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9 Religion and watching television

Ruben P. Konig*

In the Netherlands, religion's influence on people's lives and actions is waning, and some reason that television has even replaced it as society's main storyteller. Based on a 2004 telephonic survey among a random sample of the Dutch population ($N = 951$), this study indicates that such may indeed be the case. Religion and television may both be deemed conservative storytellers, but only exposure to television seems to influence a traditional division of household labour. Religion is of no consequence here. Further, religious beliefs appear to have no influence on people's television programme genre preferences, and do not correlate to domineering behaviour with respect to television programme selection.

9.1 Introduction

People do not live in the real world. They live in a world that they perceive as the real world. They continuously and subjectively construct this world for themselves, in accordance with their stock of knowledge and in an everlasting process of negotiation with other people—whether these other people are actually present or not (Berger & Luckmann, 1966 / 1991). Thus, people live in a socially constructed world, and consequently, all their thoughts and actions may be regarded as fundamentally social in nature—whether these actions pertain to their religion (Berger, 1967), to the media (Renckstorf, 1996; Renckstorf & Wester, 2004), or to anything else (Mead, 1934).

From such a perspective, the present study into the relationship between religion and watching television is a study of social action. But why study the relationship between religion and watching television, at all? That needs to be cleared, first.

Until relatively recent, religion played a major role in the lives and actions of most people in the Netherlands. Religion helped people define the situations they found themselves in, it helped people subjectively construct their world (cf. Berger, 1967). In the last century and a half, though, secularisation has severely reduced the role of religion in people's lives and society in general (Knippenberg, 1998). But still, Dutch culture is permeated by Christian religion, its values, and ideas; and substantial parts of the population still believe in God (Bernts, Dekker & De Hart, 2007). Konig and Van der Slik (2004) have shown that, in the highly secularised Netherlands, religion can still not be fully separated from the rest of life. Therefore, it is to be expected that religion still influences people's lives and actions, although maybe not as strongly as in the past.

Just like religion, television constitutes a phenomenon that influences people's lives and actions. Television too helps people understand the world they subjectively live in. Some hold that—just like religion—television determines the world view of its viewers

* Ruben P. Konig, Communication Science, Radboud University Nijmegen, +31-24-3615789, r.konig@ru.nl

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(e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1980); and that it influences what the viewers think about (e.g., McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Television is such a popular medium that, according to Gerbner and Gross (1976), it has long since replaced old fashioned storytellers—like traditional religion—in shaping the culture of the United States. “Television viewing is a ritual, almost like religion, except that it is attended to more often” (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan & Jackson-Beeck, 1979, p. 180).

In the Netherlands this seems to be no different. On average, in the beginning of the 21st century, Dutch people spend almost three hours daily watching television (Huysmans, De Haan & Van den Broek, 2004, p. 154). That means that they spend more time in front of their television sets than they—or their ancestors—ever did in Church. God is in mortal peril since he is worshipped less and less (cf. Durkheim, 1912 / 1995), whereas television thrives by the worship of the masses every day (see also Goethals 1990; Thomas, 1998).

However, as indicated above, religion's role in people's lives and actions has not been played out yet. Religion may still be relevant for people in dealing with their subjective worlds—including television. Therefore, in this chapter, I try to answer two highly related research questions. The first pertains to the discussion above. I compare the influence that religion and television both exert on people's lives and actions. Of course, I cannot do that for the whole of their lives and actions. But I can do it for the division of chores among spouses. Chores are a very day-to-day activity and thus an interesting subject for researchers who study influences on people's daily lives. Further, the division of chores is tightly wound up with culture and tradition, and thus it is interesting to see which storyteller is able to influence it most. Hence, the question can be asked: What is the influence of religion and of television on the division of chores between men and women?

Second, I relate religion to television viewing. I explore whether religion influences how people relate to its one-eyed competitor. Does religion have a say in front of the television set? If religion is still a factor of some relevancy to the interpretation of the world that people encounter in their daily lives, including television, it should.

