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# The Public Role of Religion in Europe since the 1960s: the Dutch Case

James Kennedy

After the 1960s «Christendom» disappeared from Western Europe, or at least that was the assessment of many contemporaries. A «secular age» had dawned and swept aside the last vestiges of a Christian society. Christianity as a colonial religion would, in an age of decolonization, face inexorable decline. Informed church leaders knew of the arrival of the Fourth Man – the European who, unlike generation before him, was not even nominally Christian. With the very cultural underpinnings of «conventional Christendom» being unravelled, it was not difficult to deduce that the new age would be secular.<sup>1</sup>

But Christendom is of course a subjective criterion; in some parts of Western Europe the continued force of Christian social, cultural and political influences continued to be felt long after 1960. And with the rise of Islam, «Christendom» was resurrected as a reality by those who thought to see with greater clarity than before that Europe was a Christian, or «Judaeo-Christian» continent. The Swiss minaret dispute a case in point, in which the defence of the Christian character of society was ostensibly at stake.<sup>2</sup> In other parts of Western Europe such as the Netherlands, however, Christendom was harder to posit. A recent study suggests that whereas in France and Britain anti-Islamic commentators might label the identities of their nations as alternately secular and as Christian, in the Netherlands it was heavily tilted toward just the secular.<sup>3</sup> The leading anti-Islamic politician and Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders occasionally speaks of the Jewish-Christian identity of the Netherlands, but it remained undeveloped as a

<sup>1</sup> W.H. van de Pol, *Het einde van het conventionele christendom*, Roermond/Maaseik 1966.

<sup>2</sup> Vincenzo Pacillo, «Stopp Minarett»? The Controversy over the Building of Minarets in Switzerland: Religious Freedom versus Collective Identity in: Silvio Ferrari/Sabria Pastorelli (Ed.), *Religion in Public Spaces: A European Perspective*, Farnham 2012, 337–352.

<sup>3</sup> Menno Hurenkamp/Evelien Tonkens/Jan Willem Duyvendak, *Carfting Citizenship: Negotiating Tensions in Modern Society*, Basingstoke 2013.

theme. As anti-Islamic as Dutch discourse often is, it is difficult to see that the Dutch could have generated the same anti-minaret rationale as the Swiss.

The question of Christendom's contested presence is related to other, more tangible issues – about the continued «public presence» of Christianity in Europe, but also of Islam and other religious expressions since the 1960s. What kind of influence did organized religion – in whatever religious expression – continue to have on public life after this decade? Did Christian institutions and ideas continue to have an impact? And to what extent did religious expression of any kind effectively contend for a place in the public sphere?

The obvious narrative is that both Christian influence and religious practice declined over the course of decades, even centuries, in nearly all Western European countries.<sup>4</sup> The «death» of Christian Britain (as Callum Brown has argued) or by extension the death of Christian Europe seems, however, somewhat overdrawn, and the «displacement» of Christian institutions from some positions of influence may be a better way to conceive of what has happened.<sup>5</sup> In any event, a story of decline alone ignores shifts such as the kind mentioned above, in which claims about Europe's Christian past have reasserted itself as a kind of cultural Christendom. At the European Union level, it seems, religion, as long as it is kept out of the political realm, and kept safely culturalized, is widely recognized as a positive dimension of the continent's heritage. In this context, established religions, most self-evidently the older Christian churches, often have been given relatively speaking a good deal of consideration at the national level.<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, though, the chances for Christian (or Jewish and other) groups to capitalize on that trend depends on opportunity structures – and the access to power that (established) religious groups possessed in their respective countries, or localities. But the history of this relationship still needs to be fleshed out. To be sure, Jose Casanova and his seminal work from 1994 has played an important role in showing how «deprivatized» religion reasserted itself at least some Western countries in recent decades.<sup>7</sup> Since his initial study, Casanova has admitted that his views of deprivatized religion had too normative a standard, namely that this process was necessarily characterized by the need of the (Catholic) church to shift from a state-oriented toward a society-oriented stance that accepted democratic pluralism. More broadly, he has recognized the continuing importance of establishment churches in postwar European democracies.<sup>8</sup> Still, much of the work inspired by Casanova does suggest a break with the past. Concep-

<sup>4</sup> Hugh McLeod/Werner Ustorf (Ed.), *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe 1750–2000*, Cambridge 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Morris, *The Strange Death of Christian Britain: Another Look at the Secularization Debate*, in: *Historical Journal*, 46,4 (2003), 976; see also Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: understanding secularisation 1800–2000*, London 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Ronan McCrea, *Religion and the Public Order of the European Union*, Oxford 2010.

<sup>7</sup> José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago 1994.

