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Religion, Politics and Modern Culture in Interwar Amsterdam.

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Abstract

According to the statistics, the Dutch capital Amsterdam was becoming ever more secular during the interwar years (1918-1940). This article, however, argues that religion in Amsterdam continued to have a big impact on urban government and society. During the interwar years social and political debates about modernisation, and the emergence of mass entertainment in particular, were strongly influenced by religious ideas, norms and values: Amsterdam's public sphere was still charged with religion.

For long, our understanding of the role of religion in the 'modern city' has been obscured by the equation of urbanisation with secularisation.¹ A strong narrative of urban religious decline has hidden from view the way in which religion has been (re)shaped and (re)framed within the modern city.² This misconception follows from the equation of the meta-narrative of modernisation with secularisation.³ According to this line of thought modernisation, defined as rapid, fundamental changes like industrialisation and urbanisation which uprooted social relations, caused religious decline. From the late nineteenth century onwards the Western world is said to have become more secular: less people went to church and the number of non-believers grew. In particular the urban areas of Europe were said to have experienced a religious crisis, caused by the disruption of traditional social relations. This orthodox interpretation has been criticised by revisionists who have argued that nineteenth century cities were 'the most dynamic centres of religious activism' which was aimed at countering the secular trend.⁴ A third line of interpretation, as argued by Hugh McLeod, has moved away from the dominant discourse of religious growth and decline and instead focuses on religious conflict as a means to explain 'the change from the relatively homogeneous religious cultures which characterised the eighteenth-century city, to the polarised religious world of the nineteenth-century city, to the relatively fragmented religious structure of cities in the later twentieth century'.⁵

Both the – implicit – notion of succeeding stages or regimes and the process of polarisation are also to be found in the work of the historian of Dutch religion Peter van Rooden. In his seminal study *Religieuze regimes*, Van Rooden questions the dominant orthodox interpretation of Dutch religious history and argues that the history of Dutch Christianity can instead be best understood by discriminating between different 'regimes' of Christendom which have succeeded each other.⁶ One of the

¹ The author would like to thank Paul van Trigt and Matthijs Wieldraaijer for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² Robert A. Orsi ed., *Gods of the city. Religion and the American urban landscape* (Bloomington, 1999) ix, 42; Hugh McLeod ed., *European religion in the age of great cities, 1830-1930* (London and New York, 1995) 9-10.

³ For a short international overview of the literature on secularisation and modernisation see: Benjamin Ziemann, 'Säkularisierung, Konfessionalisierung, Organisationsbildung. Dimensionen der Sozialgeschichte der Religion im langen 19. Jahrhundert', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 47 (2007) 485-508, there 491-492.

⁴ McLeod, *European religion*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

⁶ Peter van Rooden, *Religieuze regimes. Over godsdienst en maatschappij in Nederland 1570-1990* (Amsterdam 1996); *Ibid.*, 'Long-term religious developments in the Netherlands, c. 1750-2000', Hugh

regime changes occurred in the last quarter of the nineteenth century when the Protestant Nation, a religious regime dominated by liberal-protestant and elitist views on state and society, was substituted for the pillarised society. In the case of the Netherlands pillarisation refers to the division of society into four different segments: a Protestant, Catholic, social democratic and liberal or neutral pillar, each with their own network of organisations and associations, which encompassed almost every field of social, political and cultural life. Despite the collapse of the religious ‘unity’ of the Protestant Nation and the emergence of two secular pillars, within Dutch pillarised society religious identities were ever present. As Van Rooden has argued ‘religious difference came to lie at the heart of personal identity and social organization’.⁷ Moreover, thanks to the wide-ranging networks of pillarised organisations, which included almost all layers of society, religious norms and values could be transported to all layers of society and into the farthest corners of the country. The pillars in fact acted as ‘modernizing forces’ in many ways: they integrated their adherents into larger (imagined) communities and used modern communication techniques like mass open air meetings and the radio to inform and discipline them.⁸ In the case of Dutch nineteenth and early twentieth century religious history, therefore, the equation of modernisation with secularisation, defined as ‘the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance’, does not hold true.⁹

Nonetheless, in Dutch society, and particularly in the big cities, from the last quarter of the nineteenth century onwards, the fear for religious decline and the modernisation of society were highly-debated issues among church leaders, ‘sociologists’ and representatives of pillarised organisations. In general, modernisation in this case referred to a broad range of developments which were said to affect the foundations of state and society, like the emergence of mass movements, the evolution of mass media, technological innovations, industrialisation and urbanisation. In the Netherlands, like anywhere else in the Western world, modernisation was also associated with fears for moral degeneration. As Robert Orsi has shown for the American case, religious organisations came up with different solutions in order to contain the dangers of the city, like Sunday schools, revival rhetoric and pastoralisation campaigns.¹⁰ In the Netherlands, too, socio-religious organisations were well aware of the impact of ‘modernity’. A whole range of social issues appeared on their agendas in order to meet the challenges posed by modernisation: social welfare, housing, hygiene and morality, to name but a few.¹¹

At first, up until the end of the nineteenth century, most of these – predominantly liberal-protestant and elitist – organisations in the Netherlands were based on rather patronising views on the moral backwardness of ordinary citizens. According to them, trying to *impose* the bourgeois’ moral framework on the working

McLeod and Werner Ustorf eds., *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000* (Cambridge, 2003) 113-129, there 113; Peter van Rooden, ‘Secularization, dechristianization and rechristianization in the Netherlands’ in: Hartmut Lehmann ed., *Säkularisierung, Dechristianisierung, Rechristianisierung im neuzeitlichen Europa* (Göttingen, 1997) 131-153.

