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A Glance in the Mirror

Dutch and Polish religious cultures

edited by
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The Holistic (R)evolution
Contemporary Transformations of Religiosity in the Netherlands
Peter NISSEN

Barely half a century ago sociologists were predicting the imminent disappearance of religion from Western society. At the start of the 21st century, however, many researchers assert that religion has by no means disappeared. Some actually refer to a ‘de-secularisation’ (sociologist Peter Berger), a “re-enchantment of the West” (religious scholar Christopher Partridge) and a “renewed sacralisation” (the Dutch theologians Erik Borgman and Anton van Harskamp).1 Repeatedly, questionnaire research has established that religion has not vanished to the extent anticipated a few decades ago. What has happened is that religious experience has changed considerably. In this article I will explore the nature of the transformation of religiosity in the Netherlands.

From the angle of religious studies the Netherlands are an intriguing experimental garden.2 Fifty years ago this country still ranked among the European countries with the highest degree of church affiliation. Today, only half a century later, it is one of the most secularised countries in Europe. This decline in church affiliation and involvement, as well as the disappearance of many church-aligned institutions and dwindling familiarity with the Christian tradition, have led historians to refer to the “strange death”


of Dutch Christianity. But questionnaire research has shown that the disappearance of church affiliation does not go hand in hand with a similar decline in Dutch religiosity. A major study in 2003 showed that the majority of the Dutch population regard themselves as religiously or spiritually oriented. It also showed that at least a quarter of the Dutch population see themselves as ‘religiously or spiritually oriented’ without belonging to a religious denomination or institution. In other words, in the Netherlands religiosity has relocated itself outside the institutional church. At the same time major studies indicate that among Dutch Christians religious notions have also changed radically in recent years. Here too religiosity has been transformed in a way that, from a Christian ecclesiastic perspective, has led to a ‘weakening’ of traditional Christian religiosity. This ‘weakening’ – or, to put it more neutrally, transformation – is evident inter alia in a different God concept, a different approach to the Bible and a different conception of life after death.

In this article I will analyse this transformation of religiosity, treating it as the result of both a decline in the societal relevance of the Christian churches and of a popularisation of holistic spirituality. By the latter I mean the religious worldview and concomitant practices that invoke a divine life force that permeates everything, which appeals to each person’s divine core that is traceable through inner experience, and which is experienced as an injunction to spiritual growth. I will try to discuss both developments without judging them, without condemning or praising them, consistent with what I consider to be my task as a scholar of religion, namely to describe and to understand religious developments.

4 G. Kronjee, M. Lampert, Leefstijlen en zingeving, in: W.B.H.J. van de Donk et al. (Eds.), Geloven in het publieke domein, Amsterdam 2006, 171-208 (the data for this report were collected in 2003).

The Holistic (R)evolution

The Shrinking Churches in the Netherlands

I first want to make a few observations on the changing role of the Christian churches in the Netherlands in the last few decades. If we want to know how many inhabitants of the Netherlands belong to a Christian church, we may find three different answers. The first answer is based on the administration of the churches themselves. According to these data, retrieved directly from the churches’ own registers in other words, 43 percent of the Dutch population still belong to a Christian church, be it Roman Catholic, Protestant, Anglican or Eastern Orthodox. So, church members have become a minority in the Netherlands, but they still approximate half of the Dutch population. The majority of these are Roman Catholics (26.6 percent according to the churches’ administration), Protestants count for about 16.7 percent and Eastern Orthodox Christians – almost all of them migrants – count for 0.1 percent.

Statistics based upon non-church related surveys, however, make clear that the churches’ administrations offer a distorted image of reality. Many people are still included in the Churches’ registers who no longer consider themselves to be church members. In the last few years several two-stage questionnaires (the first stage involving the question “do you belong to a church”, and the second stage “to which church do you belong”) revealed a percentage of 31. And a three-stage questionnaire, which was part of a survey on behalf of the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy in 2006, indicated that only 25 percent, so a quarter of the Dutch population, considers itself to be a church member. In this three-stage questionnaire the first question was “do you consider yourself to be religiously or spiritually oriented”. If the answer to this question was yes, a second question asked “do you belong to a Christian church or another religious institu-

tion”. To the first question 51 percent of the interviewees answered yes; so approximately half of the Dutch population considers itself to be religious or spiritual. But to the second question only 25 percent answered yes. So only half of the people who consider themselves religiously or spiritually oriented still belong to a church or another religious institution. A small majority of the Dutch believers are ‘believers without belonging’, to allude to the title of the famous book by the British sociologist Grace Davie on religion in Britain after 1945.9

The Christian churches in the Netherlands are clearly shrinking. They have been doing so for more than half a century. This process can be seen very clearly when looking at census data from past centuries. In the 1950s the Netherlands still belonged to the European countries with the highest degree of church membership and ecclesial participation. Around 1960 one out of every eleven Roman Catholic missionaries worldwide originated from these small Netherlands. In those times, belonging to a Christian church was almost self-evident in the Netherlands. At the first religious count of the Dutch population in 1809, consisting at that time of about two million people, only 295 did not belong to a Christian church. The first census in 1879 still gave the same impression: 99.7 percent of the Dutch population belonged to a Christian church or to a Jewish religious institution.10 

But now, in the early 21st century, church members have become a minority in the Netherlands.