9.2 Religion and television in everyday life

Religion is a multi-faceted phenomenon (McGuire, 1992). There is more to it than just the belief that God exists (cf. Pratchett, 1993). People participate in rites and attend church with other people, which illustrates that religion has a social component. If they are religious, people are usually members of a religious community (Durkheim, 1912 / 1995; McGuire, 1992). Also, religion has a cultural component. Religion influences and is influenced by people's values and world view (Berger, 1967; Zuckerman, 2003). Further, religion has a social-psychological component in that not everybody believes in the same way. Some people believe in a more fundamentalist, or militant way, whereas others are much more liberal and questioning in their religious belief (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Hunsberger, Alisat, Pancer & Pratt, 1996). Next, a religious experience is a highly individual phenomenon that is undeniably religious (McGuire, 1992). And probably most important, religion has a theological component (McGuire, 1992). What is it that people actually believe? All these components of religion might bear on the division of household labour between men and women and on how people act toward television. Francis & Gibson (1993), for instance, showed that a higher church at-

tendance frequency among adolescents is negatively related to television viewing time and positively to watching current affairs programmes. In this chapter, however, I only look into the influence of people's actual belief content, the theological component; more specific, the theological component of Christianity. The reason for this last curtailment lies in the fact that the theological component of any religion is specifically tailored to that religion, and since Christianity traditionally is the dominant religion in the Netherlands, I chose to study the theological component of that specific religion.

Van der Slik and Konig (2006; Konig & Van der Slik, 2004; Van der Slik, 1994) have shown that there are at least two distinct sets of religious convictions that Christians may subscribe to; orthodox and humanitarian theological convictions.

Orthodox, creed-like, theological convictions include the belief in a transcendent realm, a God who is concerned with every individual personally, and life after death (Batson, Schoenrade & Ventis, 1993; Felling, Peters & Schreuder, 1991; Fullerton & Hunsberger, 1982; King, 1967; King & Hunt, 1969). These theological convictions refer to the relationship of people to God, and how people might reach personal salvation. The relationships among people do not figure prominently in these convictions.

Humanitarian theological convictions can be theoretically and empirically discerned from orthodox theological convictions. They too are central to Christian religion. Humanitarian convictions are convictions that stress that God may reveal Himself in the relationships between people. God exists in a transcendent reality, but we can see Him and learn about Him by observing how people relate to each other in this world (cf. Borg, 1997; Schillebeeckx, 1980; Van Buren, 1963). The concept of neighbourly love, that plays such a prominent role in the teachings of Christ—and in fact, in many other religions—lies at the heart of what might be called humanitarian convictions.

Christians usually subscribe in varying degrees to both orthodox and humanitarian theological convictions. These convictions often go hand-in-hand. But people do not necessarily subscribe to both sets of theological convictions with the same strength. In some, humanitarian convictions have the upper hand, whereas in others, orthodox convictions are dominant (Konig & Van der Slik, 2004).

9.2.1 Religion and television's influence on the division of chores between spouses

So, what is the influence that orthodox and humanitarian theological convictions exert on the division of household labour between men and women? Orthodox and humanitarian theological convictions may be expected to work quite different effects in this respect. If you subscribe to orthodox, creed-like, theological convictions, these convictions tell you what the world is like. Thus, they help you subjectively construct your world and act in it (Berger, 1967; Berger & Luckmann, 1966 / 1991). And since Christian theology hardly changes over time, orthodox theological convictions may be understood as agents of tradition (McGuire, 1992). It is therefore hardly surprising that previous research shows that orthodox theological convictions are positively related to a traditional view on women's roles (e.g., Eisinga, Lammers & Peters, 1991). As a consequence, I expect that people who harbour stronger orthodox Christian views have a more traditional division of labour in their household. In such households, the wife is mainly responsible for chores.

Hypothesis 1: If a person, who is part of a couple, subscribes to orthodox theological convictions more strongly, the burden of chores rests more strongly on the woman in that couple.

Subscription to humanitarian theological convictions may have different consequences. What these convictions tell you about the world is not only concerned with what that world is like, but also with how to look at that world, and especially, your fellow men. These convictions may even be interpreted as a responsibility, a challenge to try and act responsibly toward others, flexibly, in response to their needs (Batson, Beker & Clark, 1973). And that is hardly an invitation for simply following tradition, for simply going by the book, for accepting the world as it is (cf. Marx, 1973). Thus, I do not expect Hypothesis 1 to hold true for humanitarian theological convictions as well. These convictions are most probably independent from the division of household labour between spouses.