<sup>8</sup> José Casanova, *Public Religions Revisited*, in: Hent de Vries (Ed.), *Religion: Beyond the Concept*, New York 2008, 101–119.

tually, «deprivatization» necessarily implies discontinuity, and the focus is thus on groups that are «new» or have recast themselves in «deprivatized» ways. A heavy focus on European Islam is a case in point. Another example of this is work that speaks of «postsecular» religion and thus downplays important strands of public religious presence that have persisted.<sup>9</sup>

Receiving less attention is the history of religiously-based institutions since the 1960s, and the extent to which they, at least in relative terms, continued to exercise influence. What were the *vehicles* for religious endeavour, and to what extent were they able to maintain an important «public presence», that is, regarded as a significant force in public life? Which kinds of religious institutions fared better than others in maintaining a presence, and influence, in public life? Although comparisons in terms of formal rights of religious groups in contemporary Europe is a good start, it is also important to take a look at the historical contexts and developments beyond these arrangements.

This study focuses on the Netherlands, although it will make references to similar, or different, developments in other countries. It is in one sense a single case study among many Western European nations. But the Dutch case is also interesting because in the international literature it is often difficult to define. For a long time the Netherlands enjoyed a reputation for religious tolerance and the wide degree of latitude granted to – by the standards of continental Western Europe – its religiously diverse population.<sup>10</sup> In recent years, it is sometimes regarded as a country with a particularly strong anti-Muslim or anti-religious stance (as observed above) combined with a more rigorous separation of church and state than that can be found in most other parts of Western Europe.

In looking at the Dutch case, it is important to differentiate the authority and influence of religious institutions by looking at three different levels. The first is the extent to which religion in general, or Christianity in particular, functioned after the 1960s as a shared identity or heritage, as a perceived spiritual or moral resource. In this context, it is particularly important to look at the fate of the churches, and to what extent these institutions retained to a significant extent their traditional place in society. The second level is the political, that is, the extent to which parties or interest groups defending specific religious interests and other religiously-motivated interest groups were able to sustain their own place in the public sphere. This means looking in particular, at least in a country like the Netherlands, at the fate of Christian Democracy, though it is always important to note that Christian and other religious groups did not exclusive rely on this political bloc to defend their interests. And the third level is that of the organizations of civil society, in particular the ability of religious organizations involved in social and cultural tasks to command a public presence.

<sup>9</sup> Justin Beaumont/Christopher Baker (Ed.), *Postsecular Cities: Space, Theory and Practice*, London 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen V. Monsma/J. Christopher Soper, *The Challenge of Pluralism: Church and State in Five Democracies*, Lanham 1996.

This tripartite distinction – between churches, political parties and civil society – is not necessarily a division that works equally well across Western Europe. For example, it may not be so easy to separate churches out from other parts of civil society, and with the absence of Christian parties the political realm is a more difficult sector to assess. Nevertheless, these distinctions help establish a framework for more productive lines of comparison across Europe when evaluating the place of «public religion».

### *Christendom and the Churches*

Most of the countries of Western Europe understood themselves to be Christian countries until at least the 1960s. This seemed very much so in the Netherlands, where in the 1950s half the population went to church on a weekly basis, five out of six citizens identified with a Christian denomination, and Christian political parties enjoyed for decades a majority in parliament. The left-leaning Doorbraak movement of 1945, which sought to put an end to confessional parties and to end the old divide between the social democrats and churchgoers, advocated that the foundations of Dutch society should be seen as both Christianity and humanism. This attempt to understand the Netherlands in a pluralist way does not seem to have really taken root, and the prevalence of Christian spiritual and moral norms was generally accepted in the first twenty years after the war – a vaguely Christian civil religion may even have been strengthened by the war.<sup>11</sup> There was also resistance by confessional politicians to give formal recognition to «secular» expressions in the 1950s, evidenced in the longstanding refusal to pay for humanist chaplains in the armed forces, or to accept cremation – then uncommonly practiced and associated with freethinkers – on the same legal footing as (Christian) burial.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, a shared sense of Christendom was, even then, likely weaker in the Netherlands than elsewhere. Even in confessionally-mixed countries like Germany and Switzerland, Protestants and Catholics had strong regional bases with establishment churches. With a centralized state and no establishmentarian churches – the government's financial support of the denomination was very low – Dutch religious bodies were heavily dependent on the effective mobilization of their members. For many decades starting in the late nineteenth century, this mobilization was successful among Roman Catholics and orthodox Protestants. The high degree of coherence and discipline generated did undermine what liberal Protestants had initially sought for the nation: a shared sense of identity that included a broad religious basis. The Dutch felt aligned

<sup>11</sup> Coos Huijsen, *Nederland en het verhaal van Oranje*, Amsterdam 2012, 193–230.

