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Trends in Religious Affiliation: Some Reflections on the Research of Geert Driessen

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Abstract
Reflecting on Driessen’s contribution to this volume, the author tries to probe trends in religious affiliation as described by Driessen, and to raise questions for further research. These religious trends are discussed mainly from the perspective of education and the social significance of religion. The former is of interest, the author argues, in view of the fact that all respondents are young parents of primary school children, while the latter perspective helps to explain the increase in the number of Muslims in relation to their socio-economic deprivation. The author tentatively concludes that these trends in religious affiliation probably reflect a religious transformation in the direction of vicarious and ethnic religion.

Keywords
one-step question, two-step question, religious socialisation, socio-economic position, denomination, sect, vicarious religion, ethnic religion

1 Introduction
Driessen’s article is important and interesting in more than one way. Using data derived from a multiple cohort study among a representative sample of parents of primary school pupils, Driessen identifies trends in religious affiliation in the Netherlands over a period of ten years. He also compares different denominations in the Netherlands, as well as Islam, which adds to the scientific importance and novelty of his study. Driessen presents trends in religious affiliation indicating that, whereas the number of adherents of mainstream Christian denominations is gradually decreasing, the number of Muslims is growing. What do these trends imply and what do they tell us about the current state of the church and religion in a modern society like the Netherlands? Unfortunately such questions are not addressed by Driessen, who limits himself to describing trends. As a kind of supplement to Driessen’s
contribution, therefore, I reflect on his findings from various theoretical perspectives in order to come to a better understanding of the trends he describes and raise some questions for further research.

As a first step I compare Driessen’s figures with the results of similar research into religious affiliation conducted recently in the Netherlands. This affords a better perspective on his findings (section 2). Next I pay attention to the group of people from which Driessen’s data derive, namely young parents. Since parents play the most crucial role in the religious upbringing of their children, the potential church members of tomorrow, it is interesting to consider his findings from an educational perspective (section 3). Next I consider whether Driessen’s findings offer a possible explanation for these trends and tentatively refer to some socio-economic factors he discusses (section 4). Finally, on the basis of these reflections, I interpret these trends in religious affiliation in terms of the rise of vicarious and ethnic religion (section 5).

2 The Broader Context: Religious Developments in the Netherlands

In light of similar research into the present state of religious affairs in the Netherlands, Driessen’s findings contain no surprises. That is to say, the general decline in religious affiliation that Driessen detects is confirmed by other research. For example, the research project God in Nederland (God in the Netherlands), which studies trends in religious affiliation, religious practices and religious beliefs at ten year intervals as from 1966, clearly reveals that religious affiliation among the Dutch population as a whole has dropped over the past four decades. According to the recently published 2006 figures (Bernts et al., 2007, p. 14), the proportion of the Dutch population reporting to be members of the Roman Catholic Church dropped from 35% in 1966 to 16% in 2006 — a decline of over 50%! Membership of Protestant churches likewise dropped from 25% of the Dutch population in 1966 to 14% in 2006. By contrast the categories displaying growth over the same period are non-affiliated groups, which increased from 33% in 1966 to 61% in 2006, and those labelled ‘otherwise affiliated’. The latter grew from 7% in 1966 to 9% in 2006. Another interesting study is that of Becker and De Hart (2006), which focuses more specifically on developments in smaller Christian communities and Islam. As Driessen’s findings show, religious affiliation is not

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1 In the God in Nederland project the category ‘otherwise affiliated’ includes very diverse religious groups like small orthodox Christian groups, members of migrant churches, adherents of non-Western religions, Muslims and the like.
dropping all along the line. Islam, along with the category labelled ‘other Christian’, are, so to speak, exceptions to the rule. This, too, is confirmed by the findings of Becker and De Hart (2006, pp. 29-37), whose figures not only display an increase in the number of Muslims of more than 1600% (!) between 1971 and 2005, but increases in the membership of several migrant churches and smaller Pentecostal and Evangelical communities as well.