Comparing the influence of television with religion's influence on the division of household labour between men and women, one needs only recall that television can be deemed a competitor, or even the successor of traditional religion, as the educator of the masses, as the main storyteller. People may learn from television how to live and act in their world (cf. Bandura, 2002; Nabi & Clark, 2008). Knowing that television usually displays a relatively traditional division of labour between men and women (Emons, Wester & Scheepers, in press; Koeman, Peeters & d'Haenens, 2007), I formulate a hypothesis very much like Hypothesis 1—in fact contrasting religion and television's influence.¹

Hypothesis 2: If a person, who is part of a couple, watches more television, the burden of chores rests more strongly on the woman in that couple.

Thus, I expect religion and television to influence people's lives and actions in a very similar way. Religion and television both teach people how to define their continuously changing situations. But the question is, has television replaced religion in this respect, or is the religious world view still a viable alternative to the world view promulgated by television?

People's education and age may be related to the division of household labour between partners (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, Robinson, 2000), and also to people's religious beliefs (Konig & Van der Slik, 2004) and to exposure to television (Huysmans, De Haan & Van den Broek, 2004; Konig, Kraaykamp & Westerik, 2008; Mares & Woodward, 2006). Thus, education and age could bring about spurious relationships that would render the answer to this question invalid. Therefore, in my analysis I controlled for education and age.

Now that I have discussed the influence of religion and television on the division of labour between spouses, I turn to the correlation between religion and television viewing.

9.2.2 Religion's influence on television genre preference

Orthodox and humanitarian convictions—as well as other parts of Christian theology—do not feature television. Consequently, one might argue that there is no relationship

between the subscription to these religious convictions and television viewing. However, television mainly depicts human life, and people very often watch television together with other people. And that is exactly what religion focuses on; human life and other people. Thus, religious convictions and watching television might be related after all.

The depiction of human life varies enormously among the different genres of television programmes that are broadcast every day. For instance, sports programmes and game shows picture competition between individuals or teams, whereas drama and soap operas focus on human relationships. Action films and series show aggression and often even mortal combat. News, current affairs programmes, documentaries, and arts and cultural programmes portray yet another aspects of human life; information.

Because of this variety in programme contents, I tried to find out whether or not people with different religious convictions appreciate different television contents differently. I expected that people with stronger humanitarian convictions were more interested in television programmes on human relationships, such as drama and soap opera. Simultaneously, I expected that their stronger commitment to neighbourly love would make them less attracted to programmes showing competition and aggression, that is sports programmes, game shows, and action films and series. For other genres, I did not expect such differences in programme preference between people with stronger or weaker humanitarian conviction.

Hypothesis 3: As people have stronger humanitarian theological convictions, they are less likely to like to watch a) sports programmes, b) game shows, and c) action films and series; and they are more likely to like to watch d) drama and soap operas.

Orthodox convictions do not focus on the relationships between people. They mainly focus on the relationship between individuals and God. But that is the topic of hardly any television programme in the Netherlands—despite the fact that there are religious public broadcasting associations—and consequently we do not have data on preference for religious programmes. Thus, as to genres other than religious programmes, I expect no differences in preference between people who subscribe in varying degrees to orthodox convictions.

Testing my hypothesis, I simultaneously had to check for the influence of gender, because men tend to like sports and action programmes more than women do, and women tend to like soap opera's more than men do (Lull, 1988; Morley, 1986). Gender is also a known factor when it comes to people's religiousness. Women tend to be more religious than men and subscribe more strongly to orthodox and humanitarian convictions (Konig & Van der Slik, 2004; McGuire, 1992). Thus, gender could produce a spurious relationship between humanitarian convictions and programme preference. For similar reasons I controlled for education and age. Higher educated and younger people prefer other television content than lower educated and older people (Konig, Rebers & Westerik, 2009; Van der Goot, Beentjes & Van Selm, 2006) and subscribe less strongly to orthodox convictions (Konig & Van der Slik, 2004). Finally, I added television exposure to my analysis. I did so, because there are indications that people who watch relatively little television have stronger preferences for specific programme types, mostly informative programmes (Francis & Gibson, 1993; Rubin, 1984). That too could interfere with the relationships I wanted to explore.

