, but not always, Calvinist in orientation. Religious parties represented more than half the electorate in every national election between 1918 and 1966, and religious institutions of all

<sup>5</sup> Herman de Liagre Böhl, *Consensus en polarisatie. Spanningen in de verzorgingsstaat 1945–1990*, in: Remieg Aerts et al., *Land van kleine gebaren. Een politieke geschiedenis van Nederland 1780–1990*, Nijmegen 1999, 296.

<sup>6</sup> Willem Frijhoff, *Embodied Belief. Ten Essays on Religious Culture in Dutch History*, Hilversum 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The center and the fringe. America's religious futures*, in: Hans Krabbendam/Derek Rubin (eds.) *Religion in America. European and American perspectives*, Amsterdam 2004, 51–66.

<sup>8</sup> Hartmut Lehmann, *Christianization of America and Dechristianization of Europe*, in: *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte*, 11, 1 (1998), 8–20.



kinds, from schools to trade unions, were everywhere in abundance. This process of «pillarization», in which society was partially organized along «pillars» of religion and ideology, reached its organizational zenith in the 1950s, only to recede thereafter. After 1960, the leaders of these pillars themselves lost interest in tightly maintaining them, having been influenced by a self-consciously «modern» way of thinking, which eschewed sectarianism and which regarded traditional theology and traditional forms of religious organization as «outmoded».<sup>9</sup> Their own serious doubts about the value of traditional religion and its organization corresponded with the increasing wealth, education and mobility of the Dutch population as a whole, and the difficulties that these processes of «modernization» constituted to the church. The widespread accommodation of religious leaders to «the demands of the age» (to cite a stock phrase of the period) intensified the cultural and religious shifts in Dutch society. Regular church attendance and membership fell off after 1965, subscription to traditional religious beliefs declined sharply (particularly among Catholics), religious organizations closed up shop, or, as in the case of many schools, widened and flattened their religious identity. By the late 1960s, «secularization» was both the militant aim of many Dutch, eager to strip their society of the religious and moral confines of the past, *and* a self-evident description of the changes they witnessed. In other words, the concept of «secularization» had come to serve as both ideal and reality.<sup>10</sup>

This has at least two cultural effects on the way that organized religion has been perceived in the Netherlands. The first has been the marked tendency – persistent into the new century – to see traditional, organized religion as belonging, in shorthand, to the Middle Ages – a direct reference to the recent religious past. The ex-Catholic S.W. Couwenberg once spoke of having been born and raised «in the Middle Ages», that is, in the «bourgeois Roman Catholic milieu» of the Brabant town of 's-Hertogenbosch in the 1930s.<sup>11</sup> And the social scientist Paul Schnabel, in concluding his work on the «new religious movements» of the 1970s, expressed his resentment when religious groups preached «absolute truth», saying that without such «temptation» perhaps there never would come «an end to the Middle Ages».<sup>12</sup> The controversial populist politician and one-time sociologist Pim Fortuyn, who himself as a teenager had experienced the Vatican II reforms as a liberation, thought in very roughly parallel

<sup>9</sup> A sophisticated account of this view can be seen in Erik H. Bax, *Modernization and cleavage in Dutch society. A study of long term economic and social change*, Groningen 1998.

<sup>10</sup> James C. Kennedy, *Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw. Nederland in de jaren zestig*, Amsterdam 1995, 112–116. A very interesting article that investigates religious change and the «collapse» of Christianity is Peter van Rooden, *Oral history en het vreemde sterven van het Nederlandse christendom*, in: *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 119 (2004), 524–551. For an English version of this article see <http://www.xs4all.nl/~pvrooden/Peter/publicaties/oral%20history.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> José van der Sman, *Heimwee naar God. De rancune en nostalgie van kerkverlaters*, in: *Ger-tjan van Schoonhoven et al., De nieuwe kaaskop. Nederland en Nederlanders in de jaren negentig*, Amsterdam 1999, 232.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Schnabel, *Tussen stigma en charisma. Nieuwe religieuze bewegingen en geestelijke-volksgezondheid*, Deventer 1982, 343–344.