This brief comparison between Driessen’s findings and the results of similar research reveals overall parallels in the results of different studies, especially in regard to the various trends detected. Whereas the membership of mainstream Christian denominations in the Netherlands is plummeting, that of Islam and smaller Christian communities seems to be growing, or at least not dropping. But there is an important difference. On average the percentages of religious affiliation reported by Driessen are higher than those found in the *God in Nederland* project and the study of Becker and De Hart. To mention but one striking example, while the *God in Nederland project* reports that 61% of the Dutch population was non-affiliated in 2006, Driessen’s sample of parents of primary school pupils contains (only) 35.3% non-affiliated men and 32.3% non-affiliated women (cf. table 1).2

These differences are probably attributable to different ways of measuring religious affiliation. Driessen uses the so-called *one-step question* (“Of which church, religious community or worldview-related group do you consider yourself a member?”), while the researchers in the *God in Nederland project* and Becker and De Hart use the *two-step question* (“Do you belong to a religious denomination?”, followed by “Which one?”). The two-step question is known to result in higher rates of non-affiliation, since this way of questioning tends to push marginal church members into the non-affiliated category (Becker & De Hart, 2006, p. 38). Consequently, although the trends detected by Driessen are in line with those emerging from similar research, the question nevertheless arises what affiliation actually means in Driessen’s study. Given Driessen’s use of the one-step question, it is likely that a substantial part of the respondents who define themselves as Roman Catholic, Dutch Reformed or re-Reformed comprises nominal or marginal members. And what about religious communities that display growth? Does this represent growth in nominal or marginal membership, or are we in fact dealing with core members? Questions like these are not answered by the figures Driessen presents, which makes it difficult to compare the diverging trends he describes and assess their real significance. However, that does not detract from the finding — an

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2 All tables refer to those presented by Driessen.
interesting one in itself — that patterns in religious affiliation among a specific group of people (young parents) on average corresponds with those displayed by the Dutch population as a whole.

3 Religious Affiliation of Young Parents: an Educational Perspective

Religious institutions are known to recruit new members mostly among the children of their existing membership. Thus religious affiliation is the result of religious upbringing in the home rather than of conversion in later life. In the Netherlands at any rate people rarely change their religious affiliation. They stick to the denomination they were brought up in, or give up their religious affiliation altogether (Becker & De Hart, 2006, p. 40). This is the general rule, which of course does not mean that people who received a religious upbringing at home never apostasise, nor that proselytisation always fails (Hunsberger, 2000). Anyway, a religious upbringing is crucial for affiliation to a religious community. This makes Driessen's findings all the more interesting from an educational perspective, since his data derive from the most influential educators one can think of: parents!

As mentioned already, a religious upbringing at home is a major determinant of religious commitment in later life. More specifically, research has shown that there are three important conditions for a child to follow in its parents’ religious footsteps. Firstly, parents must be genuinely committed to a religious tradition and must display their commitment openly to their children. Secondly, parents need to be actively involved in a church or religious community. And finally, parents need to engage in regular prayer and Bible (or other scriptural) reading in their homes (cf. e.g. Andree 1983; De Hart, 1990, p. 179; Spilka et al., 2003, pp. 110-113). These are key activities that parents must engage in if they want to transmit their religious commitment to their children.

In this respect parents are important religious role models for their children. Considered from this educational perspective, then, an obvious conclusion would be that by and large Islam offers more favourable conditions for transmission to the next generation than Christianity, hence the trends detected by Driessen are likely to continue in the foreseeable future. For one things, whereas the number of parents who report affiliation to a mainline Christian denomination (Catholic, Dutch Reformed and re-Reformed) has steadily decreased between 1995 and 2005, the number of Muslim parents increased by more than 5% (cf. table 1). These findings indicate that a declining number of Dutch parents is able, perhaps even willing, to function as Christian role
models for their children, while the number of potential Muslim role models is growing. Another noteworthy finding, according to Driessen's figures (cf. table 2), is that both Muslims and 'other' Christians exhibit a high degree of religiously homogeneous marriages, while the marriages of re-Reformed, Dutch Reformed and especially Catholic Christians are far more religiously mixed. It is known that a religiously homogeneous home constitutes a more favourable condition for children's religious socialisation than a mixed marriage (Hutsebaut, 1995, p.126). This is confirmed by research among Dutch Muslims conducted by Phalet and Haker (2004, pp. 11-12), which revealed that with a view to their children's religious upbringing Muslims consider it important to marry a partner from the same religious background.