<sup>12</sup> James C. Kennedy, *Looking Beyond the Church: The Crisis of Dutch Public Life During the 1960s*, in: *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 3 (2012), 452–483.

with the nation, to be sure, but religion was in the contested public arena not something the Dutch shared with each other. In this respect, there long was a recognition of the plural nature of the Dutch nation and society. Accordingly, identification with the church was more about keeping specific communities of belief intact than about upholding national or social institutions, though that consideration was not entirely absent among some, such as with some members of the once-majority Dutch Reformed Church.

As long there was strong active adherence to the churches, they played an important role in Dutch society. But their fortunes went drastically into decline from the 1960s on, with attendance at Mass plummeting from over 80 percent in the 1950s to just 35 percent in the mid-1970s, and declining substantially after that.<sup>13</sup> More to the point here, membership also declined very substantially; by 1979 according to one survey some 41 percent of the Dutch were unchurched – a very high percentage by the standards of Western Europe then, and also now.<sup>14</sup> Although Protestants were more likely to formally exit their churches when they abandoned their faith than were Catholics, the shrinking numbers of adherents across the board make clear that church membership was not seen as a way of belonging to nation or society, or enacting one's social duty, as it was in the big churches of Scandinavia, Germany and some Catholic countries. It did not help the cause of the churches that after the 1960s they were entirely shut out of social services; their diaconal work – which they had insistently maintained as private sources of charity – lost most of its significance when the Dutch government guaranteed all citizens a minimum income.

For some time after the 1960s, the most frequent self-understanding of Dutch society might have been that the country was pluralist. Everyone was a minority, and as such all could make equal claims to rights and to government services and subsidies. The quick acceptance of homosexuals and their organizations has been attributed to the logic of granting all minorities the same rights.<sup>15</sup> Certainly in comparison to other West European countries new religious «sects» such as the controversial Church of Scientology were left alone in the Netherlands, despite some initial discussion.<sup>16</sup> It is possible, too, to see the acceptance of soft drug use and euthanasia in the light of allowing small, autonomous moral communities to freely establish the rules by which they wished to live. In any event, religious newcomers were also granted subsidies for their own organizations, including

<sup>13</sup> F. Haarsma, *Developments in the Spiritual Life of Holland, Particularly in the Roman-Catholic Church, in the Past Ten Years*, in: *Dutch Studies*, 3 (1977), 123.

<sup>14</sup> W. Goddijn/H. Smets/G. van Tillo, *Opnieuw: God in Nederland. Onderzoek naar godsdienst en kerkelijkheid*, ingesteld in opdracht van de KRO en weekblad *De Tijd*, Amsterdam 1979.

<sup>15</sup> Rob Tielman, *Homoseksualiteit in Nederland. Studie van een emancipatiebeweging*, Mepel 1982.

<sup>16</sup> Tobias Witteveen, *Overheid en nieuwe religieuze bewegingen. Onderzoek betreffende sekten*, The Hague 1984.



Islamic or Hindu schools.<sup>17</sup> Recent research, however, has pointed out that not everyone was quite equal; the creation of Muslim schools was resisted, with the first one coming only in 1988, and their number has never risen much above a few dozen. Educational leaders were loath to create separate schools for Muslims.<sup>18</sup> From 1976 to 1984, though, the government supported the construction of mosques, on the grounds that Muslims had been disadvantaged in not having their own houses of worship and that the government had the responsibility to equalize the situation.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, Christian groups could continue to regulate their own affairs on the basis of this pluralist principle – no more and no less than any other group.

Since the 1990s, though, this pluralist self-understanding and the arrangements it brought about began to change again. By the late 1980s and as the Cold War was drawing down, it became evident to many that the churches had lost their social and their political clout. They might yet make public claims, but they were seldom heard, as the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church was forced to conclude.<sup>20</sup> On occasion, the churches, and more particularly the Roman Catholic bishops with their more high-profile leadership, might yet make a splash, as in the late 1990s when a bishop claimed that the poor had the right to steal bread if he had no other means to satisfy his hunger.<sup>21</sup> Nor was the coalition of liberals and socialists who ran the Dutch government for most of the 1990s entirely indifferent to the churches. But the pretension which they had maintained into the 1980s that they were a leading voice in society – just as other leading churches had been *Stimmen der Vernunft* – could no longer seriously be maintained; their financial resources and social influence had become too small. Unlike the Church of England, they could not serve as a broker in the religious public sphere – even though church attendance as such was much higher than in England, and its members on average more active.<sup>22</sup> In any event, one certainly

<sup>17</sup> Monsma/Soper, *The Challenge of Pluralism* (see note 10), 70.