ways about religion. Shortly before his assassination in 2002, Fortuyn made a distinction between those faiths that had made the leap into modernity (such as Christianity) and those faiths that had not yet done so – namely, Islam.<sup>13</sup> In this way, the construction of religion along the continuum «medieval – modern» has continued to have important political effects in Dutch political life. Indeed, the Dutch government's policy of recent years has been to encourage Dutch Muslims to «modernize», by which they mean the forsaking antiquated or barbaric practices in favour of more enlightened and individualistic modes of thought and behaviour.<sup>14</sup>

These dualisms drawn between the absolute and the relative, the «medieval» and the «modern», the religious and the secular, were hardly unique to the Netherlands. But it was a powerful impulse here, and it probably had to do with the perceived fast rate of change, which tended to heighten, even exaggerate the differences between past and present. «How quickly it all happened!» the prominent Reformed theologian Hendrikus Berkhof commented in the late 1980s about the secularization of Dutch society.<sup>15</sup> The sociologist of religion Gerard Dekker, paraphrasing the famous assertion of Johan Huizinga who said «We live in a demented world. And we know it», put it this way: «We live in a changing world. And we experience it!»<sup>16</sup> For Dekker, this changing world had everything to do with the transformation of the Netherlands into a «secular» country. In summary, the construction of secularization, built on it was on the perception of quick and radical change in the direction of modernity became, and to some extent remains, the dominant vision of change. Various scholars have argued that this interpretation has had theological and social effects on the churches –including the tendency to make a Christian virtue out of the necessity to secularize. To what extent this «master narrative» of secularization affected people in the pew is, of course, harder to trace.

«Secularization» as a widely shared and influential cultural construct – I am arguing in effect that the major contours of Dutch religious history cannot be investigated without recognizing how central such an understanding of modernity has been to Dutch religious, social and political life of the last four decades. This is a point that requires particular emphasis with a non-Dutch readership. Since religious change in the Netherlands has been particularly intense, evident and rapid, understood as the shift from a «very Christian country» to being a robustly secular one, it is understandable that assumptions about the link between secularization and modernity have been so prevalent. The central assumption is that modernizing societies «naturally» secularize, since the modern societies promote rational and rationalized ways of thinking and organization, and allow individuals to detach themselves from (religious) groups and collective (religious) ways

<sup>13</sup> James Kennedy, Pim Fortuyn. *De laatste der moderne mohikanen*, in: *De Nieuwste Tijd*, 8 (2003), 6–16.

<sup>14</sup> See the speech by the Minister for Integration Verdonk of July 22, 2004 at [www.justitie.nl/pers/speeches](http://www.justitie.nl/pers/speeches).

<sup>15</sup> Cited in K van der Zwaag, *De kerk op weg naar 2000*, Leiden 1992, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Gerard Dekker, *Geloven in een veranderende wereld*, in: *Radix*, 29, 3 (2003), 109.

of thinking. To be sure, there have been more sophisticated interpretations of modernization. For example, it is widely accepted that the development of religious subcultural organizations a century ago was itself part of a modernization process, but that ongoing modernization in recent decades had made these forms of religious organization outmoded. In this view, secularization may not constitute a straight line since the Enlightenment, but it is, from the standpoint of today, the eventual outcome of modernization.

But is «secularization» merely a myth, a hopelessly muddled concept with a naïve Enlightenment teleology? This is a matter of considerable debate internationally among sociologists and historians of religion. Suffice it here to say that it really does depend on how one defines secularization (if defined as «deconfessionalization» and «laicization» secularization certainly existed) and how one defines religion (the more broadly defined, the less secularization).<sup>17</sup> But I would go so far to say that it has been overused, and in particular that the concept has obscured how religion, as one variable among many in society, has transformed itself in the last fifty years. In other words, the religious history of the Netherlands since the Second World War is richer and more complex than suggested in standard accounts of the move from the medieval to the modern, or from the religious to the secular.