⁷ Van Rooden, ‘Secularization in the Netherlands’, *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 11 (1998) 34-41, there 38.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹ Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in secular society* (Harmondsworth, 1966) 14.

¹⁰ Orsi, *Gods of the city*, 19; see also: Neil M. Maher, *Nature’s New Deal. The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (New York, 2008) 31-32 and McLeod, *European religion*, 8.

¹¹ Dirk Jan Wolffram, *Vrij van wat neerdrukt en beklemmt. Staat, gemeenschap en sociale politiek (1870-1918)* (Amsterdam, 2003).

class would be attempting the impossible, whereas the government could only try to *suppress* existing moral excesses by law.¹² In the last quarter of the century these liberal-protestant organisations, however, were gradually replaced by a more diverse set of organisations linked to the four pillars in Dutch society.¹³ As recent research has shown, pillarised organisations tried to adapt to and control the force of modernisation;¹⁴ they were engaged in setting up relief works and provided for ‘moral stewardship’ in times of rapid urban change. The erstwhile dominant repressive approach was now accompanied by more constructivist views on enhancing public morals. Members of one of the several anti-prostitution leagues which were established in the 1880s and 90s for instance posted in the vicinity of brothels trying to talk potential visitors out of entering.¹⁵ The emergence of such new religious relief organisations enhanced the cities’ religious infrastructure and enforced the involvement of churches in urban life.¹⁶ At the turn of the century the Netherlands, therefore, did not witness a process of secularization. On the contrary: religion was ever present. Despite fears for an ever-growing apostasy, a decline in church attendance and the emergence of a secular labour movement, in the early twentieth century religion continued to exert influence on Dutch society. This article will demonstrate this by focusing on the public and political debate about the emergence of a modern, mass entertainment culture.

Despite the existence of different and distinct pillars, each with their own views on politics, religion and society, this article will show that in the early decades of the twentieth century the discourse on the deterioration of morals was dominated by Christian-based norms and values, like it had been in the nineteenth century Protestant Nation, albeit that those norms and values were now up for debate.¹⁷ Despite concerns about secularisation, religion – and Christendom more in particular – was still a fundamental characteristic of Dutch society, also and – as this article will show – *particularly* in the big city, where socio-religious organisations, political parties and policy makers were very much engaged in the moral quality of modern urban life. This article sets out to explain and exemplify this engagement on the basis of a case study of Amsterdam during the interwar years which focuses on the reception of specific elements of modern culture that aroused fears for moral degeneration, like the emergence of a new entertainment culture around dance halls, movie theatres and jazz clubs. It will be demonstrated that the public and political debate on modernity in Amsterdam was dominated by religious ideas, norms and values. By focusing on *debates* this article follows McLeod’s earlier-mentioned ‘third

¹² Henk te Velde, *Gemeenschapszin en plichtsbefef. Liberalisme en nationalisme in Nederland, 1870-1918* (Groningen, 1992) 212-215; Peter van Rooden, 'Oral history en het vreemde sterven van het Nederlandse christendom', *BMGN / Low Countries Historical Review* 119 (2004) 524-551, there 546-547.

¹³ Rooden, *Religieuze regimes*, 147-199.

¹⁴ Madelon de Keizer, 'Inleiding' in: Madelon de Keizer and Ismee Tames eds., *Moderniteit. Modernisme en massacultuur in Nederland, 1914-1940. Jaarboek van het Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie* 15 (Zutphen, 2004) 9-44, there, 34-39; see also: Erik Sengers, "'Because we are Catholic, we are modern". The adaptation of Dutch Catholicism to modern Dutch society 1920-1960', *Bijdragen. International Journal in Philosophy and Theology* 67 (2006) 23-41.

¹⁵ J.N. van Munster, *Met zegen be kroond: grepen uit de geschiedenis van veertig jaren der Nederlandsche Middernacht-Zending-Vereeniging* (Amsterdam, 1929).

¹⁶ Orsi, *Gods of the city*, 24-25.

¹⁷ Van Rooden, 'Oral history', 535-536; S. Stuurman, *Verzuiling, kapitalisme en patriarchaat. Aspecten van de ontwikkeling van de moderne staat in Nederland* (Nijmegen, 1983) 222-224, 233-234; Pieter Koenders, *Tussen christelijk réveil en seksuele revolutie. Bestrijding van zedeloosheid in Nederland, met nadruk op de repressie van homoseksualiteit* (Amsterdam, 1996) 137, 140-143;

way of looking at the religious development of European cities in the nineteenth and early twentieth century'.¹⁸

For two reasons, this contribution explicitly takes into account the political perspective. First, in Amsterdam politics had a lot to do with religion: the city was governed by an Orthodox-Protestant mayor and about one third of the city councillors belonged to one of the Christian political parties. Second, the emergence of a modern entertainment culture was an explicitly political issue, since it affected existing views on and regulations regarding the public order and norms and values in society. The first section of this article deals with religious life in Amsterdam in the first decades of the twentieth century. Amsterdam's political life will be presented in section two. Section three discusses the public debate on modern culture. Finally, section four builds on the previous ones to draw some conclusions on the role of religion in early twentieth century Dutch society.