<sup>18</sup> Mellink Bram, *Worden zoals wij. Onderwijs en de opkomst van de geïndividualiseerde samenleving sinds 1945*, Dissertation, Universiteit van Amsterdam 2013.

<sup>19</sup> For a comparative study, see Tymen J. van der Ploeg, *Places of Worship, Between Public and Private: A Comparison between Bulgaria, Italy and the Netherlands*, in: Ferrari/Pastorelli, *Religion in Public Spaces* (see note 2), 353–372.

<sup>20</sup> *Rapport synode Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, Gemeente-zijn in de mondiale samenleving. Pastorale handreiking van de Generale Synode van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, The Hague 1988, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Henk Müller, *Bisschop Muskens toont zich barmhartig jegens mensen in armoede* (Een arme mag een brood stelen), in: *De Volkskrant*, 4 October 1996 (<http://www.volkskrant.nl/vk/nl/2844/Archief/archief/article/detail/431673/1996/10/04/Bisschop-Muskens-toont-zich-barmhartig-jegens-mensen-in-armoede-Een-arme-mag-een-brood-stelen.dhtml>) [Retrieved 2 August 2013].

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Birt, *Good Imam, Bad Imam. Civic Religion and National Integration in Britain* Post 9/11, in: *The Muslim World*, 96/4 (October 2006), 687–705, (<http://www.utexas.edu/law/journals/tlr/sources/Issue%2089.4/Huq%20Sources/fn83.Birt.pdf>) [retrieved 2 August 2013].

could not claim that as perhaps in Germany, the churches' public position grew over the long postwar period.<sup>23</sup>

In short, the Dutch churches could not function as a spiritual home for the nation. Interest in its services – baptism, marriage and burial – was also significantly lower than elsewhere in Western Europe.<sup>24</sup> In the absence of a broad public church (or churches) that could still function, regardless of how many people actually came to Sunday service – as a «public utility»<sup>25</sup>, it became easier for the Dutch to imagine themselves as a secularist nation, without any formal or meaningful ties to organized religion, or more specifically in this case the Christian churches. Even the Christian Democrats avoided making claims about the Netherlands being an historically Christian nation.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps this accounts for the rise of a more aggressive sort of secularist ideology that was no longer interested in pluralist arrangements but above all conformity of religious groups to a dominant, secular way of life.<sup>27</sup> It is still very much the question to what extent this kind of secularism has made its way into Dutch life, but the apparent self-understanding of the Dutch as «secular» – as opposed to (culturally) Christian – is an important development that partially defines the way religious groups are seen and – perhaps more diffusely – what kinds of access they are allowed.

### *Religion in Politics*

The decline of Christian Democracy has been one of the striking political developments in Europe in recent decades, despite signs of continuing strength.<sup>28</sup> In Germany, where the party arguably secularized its message and appeal earlier and more successfully than elsewhere, the CDU continues to be strong. But in many other places it has lost much of its influence. In France its power was already spent by the early 1960s; scandal and political upheaval brought an end to the powerful Christian Democrats in Italy thirty years later. In the Netherlands Christian Democracy survived longer than anticipated by many, but in the long run it suffered a wave of losses that recently removed it from the center of

<sup>23</sup> Wilhelm Damberg (Ed.), *Soziale Strukturen und Semantiken des Religiösen im Wandel, 1949–1989*, Essen 2011.

<sup>24</sup> J. Becker/J. de Hart, *Rapport SCP, Godsdienstige verandering in Nederland. Verschuivingen in de binding met de kerken en de christelijke traditie*, The Hague 2006, 16–17.

<sup>25</sup> Hans Knippenberg, *Hoe God emigreerde naar Amerika. Geografische bespiegelingen over godsdienst in Europa en de Verenigde Staten*, Amsterdam 2009, <<http://dare.uva.nl/document/175593>> [Retrieved 2 August 2013].

<sup>26</sup> James Kennedy/Hans-Martien ten Napel, «Geen buigingen naar rechts?» Enkele opmerkingen over de programmatische ontwikkeling van het CDA tussen 1980 en 2010, in: G. Voerman (Ed.), *De conjunctuur van de macht. Het Christen Democratisch Appèl 1980–2010*, Amsterdam 2011, 109–130.

<sup>27</sup> Cora Schuh/Marian Burchardt/Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, *Contested Secularities: Religious Minorities and Secular Progressivism in the Netherlands*, in: *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 5,3 (2012), 349–383.