#### *A tripartite periodization of contemporary religious history*

Instead, I would argue that amidst the admittedly important backdrop of declining church adherence and subscription to traditional theological tenets, we should distinguish three periods in Dutch post war religious history: 1) the high point of religious organization (1945–1965); 2) the transformation of religion into an ethics of engagement (1965–1985); and 3) a return to «the spiritual» (1985 to the present). To be sure, periodizations of this kind tend to be simplistic, and themselves obscure important lines of continuity. But I think such a periodization is particularly helpful in a small, consensus-oriented country like the Netherlands, where making generalizations of this kind is less susceptible to error. For instance, it might be relatively hard to generalize about the strongly divergent trends in American theology and church history in the 1960s and 1970s, and relatively easier in the Netherlands, where the imperative of engagement with the world so clearly set the tone in so many Dutch churches, and certainly in the three largest ones (Roman Catholic, Netherlands Reformed Church, and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands) which represented about three-quarters of the Dutch population in the 1950s. This is not to deny that even in the Netherlands there were important exceptions to this schematic, of course. But what such a new periodization does offer is a better way to see how religion has been transformed in the course of the last fifty years, rather than assuming, according to conventional wisdom, that religion simply declines or disappears in the «mo-

<sup>17</sup> O. Schreuder/L. van Snippenburg (eds.), *Religie in de Nederlandse samenleving. De vergeten factor*, Baarn 1990.

dern» age.<sup>18</sup> In turn, this does not imply that «religion» is equally strong in all places and times, or that all manifestations of religion are equally good (I myself am hardly enamoured with all of the spiritual changes since the 1960s). It does mean, though, that we can pay attention to aspects of Dutch religious history that for too long have made invisible by the secularization thesis.

*The high tide of the religious subcultures, 1945–1965*

The Second World War did not bring about a dramatic change in the position or character of Dutch churches. In the long run, it is true, reflection about the barbarity and suffering generated during the war was to change the theological tone and the moral orientation of various churches and many individuals, but this reflection did not immediately result in a religious sea change. Because of the zealous organizational drive of Dutch Catholics and orthodox Protestants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the churches at mid-century remained the inheritors of an extensive network of religious organizations. More important, many churches in the Netherlands, particularly among Catholics and conservative Protestants, consisted of a very high percentage of loyal church members, who not only attended church regularly but also demonstrated a proven and abiding affinity for church-based organizations. None of this differed from the years before the Nazi invasion; there are even a few indications that church attendance may have slightly increased after the war. What did change after 1945 is that church-based organizations, such as youth clubs, religious political parties and social welfare bureaus received increasingly large amounts of state subsidies, under national governments in which the Catholic People's Party (not to mention the frequent presence of the Protestant parties) played a dominant role. Increasingly, then, church-based organizations became arms of the expanding welfare state. On the fact of it, at least, the social position of the churches in Dutch society had seldom – arguably never – been stronger. Certainly the reach of the churches was at its organizational height.<sup>19</sup>

There were, of course, major exceptions to this rule. If the Netherlands now has the highest number of formally unchurched inhabitants anywhere in Western Europe (perhaps up to 60% of the population), it was no less the case half a century ago. During the 1950s, some 15 to 20 percent of the Dutch population classified themselves as «none» in respect to religious affiliation – a much higher percentage than anywhere in non-communist Europe, where nominal church memberships were at much higher levels. In being the most (nominally) unchurched country in Western Europe, the Netherlands took a commanding lead

<sup>18</sup> For a longer overview of the postwar period and its abiding but shifting religious manifestations, see Joris van Eijnatten/Fred van Lieburg, *Nederlandse religiegeschiedenis*, Hilversum 2005, 328–380.