From an educational perspective the conclusion thus seems to impose itself that mainstream Christian churches offer far less favourable conditions for maintaining their current position than the Muslim minority, and perhaps the smaller Christian communities as well. One has to be very careful, however, in making such inferences. To begin with, although an increasing number of parents identify themselves as 'Muslim' or what Driessen calls 'other Christian', that does not automatically imply that these parents perform the aforementioned educational practices. As explained at the end of section 2, the growing identification with Islam and 'other' Christian communities may simply be nominal or marginal, in which case it seems unlikely that these parents will take great pains about their children's religious upbringing. Hence until we know more about these parents' actual educational practices we should refrain from drawing conclusions.

But even if we did know that Muslim or otherwise affiliated parents actually function as religious role models in the way described above, that still would not tell us much about their children's future religious commitment. In a critical review of several Dutch studies into religious socialisation conducted in the 1980s Janssen (1988) pointed out a basic flaw. In most studies, according to Janssen, appropriate parenting practices with a view to children's religious socialisation were identified mainly by looking at successful instances of religious socialisation. This not only led to the identification of the aforementioned educational practices, but also created the false impression that they are both necessary and sufficient for children's religious socialisation. But as Janssen observes, the impression is not true, because there are a lot of children who enjoyed a religious upbringing at home and whose parents served as perfect religious role models, but who did not follow in their parents' religious footsteps in later life. Hence providing a religious role model may be necessary for transmitting one's religious commitment to one's children, but it is not sufficient! As Jansen points out, this emerges from a comparison of successful
and failed instances of religious socialisation of children with the same religious background.

Janssen’s criticism boils down to a rejection of a simplistic model of religious socialisation, in which religious socialisation is seen as parents transmitting their religious commitment to their children in a one-way process. More recent studies of religious socialisation, while emphasising the crucial role of parents, also stress the importance of a supportive, authoritative style of parenting (cf. e.g. Vergouwen, 2001, pp. 331-332). According to Phalet and Haker (2004, pp. 53-55), it is exactly this style of parenting that is rarely adopted by religiously committed Muslims, who, on the contrary, tend to adopt a more authoritarian style. This insight, too, should stop us from jumping to the tempting conclusion that opportunities for transmitting Islam to the younger generations are increasing, while those for transmitting mainstream Christianity are decreasing.

Because the trends Driessen describes are based on data derived from young parents of primary school pupils, it is interesting to consider his findings from an educational perspective and to see whether they are likely to continue in the foreseeable future. As I tried to show above, the mere fact that an increasing number of parents identify with Islam and some smaller Christian communities is in itself insufficient evidence to claim that these groups will be more successful in recruiting future members than the mainstream Christian denominations. Driessen’s data simply tell us too little about the actual educational practices of these parents, their parenting styles and the like to make such inferences. To enhance the predictive power of a multiple cohort study like Driessen’s it is necessary, therefore, to inquire into these aspects. That, I believe, is what this educational reflection on Driessen’s findings teaches us.

4 A Possible Explanation: the Social Significance of Religion

Predicting future trends in religious affiliation is very difficult and requires much more information than is offered by Driessen’s study. It is equally difficult to explain the trends he describes. Still, for a proper understanding of these trends one has to look for explanations. Thus the question considered in this section is as follows: what factors cause the membership of the mainstream Christian churches to decrease and that of Islam and smaller Christian communities to increase? Of course, I realise that complex, multifaceted phenomena like the ones we are dealing with here cannot be attributed to just one cause. What follows, therefore, is only a preliminary and tentative explanation of the growth of Islam and the smaller Christian communities. Partly on the basis of Driessen’s findings, this tentative explanation rests on the following
thesis. The membership of Islam and smaller Christian communities will increase, or at least will not decrease, inasmuch as these religious communities are of social significance to their members. Let me start by explaining this thesis with reference to the growth of the Muslim community in the Netherlands.