<sup>28</sup> For an overview, see Steven van Hecke/Emmanuel Gerard, *Christian Democratic Parties in Europe since the End of the Cold War*, Leuven 2004.



power. For a long time after the decline set in, however, the Christian Democrats proved a serious obstacle in the liberalization of some key legislation, and represented politically an important network of organizations allied, however loosely, with Christian Democracy.

Up until the elections of 1967, the Catholic party and various Protestant ones had held a consistent majority in the Dutch parliament. In particular, the Catholic party with nearly a third of the electorate behind it ruled in every coalition government, either with the liberals or the socialists, who were effectively forced to the political flanks by this Catholic (and confessional) center. Starting in 1967, and until the early 1970s, the decline of the confessionals, particularly that of the Catholic party, was precipitous, due to the sudden shift in Catholic organizational life, in which – under encourage of the bishops – support of Catholic associations and Catholic political parties was no longer a duty. A merger between two Protestant and one Catholic party into a Christian Democratic Appeal was deemed the only way out, a rapprochement made easier by a growing ecumenical spirit.<sup>29</sup> Efforts by the parties of the left in particular to force the creation of a left-right political system without a Christian Democratic center failed. The Christian Democrats rallied and remained in power until 1994, securing notable electoral successes in the 1980s. Though from the 1970s seldom representing more than a third of the electorate, they proved indispensable for creating workable, stable coalitions.

The 1960s brought about, however, serious divisions among (former) supporters of the Christian parties. A relatively small Christian left emerged, a part of which bolted the old parties, most notably those founding the so-called Party of Political Radicals, and some stayed in, maintaining some influence. But the thrust of Christian Democratic efforts was primarily conservative, if of a moderate nature. The Christian Democrats barely stood in the way of many forms of liberalization, such as access to contraceptives or easier divorce. But if they failed to prevent liberalization in the end they proved tough in resisting abortion past the first trimester and were able to delay, though with a parliamentary majority, a full-throated legalization of euthanasia until the 1990s. Unlike religious conservatives in some other countries, the Dutch Christian Democrats, afraid of being painted as reactionaries, were not keen to press for a return to traditional moral values, though they remained one of the key parties to stress the importance of the family.<sup>30</sup> Probably most important, they proved to be important defenders of still powerful constituencies. They supported the cause of religious schools – some 70 percent of Dutch elementary school children went to Christian schools of one kind or another – and they continued to defend the interests of Dutch agriculture, which was strongly if not exclusively shaped by Christian organizations. In this way, they proved themselves above all effective

<sup>29</sup> Rutger Zwart, «Gods wil in Nederland»: Christelijke ideologieën en de vorming van het CDA (1880–1980), Kampen 1996.

<sup>30</sup> Kennedy/Ten Napel, «Geen buigingen naar rechts?» (see note 26).

in defending organizations and interests which has been established at a time when Christian groups were most dominant. Christian Democrats also continued to insist on the importance of these groups, rather than individuals alone, as crucial for the well-being of society. Under the successful leadership of prime minister Ruud Lubbers (1982–1994) their position at the center of power seemed almost unassailable.<sup>31</sup>

Only after the disastrous elections of 1994 were the Christian Democrats effectively removed from power. For the first time ever, liberals and socialists took part in a coalition without them. The loss also had negative effects on the party itself. It has been able to attract ambition and talent because of its key role in administering the country, but now these people fled the party. The socialist-liberal coalition also implemented in the late 1990s policies opposed by the Christian Democrats: the formal legalization of euthanasia, the acceptance of same-sex marriage (the Netherlands was the first country to do so), and a prostitution policy that not only legalized brothels but required all municipalities to accept such enterprises. It was not that the new coalition was entirely libertarian; Dutch drugs policies were on balanced tightened. But developments in the later 1990s seemed to many to confirm that the power of the Christian Democrats – and by extension the power of the Christian part of the population – was now conclusively past.

It is not that Christian Democracy passed from the scene after the 1990s; indeed after 9/11 they would for a number of years make a significant comeback, re-entering the ruling coalition for a decade after 2002. Together with smaller orthodox Protestant parties they remained a significant force in parliament, and certainly also at the local level, particularly in small towns and rural areas. Only in the elections of 2012 did the total vote of all the Christian parties drop to a paltry 14 percent of the total, and put an end to the Christian Democratic Appeal as a major force. What can be said is that Christian Democratic influence in Dutch politics persisted long after churches had lost their influence. Dutch Christian Democrats were able to maintain their power by gradually loosening the explicit ties to Christian norms and values, a trend generally encouraged more, interestingly enough, by the party's Catholics than by its Protestants. But the Christian Democratic Appeal was never able to make the full transition to a largely secularly conservative party, and in turn they, too, were unable to find a winsome way to link their religious heritage with the changing commitments of the electorate.