<sup>19</sup> For the Catholic situation, see Ton Duffhues et al., *Bewegende patronen. Een analyse van het landelijk netwerk van katholieke organisaties en bestuurders 1945–1980*, Nijmegen-Baarn 1985; Erik Sengers, «Al zijn we katholiek, we zijn Nederlanders». *Opkomst en verval van de katholieke kerk in Nederland sinds 1795 vanuit rational-choice-perspectief*, Delft 2003, 6–17.



since the 1920s. Large segments of the Dutch population lived lives unmarked by traditional religious rituals or instruction of any kind. Moreover, there were important fields of Dutch life largely untouched by religion, such as the arts or intellectual life, to name only the most obvious.

Given the changes that would dramatically alter this situation in the 1960s, it is necessary to offer an explanation for why this intricate and extensive system of organized religion went into decline. Various social explanations have already been named above, such as growing individualization. Moreover, one may wonder about the quality of spiritual life in a religious world where social organization (as opposed to spirituality) seems to have played so dominant a role. Probably too often the plethora of religious organizations did not sufficiently motivate people to develop a rich inner life, opening the churches to the criticism, heard often in the 1960s, that the forms of religious organization were arbitrary and based more on earthly motives than spiritual conviction.

### *Religion as engagement and solidarity, 1965–1985*

There were religious voices in the 1950s that resolutely opposed subcultural fragmentation, and who believed that the «real» task of the churches lay elsewhere. The most obvious example of this was a portion of the Netherlands Reformed Church, whose synod in 1955 urged «a new and powerful manifestation of being together [samen-zijn] in the world [...] solidarity.»<sup>20</sup> In hindsight, the call for a kind of «public theology» issued by the Synod in 1955 became a dominant theme which the Catholics and the neo-Calvinists of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands would emulate a decade later. Even the infamous Dutch bishops' «pastoral letter» of precisely fifty years ago (1954), which forbade Catholic participation in socialist organizations, made a reluctant concession to a new kind of civic spirit. The pastoral letter conceded that «It is characteristic of our own time to live in more openness and to establish more generous contacts between ourselves and others.» This was followed, to be sure, by the stern call to remain «one with one's own circle,» and resist joining organizations outside of the Catholic Church.<sup>21</sup> The point to underscore here, however, is that the end of the Second World War brought with it a new commitment to public theology and to the desirability of lay engagement in society. In the end, the World Council of Churches (unleashed in Amsterdam in 1948 under the long-term leadership of the Dutch churchman W.A. Visser 't Hooft) would play an important role in setting the theological and moral agenda of Dutch Protestants. The attendance of the once rather isolationist neo-Calvinists at the WCC conference in New Delhi in 1961 was an important indication of a change in

<sup>20</sup> Synode van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (1955), *Christen-zijn in de Nederlandsesamenleving*, The Hague 1955, 8.

<sup>21</sup> *De katholieke in het openbare leven van deze tijd. Bisschoppelijk mandement*, Utrecht 1954.

orientation within that church body.<sup>22</sup> At about the same time, the new orientation of the *Aggiornamento* in the Catholic Church found a particularly warm reception in the Netherlands. Almost overnight, Dutch Catholics abandoned the subcultural discipline of the past and followed their bishops into an «open» Catholicism, which rejected separate Catholic organizations outside of education and which found a new value in engagement with the world. Traditional liturgy, hierarchical relations and restrictive morality, particularly in respect to sex, were now widely denounced and found few Dutch Catholic defenders.<sup>23</sup>