9.2.3 Religion's influence on domineering behaviour when watching television

People do not only prefer certain programme types, they also often watch television in the company of others with whom they interact whilst watching (Gantz, 2001; Gunter & Svennevig, 1987; Lull, 1988; Westerik, 2009). Again, I expected humanitarian convictions to be relevant. I deemed people with stronger humanitarian convictions less likely to overlook the preferences of their co-viewers, and thus more likely to concede the power over the remote control to their companions, or at least to consult with their co-viewers as to what to watch. I did not expect them to selfishly choose a television programme that only they themselves like. In this chapter I focused on partners as co-viewers. I deemed this necessary, because of the unequal power relationships between parents and their children. Relationships between partners might be a little bit more equal (e.g., Konig, Kraaykamp & Westerik, 2008).

Hypothesis 4: As people have stronger humanitarian theological convictions, they are less likely to show domineering behaviour when watching television with their partner.

I repeat that orthodox convictions do not focus on the relationships between people. Therefore I did not expect a relationship between orthodox convictions and whether people give their co-viewers the opportunity to watch their favourite programmes.

From previous research we know that men tend to dominate the remote control and programme choice in general (Copeland & Schweitzer, 1993; Gantz, 2001; Lull, 1988; Morley, 1986; Mutsaers, 1996; Walker, 1996; Walker & Bellamy, 2001), whereas women tend to subscribe to humanitarian convictions more strongly than men (Konig & Van der Slik, 2004). Thus, gender could bring about a spurious relationship between humanitarian convictions and domineering when watching television. Therefore I controlled for gender. Next to gender, I also included having a job as a control variable, because Morley (1986) found that unemployed men were not dominant with respect to television viewing. I also controlled for the number of television sets in use, because people who can watch their favourite show on another set might only watch together with their partner when they have a shared programme preference at that point in time. This could partly suppress the relationships I was interested in. And finally, I controlled for education and age, again. As argued before, education and age are related to religious beliefs and they may also be related to domineering.

9.3 Method

9.3.1 Data

The data for this study were collected through a telephone survey among a random sample of the Dutch population of 18 years or older, in weeks 46 and 47 of 2004, on weekdays between one and five o'clock in the afternoon and between half past five and half past nine in the evening. A random sample was drawn from the population of all households with a telephone line. The households in this sample were contacted by phone, and then the interviewer asked for the person that was at least 18 years of age, at

home at that moment, and the last one to have celebrated his or her birthday. This procedure resulted in interviews with 951 respondents. The cooperation rate was 45.1%. Comparison with census data (Statistics Netherlands, 2006) showed that the realised sample was not representative for age and gender ($\chi^2 = 154.76$; $df = 13$; $p < .001$). Women were over-represented, as were 40 to 69 year olds. However, since I am only interested in the correlations between the variables in this study, I assume that this over-representation is unproblematic. Moreover, I recall to mind that in my analyses, I controlled for age and gender.

9.3.2 Operationalisation

Traditional division of household labour was measured with four questions. 'At home, who usually... does the shopping?' '...does the laundry?' '...does the cooking?' '...cleans the house?'. Respondents were prompted for one of two answers; 'I' or 'my partner'. However, if respondents came up with one of the unprompted answers 'both' or 'someone else', these answers were also recorded. The answers were coded in such a way that a higher score means that the woman in the household is more responsible for chores ('both' and 'someone else' were coded as middle category). Next these answers were combined to a scale of .65 reliability (Cronbach's α) by taking the mean score if at least two questions were validly answered.

Television genre preference was measured by asking how much respondents liked to watch sports programmes, game shows, drama and soaps, and action films and series. Respondents were asked to indicate how much they liked these programme genres with a number between 0 (not at all) and 10 (very much).