In 2006 The Netherlands Institute for Social Research published a table showing that in fifteen years, between 1990 and 2005, the Roman Catholic Church had lost 16 percent of its members. The three major Protestant churches that merged in 2004 to form the Protestant Church of the Netherlands had lost 43 percent of their members in the same period. The Mennonite Church had even lost 51 percent and the liberal Remonstrant Brotherhood, belonging to the Arminian-Calvinist tradition, 34 percent. Also groups or denominations that operated on the margins of the Christian churches were diminished. The Salvation Army had lost 19 percent of its members in these fifteen years and Jehovah’s Witnesses had lost 6 percent.11

The steady decline of religious affiliation is a common phenomenon among the Christian churches in the Netherlands. It affects both the two former majority churches – the Roman Catholic Church and the Dutch Reformed Church – and the more liberal smaller Protestant churches. Nevertheless, we can identify three types of churches that seem unaffected by this general tendency of ecclesial shrinkage. The first type is that of the migrant churches. Due to migration not only Islam is growing in the Netherlands, but also the various churches – both Catholic and Protestant – of Nigerians, Philippinians, Ghanaians, Puerto Ricans and other migrant groups. They have flourishing and growing parishes and Protestant congregations in the urban centres of Amsterdam and Rotterdam. The same is true for a small number of Polish Roman Catholic parishes in the Netherlands.12

A second type of Christian church that is still growing is that of the relatively strict and conservative reformed churches like the Christian Reformed Churches, the Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands and the Old Reformed Churches, colloquially known as ‘black stockings churches’.13 Their growth is brought about by a simple cause, namely their demographic growth; the birth rate among the more strict reformed churches is simply higher, in other words. This growth in certain areas of the Netherlands, mainly in the strip called the Dutch Bible Belt, enabled them to build very large church buildings in the past few years, often referred to as ‘refodomes’, like the churches in Barneveld and Opheusden, both with more seats than the largest Catholic cathedral in the Netherlands.

A third type of Christian church that has been growing in the last two

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decades is that of the so-called Evangelical or Pentecostal churches. A recent survey of the VU University of Amsterdam charts the founding of 281 new Christian congregations in the Netherlands since 1990. Sixty percent of these newly founded congregations belong to the Pentecostal tradition. Not all of them have proven to be very persistent, however. A number of Pentecostal congregations founded since 1990 have already disappeared; they turned out to be too dependent on the presence of an inspiring preacher or evangelist.

By and large, virtually all the Christian churches in the Netherlands are declining. But we should take account of the fact that this is not a typically Dutch phenomenon. It is a general European development. We can see it quite clearly in the Netherlands because here the process took place within a few decades, starting only half a century ago when there was still a high degree of church affiliation. But a major cross-national survey carried out in all European countries and reported in the Atlas of European Values makes clear that there is no single country in Europe where the degree of church affiliation is increasing. Secularisation is taking place everywhere in Europe, but not everywhere at the same speed or from the same time. In France, the process of secularisation started two centuries ago, in the Netherlands half a century ago, and in some countries, like Poland, it started only recently.

Not only the degree of church affiliation is decreasing strongly in the Netherlands, but also the degree of church attendance among the remaining church members. We only have a clear picture of this development among Roman Catholics in the Netherlands, because since 1966 the KASKI Institute for Applied Research on Religion, now based on the campus of Nijmegen University, has been counting church attendance in all Dutch parishes twice a year. Since that time church attendance among Dutch Catholics diminished from about 70 percent to no more than 7 percent. It seems to be a catastrophic number, but again we have to be aware of the fact that the Netherlands are no exception in Western Europe. The degree of church attendance among Belgian Catholics for instance does not exceed the number of 9 percent.

The Changing Role and Position of the Christian Churches in Dutch Society and Culture

Not just the degree of church affiliation and church attendance have shown a radical decline in the Netherlands in the last few decades, but the social position of the Christian churches in Dutch society has also changed thoroughly. One could say that within half a century the churches have moved from the centre of Dutch society to the margins. They no longer represent the majority of the Dutch population, they have become minority churches. Moreover, they have lost their position of social and cultural self-evidence. This marginalisation of the Christian churches has at least two distinct aspects: that of a social and political marginalisation and that of a cultural marginalisation. In social and political life the churches have lost their influence and their traditional position. Currently, they hardly have any influence on the political debate in the Netherlands and many of the Catholic and Protestant church-related institutions in the fields of education, health care and social welfare have been dissolved or have lost their explicit relation with a church or a Christian identity.