Though the history of Christian Democracy is the most important collective expression of religious presence in politics it was of course never, nor is now, the only place where religious actors contended in the political arena. But other parties made efforts to draw religious groups to them as well, most notably the

<sup>31</sup> Kees van Kersbergen/Paul Lucardie/Hans-Martien ten Napel, *Geloven in macht? De christen-democratie in Nederland*, Amsterdam 1993.

Labour Party. Protestant and Catholic «work communities» were established in the party after the Second World War, until they were discontinued in the late 1960s. In recent years, these religious communities have been re-established, primarily to continue to draw immigrants to the party, a constituency that largely votes for the Labour Party and others on the left. Increasingly, combining religious conviction with party activism in a mix-and-match way became increasingly popular, making it harder to draw lines between religious conviction and party choice. But this is something we shall return to at the end of the article.

### *Religious Civil Society*

As noted above, the Dutch government was quite reluctant – in contrast to some other Western European nations like Germany – to support churches or other religious organizations whose purposes were *primarily* religious or spiritual, a consideration initially informed by wishing to respect the autonomy of these organizations. What the government was quite willing to do was support faith-based organizations whose aims were primarily aimed at serving society in some way.<sup>32</sup> The structural result was a well-funded civil society, much of it religiously inspired, that continued to maintain significant influence over Dutch society long beyond the 1960s. Still distinctive about Dutch civil society is its large numbers of paid, professional staff and (formally) religious character. Additionally as in other countries, religiously active citizens play a disproportionately great role in volunteering.<sup>33</sup>

Most noteworthy of these institutions are the country's «special» (*bijzondere*) schools, most of which are either Catholic or some kind of Protestant school. These schools historically have had a great deal of autonomy in prescribing their own moral and spiritual dimensions. Support for this system remains strong in the Netherlands, and two-thirds of the Dutch think that religious values are important for raising children.<sup>34</sup> The relative great degree of freedom of parents, and by extension religious communities, is not wholly unique in Europe,<sup>35</sup> but this school system is the most persistent legacy of a religious past. These schools arguably have been able to retain their commanding share of Dutch education by proving themselves highly adaptive, in many cases by removing any religious practices or doctrines that some parents or pupils might find offensive; schools typically stress the individual choice of students instead of the group identity of the school. Since the 1960s, moreover, religion has not been a particularly im-

<sup>32</sup> Matthias Kortmann, *Migrantenselbstorganisationen in der Integrationspolitik. Einwandererverbände als Interessenvertreter in Deutschland und den Niederlanden*, Münster 2011.

<sup>33</sup> For an overview see Govert Buijs/Paul Dekker/Marc Hooghe, *Civil Society: Tussen oud en nieuw*, Amsterdam 2009; René Bekkers, *Religie en het maatschappelijk midden in Nederland*, in: *Religie en samenleving*, 8, 1 (May 2013), 135–158.

<sup>34</sup> Ton Bernts/Gerard Dekker/Joep de Hart, *God in Nederland, 1996–2006*, Kampen 2007.

<sup>35</sup> See Norman Doe, *Law and Religion in Europe. A Comparative Introduction*, Oxford 2011.

portant motive of parents for sending their children to a particular school.<sup>36</sup> And perhaps most decisively, processes of professionalization changed the character of these institutions. What decreasingly mattered was the continued mobilization of (religious) constituencies, and the effective administration of these organizations, as a study on Dutch private (including religious) housing corporations shows.<sup>37</sup> It might be added that the very existence of extensive subsidies, and in many cases close ties with the government, further eroded any driving religious motivation in many of these organizations.

Seen this way, one might conclude from developments in recent decades that the public presence of religious organizations might look impressive on paper, but that the «real» religious drive has largely evaporated from these institutions. There is much truth to this claim; Catholic leaders were frequently at a loss about how to give any kind of decisive theological or moral direction to their organizations.<sup>38</sup>

But four additional factors also require consideration. In the first place, it is not only that there was an evaporation of religious commitment, but that organizations sought to understand their religious commitments in a new light. The Dutch Christian labour unions – the mostly Protestant CNV and the Catholic NKV – both made such efforts, even as the latter went on to merge with the socialist trade union. Such organizations made allowance for the looser and more personalized ways of linking faith to collective action, but they did not abandon their commitments.<sup>39</sup> In the second place, Dutch civil society in the 1960s and 1970s was rejuvenated by «new» social movements,<sup>40</sup> some strongly motivated by religious concerns, that contended for the public sphere. The clearest case of this was the Dutch peace movement, largely driven by the Interchurch Peace Council (IKV). Though most of the protesters of the late 1970s and early 1980s that fought against the development of the neutron bomb and the stationing of cruise missiles were not tied to the churches, the IKV was the main organizer of their concerns.<sup>41</sup> The new concern for human rights and the environment were often driven by religiously-minded activists.