What now replaced the emphasis on ecclesiastical unity and on unwavering adherence to traditional belief and morality was a «horizontal» expression of faith that flouted the false divides that separated humanity and articulated the imperative of universal solidarity. All this was to be achieved without imposed restraints of any kind, but from the conscience of the individual, which sought common cause with others engaged in the same struggle against injustice. Traditional theology, with its «vertical» emphasis, was more often than not regarded as an impediment to achieving human solidarity. The move from a stress on the «sacred» to the «profane» might in itself, of course, be seen as a process of «secularization», and it was regarded as such by those who now announced the end of traditional Christianity. But it should be noted that this worldly emphasis of the 1960s had its antecedents in Dutch religious life of the 1950s, with its «horizontal» emphasis on social and political organization as the functional, if not the formal, essence of religion. What changed in the course of the 1960s was not in the first place a formal break with the church (statistically, that would come later), or even the shift from the sacred to the secular (one might argue that the high degree of pillarized organization had *already* stripped much of Dutch religious life of its otherworldly orientation), but the site in which religious and moral obligations were performed – namely, in a *public* arena, often in the service of ideals that consciously transcended religion. The greatest deadly sin was now a refusal to engage the world on its own terms. «Otherwise the church will become,» warned the neo-Calvinist J. Verkuyl in 1970, «a pietistic cell, a museum piece, an old city wall around which traffic is directed, a ghetto, an ivory tower, an exclusive club [...]».<sup>24</sup> Verkuyl personally remained within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy, but regardless of the faith structures of individuals, the emphasis now lay on the public significance of religion, ethics and the churches themselves.

In this context, organized religion (in its broadest sense) became a constituent element of a consciously democratized «civil» society. Religious organizations (whether schools, churches, and the whole gamut of the well-subsidized organi-

<sup>22</sup> J. Plomp, *Een kerk in beweging. De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland na de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, Kampen 1987, 186–196.

<sup>23</sup> Loek Halman et al., *Traditie, secularisatie en individualisering. Een studie naar de waarden van de Nederlanders in een Europese context*, Tilburg 1987, 46–47. For a more recent exploration of this theme, see Loek Halman/Ruud Luijkx/Marga van Zundert, *Atlas of European Values*, Leiden 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Johannes Verkuyl, *De boodschap der bevrijding in deze tijd*, Kampen 1970, 122.



zations) often explicitly sought to become «open» institutions, vehicles by which all of society was served. Some religious organizations disappeared altogether, or merged with secular ones. Still, «deconfessionalization» is a better description of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s than «depillarization», since religious organizations, though now often in a much less pronounced religious way, continued to exert a powerful organizational influence over Dutch society.

Nor was the religious influence merely organizational – it also served as the motivation for the forms of social action that characterized the Netherlands from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. The German-Czech sociologist Ernest Zahn in the 1980s made explicit the link between the attitudes of the Dutch ruling classes and the self-styled «rebels» of the 1960s and the strong religious traditions of his adopted country, the Netherlands.<sup>25</sup> The very notion of the Netherlands as a progressive guide land to the world (*Nederland Gidsland*) owed much of its moral energy to the vision of people who, whether or not they remained conventionally religious, were shaped by a religious upbringing. The centrality of the Protestant-dominated Interchurch Peace Council (IKV) and the Catholic Pax Christi in the large Dutch peace movement are instructive here. Similarly but perhaps surprisingly, the drive to make euthanasia an accepted practice drew part of its strength from religiously-motivated advocates, mostly liberal Protestants, who considered ending the lives of suffering people as a noble expression of love and solidarity.<sup>26</sup> Nor was the intense religious activism evident in the Netherlands in the 1970s always on the «progressive» side of the ledger; the substantial anti-abortion movement, supported by many Roman Catholics and orthodox Protestants, demonstrates the range of religiously-inspired activism in the «age of secularization».

In summary, the period from roughly 1965 to 1985 deserves more attention as a period when religious language and practice not only declined, but also was transformed, sometimes unrecognizably, into new forms. Certainly the traditional, ecclesiastical definitions of religion went into considerable decline, subsumed as they were by the vision of a wider solidarity. If «secularization» is defined in a more limited sense, that is, as a process in which «the church» seeks to fulfil its mission by entering «the world», this is a good description of what happened. The stress here, nevertheless, is on transformation rather than decline, and helps give an account of how and why the Netherlands became a hotspot of moral activism in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. This emphasis allows us to ask new research questions. How were traditional theological concepts such as «love» or «stewardship» transformed in the 1960s? And what happened to lay piety and religious practice in this period? We still do not know enough about how the great social changes of the last fifty years affected ordinary people, and how they spiritually made their way in these years.