The political secularisation is reflected symbolically by the loss of several historical privileges of the churches in the Netherlands with the change of the Dutch Constitution in 1983. Article 6 of the Constitution guarantees

14 M. Klaver, De evangelische beweging, in: M. ter Borg et al., Handboek Religie in Nederland, 146-159.
19 E. Meijsing, Het Nederlands Christendom in de twintigste eeuw, Amsterdam 2007, esp. part IV.
freedom of religious belief as well as freedom of non-religious belief. On the basis of Article 6 and also of Article 9, the Public Manifestations Act was enacted. This Act regulates, among other things, religious manifestations outside buildings and enclosed places, including religious processions. Apart from Article 6, there are other articles of the Constitution that refer to religion. Article 1 does not permit discrimination on the grounds of religion, belief, political opinion, race or sex or any other grounds whatsoever. Furthermore, a specific reference to religion can be found in Article 23 which relates to education and guarantees freedom of (denominational) education. But at the same time the new Constitution removed two privileges that dated back to the early 19th century, namely the exemption from postal charges for the churches as well as the exchange of information between the municipal registry and the church administration. Since 1983, or actually since 1993 – because an interim period of ten years was agreed upon – churches in the Netherlands have to stick stamps on their official mail and they have to keep up their own membership administration; problems in both the Catholic and the Protestant churches have shown that the last task is much more difficult than the first one.20

Christian churches have become marginal institutions in Dutch society. This process has been described for the major Protestant Church, i.e. the Dutch Reformed Church, by the American historian James Kennedy, who is now teaching Dutch history at the University of Amsterdam, in a book entitled City on a Mountain (Stad op een berg).21 Following the imagery of this title, derived of course from the Gospel of Matthew (5:14), one could say that in the Netherlands the churches have moved from the mountain to the valley. James Kennedy uses another image: the Church in the Netherlands has changed from a state church into a street church. Officially, the Netherlands have never had a state church, not even in the Dutch Republic of the 17th and 18th centuries. Nevertheless, the Calvinist Church was the only church allowed to be visible and present in public life. The other churches (Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Mennonite, etcetera) could hold their services only in hidden churches or so-called ‘shelter churches’, which had to look like ordinary homes, warehouses or barns from the outside.

In the 19th century the Dutch Reformed Church tried to continue its role as the main public church of the Dutch nation. It had an organic presence in civil society and considered itself to be self-evident. In the first half of the 20th century, however, this quasi-state church changed into a societal church. It wanted to contribute to Dutch society by giving it moral inspiration and by being the spiritual leaven of society. Then in the middle of the 20th century the Church in the Netherlands discovered its global vocation. The churches, both Catholic and Protestant, got involved in the ecumenical movement, the struggle for justice and peace, the Third World movement, and the fight against Apartheid in South Africa. The churches tended to become prophetic institutions. But the global propheticism of the churches lost its strength in the 1980s and 1990s. And now the shrunken Catholic parishes and Protestant congregations have become ‘street churches': they have discovered their vocation to be servant churches, serving their own neighbourhood, the local community, in taking care of the homeless, in supporting migrants and helping drug or alcohol addicts. The churches, having become marginal themselves, have discovered their vocation among the marginalised at home.

The social and political marginalisation of the churches is just one result of the process of secularisation in the Netherlands. Another result is the cultural marginalisation of the Christian tradition; in other words, the fact that there is a tremendous decrease in people’s familiarity with the cultural and religious tradition of Christianity. Most youngsters in the Netherlands are no longer familiar with the major stories in the Bible, or with the meaning of the main Christian symbols, rituals and feasts. They do not know what Christians actually celebrate at Ascension Day or Pentecost, nor how they celebrate it. They do not recognise the major themes in Christian art or literature, and they do not know what the difference is between Catholicism and Protestantism and not even what the difference is between Christianity and Islam. This development could be labelled as the advance of religious

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analphabetism in the Netherlands. The big question for the churches in the near future is, as I would put it, "how can we become storytellers again and how can we reach the young generations who don’t know anything about the Church or about Christianity?"

### The Transformation of Religiosity in the Netherlands

As we have seen earlier, half of the Dutch population still considers itself to be religiously or spiritually oriented. Only half of them belong to a church or another religious institution; the other half are 'believers without belonging', or so-called 'unattached believers'. It could be said that religiosity has relocated itself outside the institutional churches. But also among the church members, religious notions have changed radically in the Netherlands. To put it simply, although the churches seem to be disappearing, religiosity is not disappearing, but it is changing. This change is one toward personal religious experience or subjective spirituality. The Netherlands are now witnessing the 'subjective turn' in religion, which has been described for Britain by the religious scholars Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead in their book *The Spiritual Revolution* (2005).