I

Since the last decade, religion has re-emerged as a dominant social and political issue in Amsterdam and the Netherlands as a whole. Right now, the Islamic community is the largest religious denomination in Amsterdam. As shown in table 1, when asked what religion they felt affinity for, in 2007 twelve percent of the Amsterdam population mentioned the Islam, followed by Roman Catholicism with nine percent.¹⁹ The influence and presence of the Islam in Amsterdam has put under pressure one of the most important self-ascribed virtues of the city: Amsterdam's tolerance towards people with a 'different' ethnic or religious background. Debates centre on the role of the Islam in public life: the construction of mosques, civil servants who wear head scarves, male representatives of Islamic organisations who refuse to shake hands with women, the high intolerance of homosexuality among Islamic youth and so on.²⁰

The current struggle with the Islam in Amsterdam has to be seen against the background of the marginalisation of religion as a socio-political issue after the 1960s. In many aspects, this decade marked a radical shift in Amsterdam history. On the political scene the old elites disappeared or marginalised and were replaced by a new, young generation of progressive politicians. On the social level, Amsterdam started to build on its reputation as the libertine and hedonist capital of Europe.²¹ Moreover, Amsterdam turned out to be the centre of most of the protest movements that emerged in the Netherlands in the 1960s and 70s: the feminist movement, different youth movements and the squatter movement.²² According to Van Rooden the Dutch Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, which first emerged in Amsterdam, marked a 'regime shift': the 'highly patriarchal and ascetic' Orthodox Protestant and Roman Catholic religious movements dissolved when their politics of 'strict morals,

¹⁸ McLeod, *European religion*, 23.

¹⁹ *De Amsterdamse burgermonitor 2007*. Municipality of Amsterdam, Bureau of Research and Statistics. See: http://www.os.amsterdam.nl/pdf/2007_burgermonitor_verwantschap_religie.pdf.

²⁰ See for instance: Marcel Maussen, *Ruimte voor de islam? Stedelijk beleid, voorzieningen, organisaties* (Apeldoorn, 2006).

²¹ J.C. Kennedy, *Building new Babylon, Cultural change in the Netherlands during the 1960s* (Ann Arbor, 1995), translated in Dutch: *Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw. Nederland in de jaren zestig* (Amsterdam, 1995).

²² P. de Rooy ed., *Geschiedenis van Amsterdam IV, Tweestrijd om de hoofdstad, 1900-2000* (Amsterdam, 2007) passim.

traditional gender roles and patriarchal forms of authority' were undermined.²³ As will be shown in section three, up until the 1960s their strict morals had been at the basis of the Dutch legal moral framework.

Whereas the secularisation of the Dutch moral framework took effect after the Cultural Revolution, other secular trends had already been in progress. In the early twentieth century Orthodox Protestants in Amsterdam discussed efforts to raise church attendance.²⁴ Moreover, the ten-yearly censuses showed an ever growing number of people who reported not to belong to one of the religious denominations. Table 2 shows that in 1920 slightly more than 21% of the people of Amsterdam did not belong to a church. This percentage had almost doubled in eleven years time, predominantly at the cost of the Dutch Reformed Church, which, however, remained the largest denomination in Amsterdam with almost 30% of the population as a registered member.²⁵ The Catholics came in second followed by the Sephardic and Ashkenazim Israelites. The decline in church membership was rather evenly spread across the city, albeit that the working class districts harbored the highest percentage of apostates.²⁶ These percentages, however, might lead to a distorted picture. First of all, the Roman Catholics managed to cover up the apostasy by an ever continuing flow of demographical growth.²⁷ Second, membership of a denomination sheds no light on individual religious belief or the social significance of religion in general.²⁸ Finally, the lack of decent statistical information for the nineteenth century makes it hard to draw conclusions on religious developments like church attendance or membership over time.

In any case, during the interwar years religion still profoundly influenced public and political life in Amsterdam in several ways. In the 1920s religion was brought into public space more and more: on the streets, in marketplaces, parks and public gardens, where soapbox preachers held their sermons and religious brochures and pamphlets were dispersed and sold. The Catholics in particular, lost their fear of publicly expressing their religious beliefs. For long, Catholics in the Netherlands had been looked upon as second-class citizens, because they deviated from the Protestant norm. In the first half of the nineteenth century, when the Netherlands entered a gradual process of nation building, in spite of the separation of church and state Dutch identity had been based on Protestant norms and values.²⁹ In the second half of the century, Catholic self-confidence went up, boosted by the reintroduction of the Episcopal hierarchy in 1853. Towards the end of the century, with the birth of pillarisation, the Protestant Nation was progressively dismantled. In 1888 a coalition government of Orthodox Protestants and Catholics took office. It marked the existence of a new divide in Dutch politics and society: between believers and

²³ Van Rooden, 'Long-term religious developments', 123; cf. Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain. Understanding secularization 1800-2000* (London and New York, 2003) passim.

²⁴ Wouter P. Beekers and Rolf E. van der Woude, *Niet bij steen alleen. Patrimonium Amsterdam: van sociale vereniging tot sociale onderneming 1876-2003* (Hilversum, 2008) 91; see also Jakob Pieter Kruijt, *De onkerkelijkheid in Nederland, haar verbreiding en oorzaken. Proeve eener sociografische verklaring* (Groningen, s.a.) 51-52.

²⁵ *De resultaten der volks- en beroepstelling van 31 december 1920 voor Amsterdam zonder en met het op 1 januari 1921 geannexeerde gebied. Deel 1. De volkstelling.* (Amsterdam, 1924) 26-27; R.L. Schuurisma, *Jaren van opgang. Nederland 1900-1930* (Amsterdam, 2000) 121.

²⁶ Kruijt, *De onkerkelijkheid*, 266 (table).