Domineering while watching television was measured only when respondents had indicated that they had a partner with whom they lived in one and the same household. The following questions were asked. 'When you and your partner watch television together, how often do you determine the programme you watch?' 'And how often does your partner determine what programme you watch?' 'When you and your partner watch television together, who uses the remote control most, you or your partner?' Respondents could answer the first two questions with 'hardly ever or never', 'sometimes', 'regularly', 'often', or '(almost) always'. To the third question, the answers 'I' and 'my partner' were prompted, but respondents could also answer 'both' or 'someone else'. The answers to these three questions were recoded in such a way that a higher score represented more domineering behaviour by the respondent while watching television. Then, they were standardised and combined to a scale of .60 reliability (Cronbach's α), by computing the mean score.

Respondents' religious convictions were measured with eight statements that respondents could agree or disagree with on a five-point scale. A factor analysis of the statements is presented in Table 9.1. The two dimensions are interpreted as orthodox theological convictions and humanitarian theological convictions, respectively. The correlation between the factors is high (.74), but still, they can be discerned as separate factors. For both dimensions a scale was constructed by computing the mean score of the items scoring high on that dimension, if at least half of these items got a valid answer. The reliability (Cronbach's α) for the scales thus constructed is .89 and .84 for orthodox and humanitarian theological convictions respectively.

Table 9.1 Factor analysis of orthodox and humanitarian theological convictions ($N = 865$)

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Com- mun- ality
Orthodox convictions			
To me God is like a person who sees and hears me in all I do.	.98	-.09	.83
God judges our actions.	.77	-.00	.60
God hears all our prayers.	.77	.09	.70
There is a God who concerns Himself with every individual personally.	.65	.18	.61
Humanitarian convictions			
God is where people trust each other.	-.10	.92	.73
To me God is what is worthwhile in people.	.12	.73	.67
To me God is a symbol of what is good in humankind.	-.00	.64	.41
I encounter God in the real meeting with other people.	.18	.59	.54

Note: $KMO = .91$; explained variance = 63.5%; oblique rotation; correlation between factors = .74

Television viewing time was measured by two questions. 'On average, how many days a week do you watch television?' 'On average, on a weekday, how long do you watch television?' The answers to these two questions were combined to get the average viewing time on weekdays. The number of televisions in the house was asked straightforward, as were gender and age. And finally, respondents were asked if they had a job and what was the highest education they had completed or were following at that moment.

9.3.3 Analyses

To test our hypotheses, we performed a number of multiple linear regression analyses. Gender and having a job were entered in the equations as dummies. Gender was dumified with women as reference category, and having a job with not having a job as reference category. All results are presented in Table 9.2.

9.4 Results

My first analysis pertains to the division of household labour between spouses. Here I wanted to contrast the influence of religion to the influence of television. The first column in Table 9.2 shows that religion is of no consequence to who does the chores, whereas television viewing time does have an effect. People who spent more time with television have a less traditional division of household labour. This is unexpected, but still television's influence is greater. Both Hypothesis 1 and 2 have to be rejected.

With my second analysis, I tested Hypothesis 3. The columns two to five show that humanitarian theological convictions do not have the expected effect on liking for action films and series, sports programmes, game shows, and drama and soaps. In fact these convictions have no influence at all. Hypothesis 3 has to be rejected too.

Table 9.2 Regression of traditional division of household labour, television genre preference and domineering while watching television on religious beliefs and television viewing time (standardised parameters)

	Tradition- al divi- sion of household labour	Like to watch on television...				Domi- neering while watching television
		Action films and series	Sports pro- grammes	Game shows	Drama and soap operas	
Orthodox theological convictions	.01	.03	-.01	.07	.06	-.05
Humanitarian theological convictions	.04	.02	-.01	-.01	-.03	.03
Television viewing time	-.08*	.16*	.07*	.13*	.13*	
Number of televisions						-.11*
Man		.17*	.35*	-.04	-.24*	.14*
Education	-.24*	-.16*	-.05	-.24*	-.21*	.01
Age	-.06	-.49*	.05	-.03	-.21*	-.05
Job						.04
R^2	.06	.24	.12	.10	.18	.04
N	669	900	901	899	897	642

Note. Empty cells in the table were not estimated.

* $p < .05$, two-tailed test.