In his contribution Driessen not only describes trends in religious affiliation, but also studies the relationship between religious affiliation and ethnicity. In this respect his findings confirm earlier findings reported by Phalet (2004) and Phalet and Haker (2004) that the positive relationship between ethnicity and religious affiliation is strengthened to the extent that the educational level of religious minority groups (Turkish and Moroccan Muslims) is relatively low and unemployment levels are relatively high (cf. tables 4 and 6 respectively). In this regard one could say that for Turkish and Moroccan Muslims the relationship between religious affiliation and ethnicity largely boils down to a relationship between religious affiliation and socio-economic status, as level of education and rate of unemployment are usually considered indicators of socio-economic status.

What lies behind this association between low socio-economic status and stronger religious affiliation among Muslims? Having a higher educational level, and consequently less unemployment and/or a higher profession, usually takes Muslims in the Netherlands out of their socio-religious environment. It enables them to participate more fully in Dutch society and to look beyond their own religious group, with the result that participation in, and perhaps identification, with their own religion may eventually weaken. In the case of the Muslim community, then, my argument is that because of their socially deprived position a substantial part of the Muslims living in the Netherlands continue to exist as a homogeneous group, whose members only slowly adjust to the dominant Dutch culture and thus remain more oriented to their in-group than to outsiders. It is also a group for which Islam continues to serve as an important marker of ethnic identity, so that the social expectation of being a Muslim, marrying a Muslim partner, raising children religiously and adhering to traditional family values remains intact. The social significance of Islam thus is that it gives Muslims a clear identity in a strange, sometimes hostile cultural environment. That is how I interpret the figures Driessen presents regarding the association between level of education, unemployment rate and affiliation to Islam.\(^3\)

\(^3\) Especially in regard to Muslims my argument thus emphasises a more or less indirect effect of education on religious affiliation. Higher levels of education take Muslims out of their socio-religious environment, which in turn may weaken their identification with the Muslim community and with Islam as such. Of course, this is not to deny possible direct secularising effects
Following this line of argument one could also say that to some extent Islam in the Netherlands still represents a *church* form of religion. As a religious institution, if Islam can be regarded as such, it encompasses the vast majority of Turks and Moroccans (cf. table 3); it contributes to the social integration of these ethnic groups as an identity marker; and it provides a well-defined and consistent set of family values with a conservative outlook on life (Phalet & Haker, 2004, pp.53-55). These features characterise a church form of religion rather than a denominational, sectarian or cultic form of religion, to use the well-known Troeltsch-Weberian typology of religious organisations (cf. e.g. Van der Ven, 1993, pp. 23-24; Bruce, 2002, pp. 76-79). In contemporary Dutch society Islam thus seems to occupy the position that the Roman Catholic Church and the major Protestant churches occupied some forty years ago.

As far as the smaller Christian communities are concerned, it is far more difficult to account for the growth of their membership. To begin with, it remains unclear what the category ‘other Christian’ in Driessen’s study really means. On the basis of the foregoing comparison between Driessen’s study and that of Becker and De Hart (section 2), I assume that this category comprises mainly members of Pentecostal and Evangelical communities, since they are the ones who displayed the strongest growth over the past fifteen years (Becker & De Hart, 2006, pp. 30-31). But we cannot be sure that this is actually the case. In addition, in regard to educational level and unemployment rate these ‘other Christians’ socio-economic position cannot be called poor. In this respect they hardly differ from members of mainstream Christian churches in the Netherlands. Consequently the growth of these smaller Christian communities cannot be attributed to their members’ poor socio-economic conditions and possible social isolation resulting from that. Thus we have to look for an alternative explanation.