²⁷ W.H. Vermooten, *Hervormd Amsterdam en zijn maatschappelijke achtergrond in de 19e en 20e eeuw* (The Hague, 1960) 51-53.

²⁸ Steve Bruce, *God is dead. Secularization in the West* (Oxford 2002).

²⁹ Van Rooden, 'Long-term religious developments', 116.

unbelievers, better known as the Antithesis. The emancipation of Dutch Catholics as true patriots, however, turned out to be a long-winded process. It took until 1918 before the Catholic political party, since long the biggest confessional party in the Netherlands, were confident enough to claim the prime ministership. In Amsterdam, only after the turn of the century the Catholics dared to take to the streets. The annual procession to commemorate the 'Miracle of Amsterdam' eventually drew an ever growing number of participants: some sixty thousand people at the end of the 1930s. In 1924 thousands of Catholics assembled in Amsterdam for the International Eucharistic Conference.³⁰ A final example of Catholic self confidence was the missionary zeal of the Catholic Evidence Guild which emerged on the streets of the city in the 1920s. According to the Guild many members of the working class might be fed up with the church, but had not yet totally lost their faith. They were still to be saved, albeit that the church had to find new ways to do so, rather than the traditional, dogmatic and intellectual approach. The Guild for instance used street preachers from a humble background who spoke the language of the working class.³¹ The Guild was one of the many new religious organisations which were founded during the interwar years and were aimed at making converts or at least tried to keep the flock together with the use of street preachers, by canvassing with brochures, or through the organisation of social activities.³²

Furthermore, the public appearance of religion was enforced through the enhancement of the religious infrastructure of the city. Thanks to the (joined) efforts of local government, housing corporations and private building companies house-building boomed in the 1920s. Amsterdam expanded in all directions. The city's new residential areas would turn out to be rather religiously and politically segregated. Roman Catholic, Orthodox-Protestant, social democratic and neutral housing corporations each built their own housing blocks which formed a community in itself.³³ The blocks often incorporated a club building designated for activities related to the pillar in question: a meeting place for the Catholic billiard club, a conference room for the Catholic labour union and so on. Eventually some of the new districts clearly bore the stamp of their dominant political or religious denomination, like communist Amsterdam North-Side, the Orthodox-Protestant Hugo de Groot-district and the 'red and jewish' Transvaal-district.³⁴ The suburbanisation of the city was paralleled by a boom in church building in the new neighbourhoods, while at the same time churches in the old city centre, which slowly depopulated, had to close their doors. Within a couple of years the Dutch Reformed Church opened three new churches across the city and closed down the old Zuiderkerk.³⁵

³⁰ De Rooy, *Geschiedenis van Amsterdam* IV, 61-62 and 136-137.

³¹ Jos. Mineur, 'De steen door de ruit', *Roeping* 5 (1926-1927) 429-430, there 429; Erna Treurniet, 'Diaconie in crisistijd' in: C. Augustijn ed., *Gereformeerd Amsterdam sedert 1835* (Kampen, 1989) 100-107, there 106.

³² Ada G. Endevelde and Wies J. Houweling, 'Op Gereformeerden Grondslag. Jeugdverenigingen in de jaren twintig' in: Augustijn, *Gereformeerd Amsterdam*, 77-88, there 77, 82-85.

³³ Beekers and Van der Woude, *Niet bij steen alleen*.

³⁴ P-P. de Baar, 'Linkse en rechtse buurten', *Ons Amsterdam* 55 (2003) 84-89.

³⁵ H.C. Endedijk, *De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland I, 1892-1936* (Kampen, 1990) 228; S. Duparc, 'Kroniek 1929', *Jaarboek Amstelodamum* 27 (1930) 332, 337; Guido Hoogewoud, 'De geschakeerde stad. De infrastructuur van het geloofsleven' in: Martha Bakker e.d., *Amsterdam in de Tweede Gouden Eeuw* (Bussum, 2000) 209-236; Guido Hoogewoud, 'Kerkbouw als sociaal-cultuurpolitiek fenomeen. Religieuze bouwactiviteiten in Amsterdam tussen 1945 en 1993' in: J.D. Snel et al. ed., *En God bleef toch in Mokum. Amsterdamse kerkgeschiedenis in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw* (Delft, 2000) 519-553, aldaar 521-522.

Finally, religion even made it to the newspapers headlines. In 1926 a ‘modern’ interpretation of Gen. 3 – the speaking serpent – led to the expulsion of the Orthodox-Protestant minister J.G. Geelkerken who was based in the Amsterdam Park Church. Geelkerken was supported by his church council, but the synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands did not tolerate his behavior. Geelkerken’s expulsion caused a schism within the Reformed Churches. The first sermons of Geelkerken after his expulsion were closely watched by the police, who guarded the entrance of the Park Church to prevent public unrest.³⁶ In essence, the expulsion of Geelkerken was caused by different views within the Reformed Churches on the relationship between modernisation and religion. Geelkerken has been typified as the representative of the ‘youth’ within the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands: in this case ‘youth’ was directly linked with modern religious views.³⁷ Geelkerken’s ‘modernist’ religious ideas indeed particularly appealed to (young) intellectuals of the post war generation.³⁸ Apart from this intra-religious conflict, Amsterdam also witnessed clashes between different religious groups. In the 1920s the activities of the Catholic Evidence Guild caused public unrest. The members of the Guild were well-known for their rather provocative public sermons in which Protestants, socialists and communists were abused. On many occasions the police was forced to intervene when members of the Guild, who preached their sermons in parks and public gardens in the vicinity of working class neighborhoods, were besieged by angry opponents.³⁹ The chief of police decided to ban the Guild from the public parks and gardens in Amsterdam. The religious bull fights, however, did not cease and the mayor therefore decided to ban all street preachers from the streets of Amsterdam for one year.⁴⁰ All in all, where statistical information might lead us to the conclusion that religion gradually disappeared from Dutch society, developments in Amsterdam alone point to the contrary.