<sup>25</sup> Ernest Zahn, *Regenten, rebellen en reformatoren. Een visie op Nederland en de Nederlanders* Amsterdam 1989.

<sup>26</sup> James Kennedy, *Een weloverwogen dood. Euthanasie in Nederland*, Amsterdam 2002.

*Return to the spiritual*

Shortly after 1985 the primacy of ethical engagement as the dominant expression of religious motivation went into rapid decline. This kind of religiously-inspired engagement had drawn strength from a wider hope of the 1960s that the world could be transformed, if only people resolved themselves to change it. This hope was quickly dashed in other parts of the world, but in the Netherlands, which faced no obvious and intractable social problems of its own, this hope arguably persisted longer. The central ideological importance of development aid and the peace movement into the 1980s is perhaps telling in this respect. By the 1980s, however, the crisis in the welfare state at home, and the failure of development aid and above all the peace movement to achieve social justice contributed to the decline in the activist period of Dutch history. Perhaps the advent of a new generation of young people, whose moral and religious formation had been very different from those of their parents, also made a difference. In any event, the strong hostility toward traditional religious expression, often so characteristic of the period of ethical engagement, declined as well. Religious impulses became (even) more individualistic, more diffuse, less ethical in intent, and more «spiritual» in feeling. In this respect, the new academic interest in religion, that for example can be seen in Schreuder's and Snippenburg's work and is evident since the late 1980s, closely paralleled the changes in Dutch (and Western) societies. All this contributed to the rise of individual «spirituality» as the dominant religious motif in the Netherlands. Many Dutch – not least those without the least connection to institutional religion – liked to think of themselves as «spiritual».

Where did this impulse originate? «Therapeutic theology» had taken quick root in the United States in the late nineteenth century, emphasizing religion's benefit to the self, in respect to worldly success, health and well-being. Historian Jon Butler has stressed «the incredible lure of therapeutic theology» in accounting for the relative success of the American churches since that time.<sup>27</sup> Aimed at preserving traditional theology and effectively organizing the faithful, Dutch churches traditionally did not gear their message to the psychological well-being of individual hearers. By the time that a therapeutic culture, with its emphasis on «personal well-being, health and psychic security»<sup>28</sup> had arrived in the Netherlands, it developed largely outside of organized religion. This is not to say that the «psychologization» of Dutch society, in which the Netherlands had become one of the leading countries in the availability of mental health care, has had nothing to do with the country's religious past. On the contrary, I have argued elsewhere that there seems to be an historical link between (once) strongly religious, Protestant-dominant countries and the number of psychologists and psychiatrists.<sup>29</sup> But it is to say that «the therapeutic» in the Netherlands came to re-

<sup>27</sup> Jon Butler, *The Christianization of modern America*, in: *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte*, 11, 1 (1998), 143–155.

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The culture of narcissism. American life in age of diminishing expectations*, New York 1991, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Ido de Haan/James Kennedy, *Progress, patients, professionals, and the psyche. Comments on cultures of psychiatry and mental health care in the twentieth century*, in: Marijke

place, rather than to merge with traditional religion, as has been the case in the United States.