One alternative explanation could be that the members of smaller Christian communities themselves may choose to keep aloof from the dominant Dutch culture: they are not forced into this position as is the case with a large part of the Muslim community, but actively strive for a kind of religious education. As secularisation theorists often point out (cf. Bruce, 2002, pp. 106-117 for a critical discussion), higher education in particular makes it more problematic for people to go to church and accept metaphysical beliefs or to understand symbols referring to a transcendent reality. This negative association between higher education and religious belief is confirmed by the aforementioned *God in Nederland* project (Bernts, et al., 2006). In some instances, however, the empirical findings reveal no such association. It is quite remarkable, for example, that of all the parents included in Driessen’s sample those affiliated to the re-Reformed Church appear to be the most highly educated (cf. table 3).
'self-segregation'. In terms of the aforementioned typology of religious organisations this would make these communities more like sects. Sects are small, religious communities of chosen or elected members, who identify completely with the religious group and rather uncritically accept its religious truth claims. In addition sects are marked by a degree of 'ethical radicalism' that puts their members in opposition to various widely accepted values and norms in their socio-cultural environment (Van der Ven, 1993, p. 24). In their partial opposition to mainstream culture, sects thus display traits of what Kelley (1972, p. 84) calls a 'strong' religion in contrast to the 'weak' religion of denominations. Consequently sects, because of their strong cohesion, high levels of commitment, purified belief, clear-cut values and norms and accompanying lifestyles, also have great social significance for their members. And although these aspects make sects attractive to certain people, the extent of their membership is by nature limited, since unlimited growth would turn a sect into just another denomination (Bruce, 2002, pp. 22-25).

Admittedly this account of the upward trend displayed by the category 'other Christian' is highly speculative. It is only supposed to show that, like the growth of Islam, the growth of this category may also be explained in terms of the social significance religion may have for its adherents. As my interpretation of Driessen’s findings indicates, the social position of Muslims in Dutch society makes Islam a church form of religion with specific social functions. It acts as a strong identity marker, supports social cohesion among Muslims and provides traditional family values. By the same token, if those who identify themselves as ‘other Christian’ can justifiably be considered members of sectarian religious groups, one could argue that their self-chosen, partial isolation from the dominant Dutch culture means that these ‘other Christians’ experience strong social support from and solidarity with their fellow believers. This helps them to live the life they choose to live in accordance with their religious principles, no matter how strange certain elements of this lifestyle may look to non-members.

4 Although sects keep aloof from the dominant culture, they are never completely alienated from their cultural environment. With reference to the growing popularity of Evangelical and Pentecostal communities in the United States, Wolfe (2006) shows that these religious communities conform to core values of American culture like individualism and democracy. This is evident, for instance, in their emphasis on individual religious experience of faith and their congregational nature.

5 A ‘weak’ religion, according to Kelley (1972, p. 82) is characterised by relativism (recognition that nobody has a monopoly on truth), diversity (appreciation of individual differences) and dialogue (active exchange of differing ideas).
Conclusion: the Rise of Vicarious and Ethnic Religion

To conclude my reflections on Driessen’s findings I give a more general interpretation of the trends in religious affiliation that he describes. In line with much of the foregoing discussion I will try to show that the most striking trends Driessen reports — the declining membership of mainstream Christian denominations and the increasing number of Muslims — can be seen as part of a religious transformation in the direction of vicarious and ethnic religion currently taking place in several West European societies.

Crucial to this interpretation is that I would define the present religious situation in the Netherlands as belonging without believing. This is an inversion of the dictum ‘believing without belonging’, introduced by Davie (2002, p. 5) to describe religious developments in contemporary Europe. With this expression Davie makes the point that although adherence to traditional religious beliefs, ritual participation, religious affiliation and the like may well be declining, religious belief as such by and large persists. More particularly, de-institutionalisation of religion implies not so much the end of faith but its individualisation. That is to say, according to Davie, it results in the emergence of personal, heterogeneous and de-traditionalised religious belief. To make her case Davie cites the European values study, which indeed shows that in many West European countries the extent of religious belief greatly surpasses frequency of church attendance, suggesting that institutional religiosity and personal belief do not necessarily coincide. But does the expression ‘believing without belonging’ also apply to the trends described by Driessen? I tend to think not.

To begin with, very recently this expression has been partly refuted by the God in Nederland project (Bernts, Dekker & De Hart, 2007, pp. 39-68; also see section 2). Although in 2006 there were still more people who considered themselves religious rather than church members, the percentage of the Dutch population that calls itself religious has clearly dropped for the first time in forty years. And if we, like the researchers in the God in Nederland project, define religious belief in terms of belief in God, the association between religious belief and church membership again appears to be very strong. Of course, this is probably due to the use of the two-step question in the God in Nederland project. As noted in the second section, the two-step question tends to push marginal church members into the non-affiliated category, which automatically strengthens the association between religious belief and church membership.