II

On a political level Amsterdam had been a predominantly liberal city right from the introduction of local democracy in 1851. Up until the end of the First World War, Amsterdam was governed by liberal mayors. Moreover, liberal governors dominated the board of mayor and aldermen. Most of this liberal elite belonged to the predominantly moderate Dutch Reformed Church, which was, as shown in the first section, the most dominant religious denomination in Amsterdam up until the 1920s. Looking at the religious background of the councillors, throughout the nineteenth century the composition of the city council did not reflect the religious relations in Amsterdam; Catholics in particular were under- and Dutch Reformed

³⁶ Endedijk, *De Gereformeerde Kerken*, 196, 199.

³⁷ Ibid., 199; J. Peters and O. Schreuder, *Katholiek en protestant. Een historisch en contemporain onderzoek naar confessionele culturen* (Nijmegen, 1987) 110.

³⁸ D.Th. Kuiper, 'Gefnuikte vernieuwing. De "beweging der jongeren" in de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland in de periode 1910-1930' in: J. de Bruijn, J.G.M. de Bruijn and G.J. Schutte eds., *Tussen observatie en participatie. Twee eeuwen gereformeerde en antirevolutionaire wereld in ontwikkelingsperspectief. Verzamelde opstellen* (Hilversum, 2002) 125-152, there 142; Ben van Kaam, *Parade der mannenbroeders. Flitsen uit het protestantse leven in Nederland in de jaren 1918-1938* (Wageningen, 1965) 96-97.

³⁹ B. Voets, 'De klare waarheid' in: Herman Pijfers ed., *De klare waarheid en andere herinneringen aan het katholieke verleden* (Nijmegen, 2001) 129-145, there 130-131; ACA, General Affairs Archive (5181), inv. nr. 4258, no. 3719.

⁴⁰ Voets, 'De klare waarheid', 133; ACA, 5181, inv. nr. 4258, no. 3719.

overrepresented. The situation, however, changed at the turn of the century, when the liberal political dominance came under pressure from the confessional political parties and the social democrats who managed to mobilise a large part of the ‘new electorate’: citizens who acquired the right to vote thanks to a lowering of the census. As shown in table 3, this development was reflected in the religious composition of the council. The loss of Dutch Reformed dominance went hand in hand with the rise of the number of Catholic and Jewish councillors; the latter predominantly belonged to either the social-democratic or the communist party. Moreover, the number of nonbelievers – councillors who stated not to belong to one of the religious denominations – increased from 6.4 percent in 1899 to 24.4 percent of the city council members in 1914. This percentage would have been even higher when one takes into account the fact that many of the Jewish councillors felt no connection with the Jewish religion.⁴¹

Meanwhile, however, the number of councillors belonging to a confessional political party reached an all time high. As shown in table 4, both the left-wing political parties and the confessional parties were the victors of the first post war elections in 1919. They gained most from recent changes in the Electoral Law, like the introduction of proportional representation (1917) and general suffrage (1919), which permanently ended the liberal dominance in Amsterdam. In a political sense, the ‘liberal city’ would be replaced by an interesting, and sometimes fiery mix of social-democratic, confessional and, to a lesser extent liberal politics and policies. Looking at the distribution of seats in the city council the confessional political influence even reached its peak in the 1920s with one third of the councillors belonging to one of three confessional political parties: the Orthodox Protestant ARP, the Roman Catholic Party and the predominantly Dutch-Reformed CHU. Despite their religious differences these parties cooperated pretty well; they for instance established their own club of confessional council members which met a couple of times per year.

The confessional wing’s figure heads were councillor Carl Romme and mayor Willem de Vlucht. Romme was a Catholic lawyer who headed the Catholic party in the city council and emerged as the prime opponent of the social democratic governors of the city. He was a Neo-Thomist who criticised the existing liberal democratic order and urged for a Christian corporatist state. Romme tried to implement some of his corporatist ideas in Amsterdam, but almost without any effect.⁴² De Vlucht was an Orthodox Protestant former alderman who was appointed to the office of mayor by the Queen in 1921. Like Romme, De Vlucht had established himself in Amsterdam local politics as an opponent of social democratic municipal policy. Before his mayorship, former contractor De Vlucht had been responsible for the city’s Public Works Department.⁴³ At first, De Vlucht’s religious background did not appear to exert much influence on his political and administrative outlook. His electoral campaigns lacked any religious undertone: De Vlucht presented himself as a self-made man and a champion of private enterprise.⁴⁴ During his mayorship, however, the apparent effect of his religious beliefs on his public policy would cause disturbance.

⁴¹ Peter Hofland, *Leden van de raad. De Amsterdamse gemeenteraad 1814-1941* (Amsterdam, 1998) 87-91.

⁴² Stefan Couperus, *De Machinerie van de Stad. Stadsbestuur als idee en praktijk, Nederland en Amsterdam 1900-1940* (Dissertation Groningen University: Amsterdam, 2009) chapter 10 (*in press*).