My last analysis tested whether people who subscribe to humanitarian theological convictions are less domineering when they watch television (Hypothesis 4). As can be seen in the last column of Table 9.2, this hypothesis too was refuted by my data.

Thus religion resorts no effect at all, whereas television viewing time does. Viewing time also has an effect when it is just a control variable in the second to fifth columns of Table 9.2. People who watch more television tend to like all four television programme genres more. As a matter of fact, the control variables in these analyses are the only predictors of consequence.

9.5 Conclusion and discussion

Superficially, the main conclusion seems to be that television might indeed—as Gerbner and Gross already stated back in 1976—have replaced religion as storyteller, as an influence on people's lives and actions. The division of chores between men and women is not influenced by what people believe, but it is by the amount of time they spend in front of their television sets. Further, religion also seems incapable to influence the definition of the situation people find themselves in when they are watching television. Their religious beliefs do not influence what they like to watch, and do not prevent them from domineering the others with whom they watch. To love your neighbour as you love yourself does not seem to mean that you do not domineer the ones that you love, or that you do not want to watch competition and aggression on television.

Possibly that conclusion is correct, but there are several reasons not to accept this conclusion straight away. The first is that there is more to religion than the theological

convictions people subscribe to (McGuire, 1992). Humanitarian theological convictions may be irrelevant when it comes to watching television, but other aspects may still influence people's lives and actions. For instance, the degree of religious fundamentalism might still make for individual differences with respect to television viewing. Future research might shed some light here.

The second reason is that my regression analyses showed very small proportions of explained variance. For example, traditional division of household labour and domineering while watching television are hardly explained by the regression models applied. Other explanatory variables are needed, like maybe conservatism. Possibly though, my social action perspective does not suffice and other kinds of variables are needed, like for instance personality traits or other biology related variables (Sherry, 2004), and these might be related to television viewing time and religious convictions as well. If so, the parameters might change radically.

The third reason is the unexpected negative relationship between television viewing time and traditional division of household labour. As people watch more television, they are apt to have a less traditional division of household chores. Since in the past decades women are relatively often represented on television as housewives (Emons, Wester & Scheepers, *in press*), this is not what cultivation theory (cf. Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1979, 1980) nor social-cognitive theory (cf. Bandura, 2002; Nabi & Clark, 2008) would predict. Thus, television may have replaced religion as the people's main storyteller, but one cannot conclude that from the present study. Moreover, should television indeed have replaced religion as the people's main storyteller, the people do not seem to give much heed to the contents of the stories that they are being told. At least not to all of the contents.

And finally, it is possible that religion's influence mainly makes itself visible at the cultural level. Maybe centuries of Christianity have moulded Dutch culture in such a strong way that individual differences are much smaller than they would have been, had the Netherlands never been fully Christianised. Research in countries that have a different religious history could result in a deeper understanding in this respect.

Of course, this study cannot be the last one on this topic. I started out with some broad fundamental concepts; religion, television, and people's lives and actions—connecting it all with the world that people subjectively live in. Then, I radically reduced it all to some specific theological contents of what people may believe, exposure to television, some television content preferences, domineering television programme choice, and a traditional division of labour between male and female partners. Thus, my conclusions about religion, television, and people's lives and actions are limited, if not shallow. Future researchers might want to investigate the relationships among a much broader array of social phenomena that can be categorised under the labels of religion, television, and people's lives and actions. As already indicated, religion is a multi-faceted phenomenon. This, however, holds true as well for television, which is not only a storyteller that is attended to in various amounts by people who prefer varying kinds of contents. People use television in myriad ways, and the stories that they are being told by television are diverse. As a consequence, empirical research on this topic should not end here. As to that, the story has only just begun.

All in all, pertaining television, I have not found the expected influence of religion. And as far as I know there is no previous research to compare this finding to. Previous research on religion and television is mainly concerned with religious television; that is,

religious programming on television, and how religions might use television for their purposes (e.g., Fore, 1987; Parker, Barry & Smythe, 1955; Svennevig, Haldane, Spiers & Gunter, 1988). Thus we hardly know anything about this subject yet.

Notes

1. Of course, one could better predict what people learn from the stories told by television when one knew what stories they watch, but since I do not have such data, I formulate my hypothesis for television viewing in general.

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