It was not until the 1980s that «the new spirituality» or consciously New Age ideas began to receive a good deal of attention in the Netherlands, though clearly there were evidences of it in the 1960s and 1970s, if not before. The new emphasis on personal spirituality fit in well with an increasingly consumerist society (a trend evident from the late 1980s on) where personal choice was hailed as the highest good. It was not as if the turn to spirituality entirely abandoned ethical commitments – commitment to the environment, for example, remained strong in the new spirituality – but the emphasis was on the *inner* life, of experiencing the cosmic and the divine within. Organized religion was typically regarded as too external and too suffocating, and not sufficiently tailor-made to provide real spiritual answers. Eclectic approaches and eclectic ideas were the hallmarks of a spirituality that was primarily directed at the self. This is, for example, true of the self-styled healer Jomanda, popular in the Netherlands in the 1990s. A one-time radio guru, Jomanda also offered (for a fee) healing sessions at her base in the town of Tiel. The Light Song, which Jomanda on at least an occasion urged her audience to sing, is reflective of the current spiritual turn:

We are all together now to get the power of the light and to feel the energy to go inside let us all hold hands and we'll get into the mood. Open up your mind, it's real and good.<sup>30</sup>

Jomanda's emphasis on healing cannot be said to be typical of the new spirituality, but her emphasis on internal «energy» and «mood» is part clearly part of an individualistic religiosity with a strong therapeutic component. In this respect, the kind of spirituality now articulated in the Netherlands does not differ from the variations found elsewhere in Western Europe and North America. Nor does it seem likely at this point that this kind of spirituality, so custom-made for consumer society, is likely to give way soon to more traditional forms of spirituality or ethical engagement.

### *Summary*

To recapitulate, we might divide Dutch religious history since 1945 in three periods: the period of subcultural organization with a still strong ecclesiastical orientation; the period after 1965 of religious-ethical engagement in which the old ecclesiastical and theological distinctions were widely rejected; and the period after 1985 when religion, now more than ever shorn of its institutional frameworks, became primarily an eclectic set of meanings for individuals. Through this schematization I want to stress two things. The first is that while we must not dismiss the «secularization» thesis out of hand we must be careful not to overuse it. And the second is to raise the question whether we are not in fact talking about three

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Gijswijt-Hofstra et al. (eds.), *Psychiatric cultures compared. Psychiatry and mental health care in the twentieth century – comparisons and approaches*, Amsterdam 2006 (forthcoming).

<sup>30</sup> Bart Koene/Bertolt van der Grijn Santen, Jomanda. *Genezend medium*, in: *Religieuze bewegingen in Nederland*, Amsterdam 1993, 25–51.

essentially incompatible religious paradigms: religion as social organization, religion as social activism and religion as individual spirituality. Each of these, at least in strongly consensual, trend-sensitive countries like the Netherlands, has come to dominate a particular period of Dutch history at the expense of the other paradigms. I am not proclaiming an iron law, but I do think it is important to reflect upon the extent to which consensus-oriented societies like the Netherlands tend to create a broadly-shared religious consensus about the legitimate place of religion in society, in which each succeeding paradigm drives out the other.

The possible exceptionalism of the Dutch case, however, only invites comparative research about shifting natures of «religious regimes» throughout Europe and North America in the contemporary period. We do not know enough about how religious developments varied across these countries. Certainly a comparative perspective can enrich our understandings of religious developments, and to what extent secularization and laicization have left different imprints on respective Western societies. Furthermore, it should have become more evident how difficult it is to write Dutch religious history without taking account of the increasing importance of «cultural transfer», of the ways in which religious ideas move from one arena to another. Such processes of transfer are, of course, not new; they include the way in which Dutch religious thought was exported abroad in the past (from Dutch Catholic missionaries in Africa to the revival of Abraham Kuyper's «sphere sovereignty» in the Bush White House). But it also includes the historical re-evaluation of the importance of «marginal» groups in Dutch society who represent internationally important religious movements: «evangelicals» (from those in the Netherlands Reformed Church to Anglican-Nigerian immigrants) and Muslims, whose history in the Netherlands has only very recently become the focus of scholarly interest. Certainly the centrality of media in transmitting ideas and defining religious identity are part and parcel of such a focus, for example in the work of Amsterdam's Religious Research Centre, which aims at making systematic transcontinental comparisons.