⁴³ Harm Kaal, ‘Een ondernemende burgemeester: Willem de Vlucht (1872-1945)’ in: Rolf van der Woude and Paul Werkman eds., *Wie in de politiek gaat, is weg?* (Hilversum, 2009) *in press*.

⁴⁴ Gert van Klinken, *Actieve burgers. Nederlanders en hun politieke partijen 1870-1918* (Amsterdam, 2003) 473, 498.

De Vlugt's appointment as mayor of Amsterdam was not undisputed. First of all, he represented one of the smallest political parties in Amsterdam; in its heyday the Orthodox Protestant party ARP (Antirevolutionary Party) won only four out of the 45 seats in the city council. Moreover, his political opponents, the social democrats and the old liberal elite in particular, feared that the mayor might try to impose his religious views on the city. Together with 5.1 percent of the Amsterdam population, De Vlugt was a member of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, a rather small and orthodox denomination. According to a liberal newspaper, in Amsterdam, more than in any other city in the Netherlands, a wide gap existed between the Orthodox Protestant faith and the views and beliefs of the citizenry in general. During his mayorship De Vlugt, nonetheless, managed to gain popular support. Amsterdam newspapers of all denominations repeatedly praised his indefatigable dedication, impartial stance, humour and debating technique, hailing him as an 'Amsterdammer' in the true sense of the word. Apparently, De Vlugt had managed to find the right mix between his own, personal, political and religious background and the traditions and expectations surrounding his office. On official, public occasions De Vlugt for instance used the old customs and traditions surrounding his office as a way to transcend his religious and partisan background and become a mayor of all citizens of Amsterdam.⁴⁵ As far as politics was concerned, De Vlugt certainly did not hesitate to express his religious beliefs in public, as will be illustrated in the next section.

III

In the 1920s big cities like Amsterdam experienced the emergence of a 'modern' mass entertainment culture. An ever-growing amount of movie theatres, the introduction of new and highly-debated dance styles like the Shimmy and Charleston and indecent revues presented new challenges and choices. Concern about the immoral character of certain elements of modern culture, especially concerning their influence on the youth, was widespread. City councils debated the admissibility of dancing in public bars and restaurants and of plays and revues with a particular sexual undercurrent. As far as the moral order was concerned, members of all political parties to some extent contested the influence of certain elements of modern culture on adolescents in particular. Dissension, however, arose on the issue of governmental interference: to what extent could the government be held responsible for regulating and containing the excesses of modern culture? In Amsterdam, Mayor De Vlugt was evidently involved in these debates, because of his formal responsibility to maintain public order and uphold public decency. De Vlugt advocated a strong policy of government censorship. The mayor did not hide the fact that he, at least partially, based his decisions on his Orthodox Protestant faith. De Vlughts rather strict moral policy met with criticism from the city council where communists, some social-democrats and liberals opposed the mayor's alleged efforts to impose his faith on the citizens of Amsterdam.⁴⁶

In order to properly value the debate on modern culture in Amsterdam, the national, political debate on moral issues needs to be explained briefly. As mentioned in the introduction, since the turn of the century the fear for moral decay was omnipresent. With a confessional coalition government in power, Dutch Parliament started discussions on a Public Decency Law, which was proposed by the Catholic

⁴⁵ Kaal, *Het hoofd van de stad*, 47-50.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 105-123.

Minister of Justice E.R.H. Regout in 1911. His bill radiated the widespread fears for moral degeneration caused by pornography, prostitution, contraception propaganda and homosexuality. Although liberals and social democrats criticised the law as a means to impose the Christian faith on the nation as a whole through strict legislation, many agreed on the fact that these affairs posed a threat to society.⁴⁷ It seemed that Regout was right when he stated that Dutch moral standards were evidently dominated by generally endorsed Christian norms and values.⁴⁸ The following years the national government focused on the demoralisation among the youth. In its 1919 report the State Commission for Youth Development concluded that industrialisation, urbanisation and the experiences of the First World War had caused demoralisation. In order to stop this process, the youth needed to be disciplined not just through repressive measures, but in a constructive way. The latter approach was picked up by the pillars: during the interwar years pillarised youth organisations flourished. They provided for a social safety net which had to lure the youth away from the baneful influences of modern culture.⁴⁹ This, however, was not enough according to many administrators and politicians who emphasised the need for tight regulations.

One of the elements of modern culture which roused fears among politicians and social organisations of all denominations was dancing 'in public': in bars, restaurants and the newly-established dance halls. Traditionally dance had been a custom among the Amsterdam elite: asking a lady for a dance – an English waltz for instance – was one of the first steps on the way to a close relationship. These elitist balls, however, were not a public event. The Amsterdam lower class also liked to go to dance, especially during the annual Carnival, at least up until 1875 when the liberal local government decided to abolish the event because of its immoral character; Carnival was equated with alcohol abuse and indecent behavior.⁵⁰ After the First World War dance emerged in a different guise: as an integral part of urban nightlife in which members of all classes were engaged.⁵¹ In Amsterdam, dancing in public, however, had been forbidden for decades, because it posed a threat to public decency.⁵² The director of the Municipal Health Board even expressed his fears for an increase of the number of venereal diseases if dancing in public would be allowed.⁵³

In the Netherlands mayors bore responsibility for dance regulations since the Municipal Law of 1851 had charged them with watching over shows and performance

⁴⁷ Henk te Velde, 'Van grondwet tot grondwet, 1848-1917' in: R. Aerts et al., *Land van kleine gebaren. Een politieke geschiedenis van Nederland 1780-1990* (Amsterdam, 2004) 97-175, there 159-160; Henk te Velde, 'Zedelijkheid als ethiek en seksueel fatsoen. De geschiedenis van een Nederlands begrip' in: Remieg Aerts and Klaas van Berkel eds., *De pijn van Prometheus. Essays over cultuurkritiek en cultuurpessimisme* (Groningen, 1996) 198-218, there 203-205.