Third, the availability of subsidies and traditions of easy and equal access facilitated the public presence of relatively small and active religious minorities who in other circumstances would not be able to create the institutions that they

<sup>36</sup> Mellink, *Worden zoals wij* (see note 18).

<sup>37</sup> Wouter Beekers, *Het bewoonbare land. Geschiedenis van de volkshuisvestingsbeweging in Nederland*, Amsterdam 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Maarten van den Bos, *Verlangen naar vernieuwing. Nederlands katholicisme 1953–2003*, Amsterdam 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Peter van Dam, *Een wankel vertoog. Over ontzuiling als karikatuur*, in: *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden – Low Countries Review*, 126 (2011), 3, 52–77.

<sup>40</sup> J. W. Duyvendak/H. A. van der Heijden/R. Koopmans/L. Wijmans (Ed.), *Tussen verbeelding en macht. 25 jaar nieuwe sociale bewegingen in Nederland*, Amsterdam 1992.

<sup>41</sup> Beatrice de Graaf, *Über die Mauer. Die DDR, die niederländischen Kirchen und die Friedensbewegung*, Münster 2007.



came to enjoy. Orthodox Protestants schools – where the selection of children on religious grounds could be very strict – was a case in point. Perhaps a more important example was the rise of the Evangelical Broadcasting Association, which through a combination of government subsidies and strong support by a segment of Dutch society became in recent decades one of the pillars of the Dutch broadcasting system. Evangelical groups like Youth for Christ continued to receive state funding for youth programs in the larger Dutch cities, although in one city – Amsterdam – this program became controversial over the fact that the organization hired only Christians subscribing to their beliefs. Other religious groups such as the Muslims also thus gained access to public broadcasting. Religious minorities with traditional commitments thus continued to benefit from a system that gave them a means to participate in civil society, though as noted above not all groups were granted quite the same access.

Finally, there is some indication that with the decline of the welfare state religious organizations have become more important partners than they once were, most notably on the local level. A law from 2007 (*Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning*) enabled religious organizations to work more effectively with local government in providing services. In playing a role, not all faith-based organizations required money from the state, or sought cooperation with local government. Churches, in fact, often remained hesitant about taking on new responsibilities.<sup>42</sup> But whatever the precise case, religious organizations continued over the decades to provide services insufficiently picked up by the welfare state. This has continued to be the case, though the role of traditional churches in this work has declined, replaced by more hybrid groups and immigrant networks.<sup>43</sup>

The result of this pattern was a Dutch civil society that generated important examples of the public presence of religion. This presence was more diffuse than it had been in the 1950s, and many of its religious groups had broadened their identities to such an extent that they no longer caused any religious affront. Much of Dutch civil society, of course, was non-religious, and this has become more so in the course of recent decades. Still, there was a willingness of many local governments in particular to work with religious civil society organizations, particularly as the state's ability to direct and control social policy declined. The Salvation Army, or at least the professionalized part of the organization responsible for dispensing social services has remained highly popular and government agencies depend on it to take care of some of the country's most destitute and desperate citizens. This was just one striking example of how

<sup>42</sup> Marja Vreugdenhil, *Nederland participatieland? De ambitie van de Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning (Wmo) en de praktijk in buurten, mantelzorgrelaties en kerken* (Amsterdam, 2012), 175–209 (<http://dare.uva.nl/cgi/b/bib/bib-idx?type=simple;lang=nl;c=uvadis;sid=c0-eb0eaff3c4458f8bbbedf6d85f76f2b;rgn1=entire%20record;q1=jager-vreugdenhil;Submit.x=0;Submit.y=0;sort=publicationyear;cc=uvadis;view=reslist;fmt=long;page=reslist;start=1;size=1>) [Retrieved 4 August 2013].

<sup>43</sup> Maarten Davelaar et al., *Faith-Based Organizations and Social Exclusion in the Netherlands*, Utrecht 2011.



religious organizations continued – in some cases more than before – to remain important factors in Dutch civil society. About half of Dutch municipalities indicated they cooperated structurally with religious organizations.