Finally, these questions necessarily raise perennial questions about the nature of religion itself. Does the study of religion have a future if religion itself becomes increasingly less institutional? That institutional religion will entirely disappear in the Netherlands seems highly unlikely; the rise of Islam and other organized religions, not to mention the persistence of Christian communities, will prevent that from occurring. But the marginalization of organized religion to the numerical fringes of society does raise questions about how widely religion should be defined and how it ought to be studied. To see religion in psychological practice, in the rituals of sport, or, as Rothuizen did, in psychedelic experience or in the sayings of Chairman Mao, may be creative answers to this challenge. But it is always problematic to dub as «religious» those practices not regarded by the participants themselves as religious. So, too, the now-you-see-it-now-you-don't character of current «spirituality» does not make matters easier for scholars of religion, who are obliged to study phenomena that both resemble, and do not resemble, what may plausibly understood as religion.



For all of these challenges, however, it still appears that we are standing at the beginning of the «post-secular» age. The renewed interest in «spiritual» meaning among individuals has allowed us to recast our questions about religion. And the increasing interest in the social role of religion – precipitated not least by the rise of various forms of «fundamentalism» – is accompanied by a re-examination of the «hidden» ways in which religious assumptions have worked in contemporary culture. In all of this, there is a new desire to come to terms with the abiding religious longings of humanity, not least by scholars themselves. In short, it is time to crank up the research into the mysteries of contemporary Dutch religious practices, not to wind it down.

#### *Recent Dutch religious history and the limits of secularization*

For several countries in Western Europe, the 1960s and subsequent decades witnessed the «collapse» of Christendom and, for many observers, the «secularization» of public life. Given this development, how should religious history be constructed for the postwar period? This article suggests a periodization for the religious history of the Netherlands, a country religiously transformed after 1945. In particular, it suggests a tri-partite periodization, in which an era of organizational cohesion was succeeded in turn by periods in which religion was defined as engagement and as personal spirituality.

#### *Die neuste niederländische Religionsgeschichte und die Grenzen der Säkularisierung*

In zahlreichen westeuropäischen Ländern stellten die 1960er Jahre und die darauf folgenden Jahrzehnte eine Erosion des Christentums dar, was für viele Beobachter die «Säkularisierung» des öffentlichen Lebens bedeutete. Wie sollte vor diesem Hintergrund die Religionsgeschichte der Nachkriegszeit konstruiert werden? Dieser Artikel schlägt eine Periodisierung für die Niederlande vor, ein Land, das religionsgeschichtlich nach 1945 einen starken Wandel erlebte. Insbesondere schlägt der Beitrag eine Periodisierung in drei Phasen vor: eine solche der organisatorischen Kohäsion wurde von einer solchen abgelöst, in der Religion als Verpflichtung und einer weiteren, in der sie als persönliche Spiritualität verstanden wurde.

#### *L'histoire religieuse contemporaine et les limites de la sécularisation*

Pour un grand nombre de pays de l'Europe de l'ouest, les années 1960 et les décennies subséquentes signifiaient un «collapse» de la christianité, et pour nombreux observateurs la «sécularisation» de la vie publique. Comment l'histoire religieuse de l'époque de l'après-guerre devrait-elle être construite? Cet article propose une périodisation pour les Pays-Bas, un pays qui a vécu d'immenses transformations religieuses après 1945. L'article propose principalement une périodisation en trois phases: une phase de cohésion organisationnelle était suivie d'une qui était définie d'engagement et d'une autre caractérisée de spiritualité personnelle.

#### *Keywords – Schlüsselbegriffe – Mots clés*

ethics – Ethik – étiq, Netzerlands-history – niederländische Geschichte – histoire néerlandaise, pillarization – Versäulung – pillarisation, secularization – Säkularisierung – sécularisation, spirituality – Spiritualität – spiritualité

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