⁴⁸ J.W. Noteboom, 'Goede zeden' in: C.W. van der Pot et al. ed., *Nederlandsch bestuursrecht* (Alphen aan den Rijn, 1932) 429-453, there 431.

⁴⁹ Piet de Rooy, *Republiek van rivaliteiten. Nederland sinds 1813* (Amsterdam, 2002) 172-173; ACA, 5181, inv. nr. 4291, no. 811. *De Gong* 13 (1925); see also: Mieke L. Lunenberg, *Geluk door geestelijke groei. De institutionalisering van de jeugdzorg tussen 1919 en het midden van de jaren dertig, uitgewerkt voor Amsterdam* (Zwolle, 1988) 8, 83.

⁵⁰ Remieg Aerts and Piet de Rooy eds., *Geschiedenis van Amsterdam III, Hoofdstad in aanbouw, 1813-1900* (Amsterdam, 2006) 418-420.

⁵¹ Marjet Derks, 'Steps, shimmys en de wulpsche tango. Dansvermaak in het interbellum', *Spiegel Historiae* 26 (1991) 388-396 391; for the American case see: Orsi, *Gods of the city*, 22.

⁵² ACA, 5181, inv.nr. 4173, no. 2488. Letter of the Head of the Municipal Archives Joh.C. Breen to Mayor De Vlucht d.d. 14 November 1923.

⁵³ ACA, 5181, inv.nr. 4102, no. 5571. Letter of H.C. Ringeling to Chief of Police Marcusse d.d. 6 January 1922.

(in Dutch: *vertoningen*) like dance, theatre and film performances.⁵⁴ Where Rotterdam and The Hague, two other major cities in the western part of the Netherlands, harboured several dance halls, initially mayor De Vlucht resisted the pressure from bar and restaurant owners to legalise dancing in public.⁵⁵ De Vlucht's stubborn stance met with fierce resistance; it was held against him by liberal and some social democratic councilors that he was trying to force his religious and moral views on the citizens of Amsterdam. Caricaturists depicted De Vlucht as an old-fashioned puritan with Victorian morals.⁵⁶ According to Orthodox Protestant principles the authorities indeed had to act as an 'instrument of the Common Grace' in their battle against the sinful elements of modern culture.⁵⁷ De Vlucht in turn certainly referred to the fears among confessional groups in Amsterdam for the devastating influence of the new dance styles on morals and sexual behavior. In addition, however, he could also point to the widespread dissatisfaction with the excesses of modern culture among non-confessional groups, like some social democrats who criticised dancing as a symptom of degeneration and preferred their own socialist folk dances.⁵⁸ Eventually, some confessional councilors advised De Vlucht to allow for public dancing in order to be able to control and regulate it. In close consultation with the chief of police De Vlucht handed out dance permits to seven highly reputable places in the city centre.⁵⁹ In this case, local government managed to at least contain an element of modern culture with the support of confessional political parties and with reference to complaints from religious as well as non-religious groups. At the same time, through the government-controlled establishment of dance halls, the local government managed to reconcile modern culture and fears for moral degeneration.

The influence of confessional views on modern urban society was also articulated in the local government's efforts to maintain Sunday rest. Personally, De Vlucht strictly observed the Sunday when he visited an evening performance in the city theatre at Saturday night, De Vlucht always left before midnight.⁶⁰ Legally, 'public attractions', like dance, were only allowed when all religious services were finished. In practice, the Sunday Law, which dated back to 1815, was a dead letter. In the 1920s the liberal mayor of The Hague J.A.N. Patijn urged the national government to adjust the existing regulations to 'the spirit of the age' which, according to Patijn, called for a more flexible approach.⁶¹ In Amsterdam, however, the 'antiquated' Sunday Law was well observed; Amsterdam dance regulations forbade dancing on Sunday, which – again – caused annoyance among bar and restaurant owners. At first, De Vlucht refused to yield to the protests, arguing that a 'large part' of the Amsterdam citizenry wanted the Sunday to be observed, not only confessionals, but also social

⁵⁴ Tjeerd Schiphof, *De vrijheid van het toneel. Een studie naar de juridische beperkingen van de vrijheid van het toneel in Nederland en Engeland in grondwettelijk perspectief* (Amsterdam, 1994) 131-132.

⁵⁵ ACA, 5181, inv. nr. 4173, no. 2488. Memorandum Chief of Police Marcusse, March 1923; Letter of Marcusse to Mayor De Vlucht d.d. 19 December 1921; Letter of Mayor Patijn (The Hague) to Chief of Police Van 't Sant d.d. 18 May 1923; Rotterdam Municipal Archive, NSA/AZ, inv. nr. 4241, no. 17. Letter of Chief of Police Sirks to Mayor P. Droogleever Fortuyn d.d. 31 December 1930.

⁵⁶ *De Telegraaf* 25 July 1923 (evening paper).

⁵⁷ W.J. van der Veen, 'Uitwassen der moderne cultuur', *Anti-Revolutionaire Staatkunde* 14 (1938) 562-591, there 569.

⁵⁸ ACA, Gemeenteblad (*City Council Minutes*) II 1924, 445-466, 12 March 1924.