### *Conclusion*

In the Dutch case at least it is important to make distinctions between three different levels when speaking of the «public presence» of religion – on the level of religious identification and affiliation with organized religion, on the level of political organization and direct influence on the state, and religious presence in civil society, where influence on state and society is more indirect. What is striking about the Netherlands the relative weakness of the institutional churches, particularly in terms of professed adherence. That likely has consequences for the way that the Dutch see their society, and their relatively low view of religion's ability to bind people together. In politics, however, Christian Democracy remained for a long time at the center of power, delaying legislative liberalization into the 1990s and serving as a defence of the established interests associated with them. Their importance was only – as it now seems – eclipsed in just the last few years. As for civil society, pluralist arrangements and respect for private initiative kept a wide variety of religious organizations in the center of Dutch public life. Religiously-based movements for peace, social services offered by organizations like the Salvation Army and a vast network of schools, both orthodox and religiously latitudinarian, are all examples of how Dutch religious civil society, though changing in character, managed to remain a significant part of Dutch public life. According to some accounts, the further recession of the welfare state will give new opportunities for (religious) civil society groups, though that remains to be seen.

This article has focused on the histories of religious groups – the churches, the Christian Democratic Appeal and other parties, and religious civil society organizations. It has argued for a differentiated assessment of what has happened to institutional religion. But one of the new developments is that religiously motivated actors have increasingly been active in the public sphere in more loosely formed networks, or as individuals. This is a trend that was spotted as early as the 1970s in the Netherlands; believers picked and chose their own packet of activities rather than following the lead of churches.<sup>44</sup> With the increasing overlap of «public» and «private» and the emergence of personal voices it has less easy to justify leaving such expressions.<sup>45</sup> And although such voices are notoriously hard to follow, further research will have to take additional steps to give the increasingly fragmented, temporary and sometimes solo voices of religion a place in any assessment of the contemporary public sphere.

<sup>44</sup> R.G. Scholten, *Vrijwilligersarbeid in hervormde gemeenten: verslag van een in februari 1977 in opdracht van de Raad voor de Herderlijke Zorg van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk gehouden onderzoek*, The Hague: Boekencentrum 1978.

<sup>45</sup> Ferrari/Pastorelli, *Religion in Public Spaces* (see note 2).

*The Public Role of Religion in Europe since the 1960s: the Dutch Case*

In many parts of Western Europe, the 1960s and its aftermath resulted in a diminished or contested public place for many well-established faith-based organizations, from parties to the churches. Yet the fortunes of different religious organizations since the 1960s varied, as the Dutch case shows. There, the churches were hardest hit, whereas Christian political parties and other civil society organizations did better in maintaining their public presence.

Public presence of religion – churches – Christian political parties – civil society organizations – the Netherlands.

*Die öffentliche Rolle von Religion in Europa seit den 1960er Jahren: das niederländische Beispiel*

In grossen Teilen Westeuropas führten die 1960er Jahre und deren Folgen zu einer verringerten oder umkämpften öffentlichen Präsenz vieler etablierter glaubensbasierter Organisationen – von den Parteien bis zu den Kirchen. Doch zeigen sich diesbezüglich Unterschiede zwischen verschiedenen religiösen Organisationen, wie der niederländische Fall zeigt. Während die Kirchen am stärksten von einem Rückgang betroffen waren, konnten die christlichen politischen Parteien und andere zivilgesellschaftliche Organisationen ihre öffentliche Präsenz stärker aufrechterhalten.

Öffentliche Präsenz von Religion – Kirchen – christliche Parteien – zivilgesellschaftliche Organisationen – Niederlande.

*La présence publique des religions en Europe depuis les années soixante: le cas néerlandais*

Dans une grande partie de l'Europe occidentale, les années soixante et leurs répercussions ont vu de nombreuses organisations religieuses bien établies – des partis aux églises – à une présence publique réduite ou contestée. Cependant, les destins de différentes organisations religieuses ont varié, ce que cette contribution montrera en référant au cas néerlandais. Tandis que les églises étaient affecté le plus d'un déclin de participation, la présence publique de partis chrétiens et d'autres organisations de la société civile restait plus forte.

Présence publique des religions – les églises – partis chrétiens – organisations de la société civile – Hollande.

*La presenza pubblica dei religioni in Europa dagli anni Sessanta: il caso olandese*

In molte parti dell'Europa occidentale, per molte organizzazioni religiose affermate – dai partiti politici alle chiese – gli anni Sessanta e le loro conseguenze si sono manifestati in uno spazio pubblico più ristretto o contestato. Tuttavia, la situazione di organizzazioni religiosi diversi variava, come questo contributo mostra rispetto al caso olandese. Mentre le chiese erano colpiti maggiormente, la presenza pubblica dei partiti cristiani anzi che d'altri organizzazioni della società civile è rimasta più forte.

Presenza pubblica dei religioni – chiese – partiti cristiani – organizzazioni della società civile – Hollanda.

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