I would like to illustrate the presence and the vitality of this transformed type of religiosity in the Netherlands, both among church members and among non-church members, with two examples of religious phenomena. The first is the practice of prayer. A year ago, in August 2009, the Dutch women’s magazine *Margriet* published the results of a survey on religion. One of the startling results was that 70 percent of the readers of the magazine indicated that they practised prayer more or less regularly. Three years earlier another enquiry, *God in the Netherlands*, based on in-depth interviews of 1132 people, concluded that about 63 percent of them practised prayer. Finally, an investigation by psychologists of religion of Nijmegen University even lead to the conclusion that 71 percent of the Dutch population practises prayer. This means that two thirds of the Dutch population actually knows the religious practice of prayer. This is more than the average among the European countries according to the *Atlas of European Values*, which concludes that about half of the Europeans practice prayer or meditation more or less regularly.

An empirical study by psychologist Sarah Bänziger entitled *Still Praying Strong* clearly demonstrated that praying is still a common practice even among young people in the Netherlands, although it is a hidden practice: it is a taboo among youngsters to talk about prayer. But what her research also underlined is that we can identify a shift in the types of prayer. Classical forms of prayer, like praying according to a traditional formula (the Lord’s Prayer, Hail Mary, etcetera) and petitionary or intercessory prayer, are becoming less popular, whereas meditative prayer and aspirative or impulsive prayer are becoming more familiar. The last form, also called the prayer of sigh, unMASKs an important aspect of the transformed, subjective religiosity. This prayer originates from an experience of being touched by transcendence. It is an emotional type of prayer. And emotion is revealed to be an important aspect of present-day religiosity in the Netherlands.

The importance of emotion is confirmed by another religious phenomenon: the belief in miracles. Despite the processes of secularisation and decline of church membership and church attendance, the belief in miracles has grown in the Netherlands since the 1990s, both among church members and among non-church members. In 1991 53 percent of the church members indicated a belief in religious miracles; in 2002 this percentage had grown to 67 percent. Among non-church members in the Netherlands the

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22 M. Delnoe, Kunst en spiritualiteit, Tielt 2006, 82-83.
belief in miracles has doubled from 15 to 31 percent in the same period. A few years ago the Catholic Broadcasting Company KRO broadcasted a television series entitled *Miracles do exist*. Television viewers could send in their own miraculous experiences. And again the underlying theme turned out to be an emotional experience of being touched by a glimpse of transcendence.

This notion of transcendence is called God by a number of the experienced. But many of them are hesitant to use this name. This has to do with the radical changes in the image of God among both church members and non-church members in the Netherlands. The classic revelational concept of a personal God has made way for an all-pervasive, omnipresent higher force, “something like a higher power that controls life”, which “connects humans, the world and nature to the core”, popularly condensed to the term ‘somethingism’ (in Dutch: ‘ietsisme’). This power or energy is considered to be present in the cosmos and in human beings, but it also transcends human beings. This penchant for transcendence – along with the notion of the immanence of the divine – is a hallmark of the holistic worldview that has become popular in the Netherlands over the last few decades. The number of believers in a personal God has been reduced by half within three decades. In a survey in 1966 61 percent of the Dutch Catholics indicated to uphold the revelational concept of a personal God. In 1996, thirty years later, this number was only 17 percent, in 2006 it was 27 percent. The majority of both church members and non-church members in the Netherlands hold to an image of God that could best be labelled as panentheistic or Spinozistic: God is an all-pervasive, primordial divine energy or force, present in the cosmos.

The relationship between religion and the communal experience of the church is weakened in the Netherlands. On the other hand, religion has been subjectivised into an emotional and inner experience, an inner experience that appeals to the divine core in a person’s interior. It is experienced also as an injunction to spiritual growth. Both the practice of prayer and the experience of the miraculous are seen by many people as a stimulus and an impetus to follow a personal spiritual path. The challenge for the churches to me seems to be to show that they can be helpful on this spiritual path, not because they are in the possession of eternal truths, but because they have centuries of spiritual experience at their disposal. The churches have a wealth of spirituality and wisdom in stock. By generously sharing this wealth with the many religious seekers, the churches can regain part of their societal relevance in the Netherlands again.

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33 K. Bizeveld et al. (Eds.), In iets geloven. Ietsisme en het christelijk geloof, Kampen 2006; P. Nissen, Wat is er gebeurd met God in Nederland?, in: Speling 63 (2011), 15-23.
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E. MeiJERING, Het Nederlands Christendom in de twintigste eeuw, Amsterdam 2007.

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