But if this is true, the association between religious belief and church membership may be weakened if the one-step question is used, which could be the case, I believe, with Driessen’s findings. Notwithstanding his finding that the membership of mainstream Christian denominations is declining, it is still
relatively high, especially in view of the respondents’ fairly youthful average age of approximately 36 years. This brings us back to a question posed in the second section: what does affiliation actually mean in Driessen’s study? In my view the trends in religious affiliation indicate not so much the religious involvement of respondents in mainstream Christian denominations, and maybe in the Muslim community as well, but rather their ‘cultural’ belonging. Because Driessen’s study provides no additional information about the respondents’ religious beliefs and practices, this remains an assumption. But if proven correct and trends in religious affiliation to some extent reflect respondents’ ‘cultural’ belonging to their religious traditions, Davie’s expression has to be inverted and at least part of the religious situation in the Netherlands should be described as belonging without believing.

But why would such nominal or cultural belonging to a religious tradition still be important to people? The answer may lie in the phenomena known as vicarious and ethnic religion. The notion of vicarious religion also features in Davie’s work, mainly to explain that a society completely devoid of religion cannot actually exist. Drawing largely on the work of Hervieu-Léger (2000), she understands religion as a kind of collective memory (tradition), which prevents society from disintegrating by depicting an image of a shared past, present and future. A collective memory — and that is typical of religion (Hervieu-Léger, 2000, pp. 97-100; 124-127) — that transcends history, is vested with authority and thus confers a collective identity on the members of a community. However, modern people typically do not constantly celebrate and actualise this shared identity. Instead it is done on their behalf, that is vicariously, by the churches. And according to Davie this has become one of the most important functions of churches in Europe, evidenced by the still considerable need among European populations for religious ceremonies to mark birth, marriage and death, as well as the importance widely attached to religious services in times of national crisis or to commemorate the death of public figures (Davie, 2000, pp. 71-81; 2002, p. 19).6 Although people may not be actively involved in church life, they may still be convinced that the church fulfils an important function in making sense of individual and collective misfortune and strengthening solidarity in times of crisis.7 From this

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6 As striking examples Davie discusses the funerals of former French president François Mitterrand, an outspoken advocate of the French principle of the secular society, laïcité, who was nevertheless buried according to Catholic rites, and Princess Diana, whose death triggered massive spontaneous congregations in church buildings all over Britain.

7 A function which is recognised by the majority of the Dutch population. The aforementioned God in Nederland project not only reveals a decline in religious affiliation, but also shows
perspective I consider the fact that a declining but still substantial number of young parents claim to be affiliated to one of the mainstream Christian denominations to be an instance of vicarious religion. That is to say, these parents probably still nominally support the churches for the sake of rituals enacted on their behalf on special occasions.

In similar fashion the increase in the number of Muslims may point to a trend towards ethnic religion. This means that Muslims use Islam as a means of ethnic identification to compensate for the loss of collective identity, which may be threatened by, for instance, Western society with its emphasis on individualism and egalitarianism (Hervieu-Léger, 2000, pp. 157-162). Hence the growing identification with Islam, one of the trends described by Driessen, may actually reflect a process of ethno-cultural rather than religious identification, an idea supported by some of the findings of Phalet and Haker (2004) among Turkish and Moroccan Muslims in the Netherlands. Their research into the religious identification and practices of Turkish and Moroccan Muslims between 1998 and 2002 reveals that although ritual participation is declining among these ethnic groups, especially members of the second generation, they continue to identify themselves as Muslim. Thus, Phalet and Haker (2004, p. 15) infer, for younger Turks and Moroccans there is a growing difference between identifying oneself as Muslim and participating in religious practices. For these younger Turks and Moroccans Islam functions mainly as an identity marker, which broadly accords with my description of the religious situation in the Netherlands as belonging without believing.

In short, the final thesis of my reflections is that the trends described by Driessen in fact illustrate the rise of vicarious and ethnic religion in the Netherlands. I emphasise that this is just a hypothesis that needs to be supported by further research. As I have already mentioned several times, in many ways Driessen's findings are just too limited to corroborate such inferences. That would require a far more differentiated study than simply inquiring after respondents’ religious affiliation. Still, Driessen convincingly demonstrates that even a limited, modest study of religious trends can already be of great value.
References