⁵⁹ Harm Kaal, 'Verderfelijk vermaak. Het film-, toneel- en dansbeleid van de burgemeesters van Amsterdam, Rotterdam en Den Haag tijdens de roaring twenties', *Holland* 37 (2005) 259-277, there 273.

⁶⁰ Richter Roegholt, *Amsterdam in de 20e eeuw I, 1919/1945* (Utrecht and Antwerp, 1976) 50.

⁶¹ Kaal, *Het hoofd van de stad*, 119.

democrats for whom a day of rest was an element of social policy. As mayor of *all* citizens of Amsterdam, De Vlucht said to feel obliged to make a stand for their opinion. Moreover, according to De Vlucht the people who urged for the abolishment of Sunday regulations were primarily motivated by financial gain. At last, De Vlucht had to cave in when a majority of the city council urged him to relax dance regulations and allow for dancing on Sunday afternoon.⁶²

The ‘defeats’ De Vlucht suffered might be interpreted as a defeat for the confessional pillars’ Christian moral framework. In fact, the discussions on modern culture in Amsterdam *catalyzed* a broader political and public debate about the impact of modern culture. When the Amsterdam city council discussed the dance ban, the mayor of The Hague for example decided to tighten up dance regulations. Moreover, the – predominantly confessional – national government stepped forward and established national regulations for specific elements of modern culture. In 1928 a national movie censorship board was created. The first chairman was a social democrat. The following year a national commission started an investigation into the ‘dance question’. One of the members of the commission, which included members of all pillars, was the liberal-oriented Amsterdam chief of police H.J. Versteeg. In its final report the commission stated that dancing was a symptom of moral degeneration which needed to be regulated by the government in order to prevent decay.⁶³ In 1933 the national government indeed issued national dance regulations.⁶⁴ In Amsterdam liberals and social democrats together indeed had the political power to enforce a more ‘relaxed’ *policy* in regard to specific elements of modern culture, yet the *debates* about modern culture both in Amsterdam and on the national level were dominated by a Christian moral framework.

IV

During the interwar years, religion still made itself felt in Amsterdam political and public life. During the nineteenth century a moderate, liberal-protestantism had formed the backbone of Dutch society. With the rise of pillarisation the unity of the Protestant Nation, which in fact had rather been the unity of the liberal elite, broke up into four parts. Pillarisation cleared the way for religious diversity and therefore contributed to an intensified religious life as the discussion of religious activities in Amsterdam has shown. Simultaneously, pillarisation implied the creation and organisation of secular groups, like the social democratic labour movement who identified itself as non-religious. Nonetheless, despite significant differences of opinion regarding religious dogmas and their formal implementation in politics and administration – as manifested for instance in the debate about modern culture – members of all four pillars and Dutch citizens in general observed Christian norms and values. The breaking up of the Protestant Nation therefore did not imply a gradual process of secularisation. On the contrary, as the debate about mass entertainment has shown, religious and secular groups shared fears for the impact of modernisation on the Christian-inspired norms and values of Dutch society. In Amsterdam, De Vlucht’s rather strict moral policy met with criticism from the city council where liberals and left-wing political parties opposed the mayor’s alleged efforts to impose his faith on the citizens of Amsterdam. De Vlucht, however, catered to the fears among many

⁶² Ibid., 120-121.

⁶³ *Rapport der regeerings-commissie inzake het dansvraagstuk* (The Hague, 1931).

⁶⁴ Kees Wouters, *Ongewenschte muziek. De bestrijding van jazz en moderne amusementsmuziek in Duitsland en Nederland 1920-1945* (The Hague, 1999) 20-21.

citizens, confessional and non-confessional, about the effect of modern culture on public morals. By the early 1930s, policy on moral issues would be implemented at the national level by the confessional coalition government, as nationwide regulations concerning movie censorship and dancing were decreed. At the same time, 'modern' norms and values were evaluated, discussed and in some cases assimilated. Some religious (youth) organisations even adopted sports, music, dance and other forms of (modern) entertainment in order to be able to control and monitor potentially risky behaviour.⁶⁵ The government, in turn, both on the local and the national level aimed to regulate specific elements of modern culture in order to prevent moral degeneration. Christian norms and values were at the basis of these regulations and also dominated the public and political debates about modern culture.

Moreover, religion did not simply disappear under the pressure of modernisation, but took a different shape in form and content. Modernisation in fact contributed to countering of the supposed threat of secularisation. A modern phenomenon like mass political movements contributed to the integration of Orthodox-Protestants and Catholics into larger (imagined) communities. In addition, many of the (new) religious movements used elements of the new mass culture like film, radio, cars with loud speakers, well-illustrated brochures, professional propaganda committees and mass meetings to inform, supervise and discipline the religious masses.⁶⁶ Finally, the public religious revival, as manifested for instance in the popularity of Catholic processions, can be interpreted as a 'modern' phenomenon in itself. The emergence and growing presence of public religious activities coincided with developments on the sociopolitical level: the interwar years were the heyday of open air mass meeting of political parties, parades and torch light processions. The urban arena was filled with highly symbolic and spiritual events which appealed to and stirred the imagination of the 'modern urban citizen'.

⁶⁵ Paul Luykx, *Andere katholieken. Opstellen over Nederlandse katholieken in de twintigste eeuw* (Nijmegen, 2000) 228-230.

⁶⁶ Joris van Eijnatten and Fred van Lieburg, *Nederlandse religiegeschiedenis* (Hilversum, 2005) 316.