The Netherlands as an Experimental Garden of Religiosity

The religious condition of The Netherlands is the result of an encounter between general processes of European change on the one hand—characterized by individualization, humanization and abstraction—and a historical process peculiar to The Netherlands on the other. Here, the general trend of secularization hides the development of a veritable garden of new and interesting religiousities. Church membership is falling, yet the number of religious groupings is growing. A large part of the population is still tied to traditional religion. Yet many in The Netherlands have a real interest in general religious questions and share through discussion and active practice in New Age orientations. The most astonishing development is that Dutch society, historically a society of minorities, has produced a majority religious orientation which is no longer part of the traditional ideological “pillars”, and that for the first time a nationally common morality is being sought out.

La situation religieuse aux Pays-Bas résulte d’une confrontation entre un processus européen général d’une part—ici caractérisé comme l’individualisation, l’humanisation et l’abstraction de la religion—et les caractéristiques de l’histoire néerlandaise d’autre part. En ce qui concerne les Pays-Bas, le processus général de sécularisation cache l’émergence d’un jardin de religiosité nouveau et intéressant. On constate une diminution de l’affiliation aux Églises, mais, en même temps, une augmentation du nombre de groupes religieux. Une grande partie de la population reste toujours liée aux religions traditionnelles. Beaucoup de gens portent un intérêt véritable à des questions religieuses générales et participent à des discussions et pratiques d’orientation Nouvel Age. Le développement le plus étonnant est que la société néerlandaise, historiquement une société de minorités, est confrontée maintenant à une majorité qui n’est plus liée à un des “piliers” traditionnels. Pour la première fois, une moralité nationale commune est recherchée.

In many respects and notably in religious affairs, The Netherlands is an exceptional country. The European Value Systems Study Group and the International Social Survey Programme have shown time and again that in no other western European country are so few people members of a church. As a consequence church attendance is low, few people say they believe in God, take part in church activities or put faith in the church and church-related organizations. Several studies by Dutch sociologists show a steady decline of religious organizations, opinions and behaviour (see for an
extensive review Becker and Vink, 1994). The figures seem clear and unambiguous. In 1945, 40 percent of the Dutch population were Catholics; in the year 2000 this percentage will have been halved. For the Protestant denominations the figures are even more telling. In 1945, their percentage was above 40; in the year 2000 it will be below 15. To put it differently: in 1945 the percentage of non-church-members was 15, in the year 2000 it will be approximately 62, and this percentage is predicted to rise to 75 in 2020 (Becker and Vink, 1994: 175–180). At the parish level, the remaining believers are confronted with the effects of this process. Churches are empty, some even closed, the young are not interested in church membership despite serious and constant endeavours by their parents, and there is a shortage of qualified priests.

As such, these figures correctly describe the situation in The Netherlands. However, this article will assert that the commonly accepted general interpretation of this process as a one-way secularization process needs to be revised. It is one-sidedly statistical, unhistorical, and based upon rather superficial and dogmatic survey research (Poulat, 1997: 33). As early as 1972, Luckmann called secularization "a contemporary myth". Perhaps no sociological explanation is as persistent as a mythical one.

The situation in The Netherlands might be seen as a local manifestation of a general European process. First we will identify three currents in European culture that reflect the way people experience religion. The present Dutch situation results from the confrontation between this European cultural process and the specificities of Dutch history. Historical analysis is needed to understand the sociological significance of European survey studies. In the Dutch case this will lead to the conclusion that a superficial interpretation of the secularization process—which, according to comparative surveys, reaches its peak in The Netherlands (Becker and Vink, 1994)—conceals the emergence of a new and interesting experimental garden of religiosity.

Western European Values

Secularization, defined here as the steady decline of the importance of religion in societal affairs, the daily lives of the people, and of religion as such (Dobbelare, 1981), is not a typical Dutch phenomenon. It is a general cultural process that has been taking place throughout Europe for more than a century. In the 1970s this process accelerated. In each new generation the church is less important. This is also a European phenomenon (Campiche, 1997: 97–166), where religion is undermined not just as an institution but primarily as a way of thinking and feeling, as a way of life. On the basis of several European studies, Willaime (1996: 313–314) speaks of global European trends and characterizes them—in French—as "individualisation", "subjectivisation", "esthétisation", "émotionnalisation", "éthicisation", and "indifférentisme". We will start our analysis with the general and most discussed trend, individualization, and subsequently specify two less mentioned trends, namely humanization and abstraction. These European
values—as they are called here—did not emerge overnight. They can be traced back in the ideas of philosophers and writers of past times. Hangegraaff (1995) claimed in his study on New Age that nothing is new in New Age, and that there are no elements in the New Age creed that were not known at the end of the 19th century. In line with Hangegraaff’s claim it will also be suggested that modern religious feelings and concepts are democratized and popularized versions of older currents.

The individualization, humanization and abstraction of religion

The term “individualization” is almost inevitable when discussing modern religion. The celestial canopy that was once stretched over the heads of the true believers shows holes and fissures. Everyone is making his or her private religion. This European “constructionist” value has remote roots, as Jean La Bruyère (1881, first published 1688) may illustrate.

This same religion, which people defend with such warmth and zeal against those who are against it, they themselves alter according to their own particular leanings. They add and take away what are often essential elements and hold firmly to what they have created. In fact one often speaks of each nation living out its own religion; but, in truth, there are many of them, and each person has his own. (“Des esprits forts”, No. 25)

So, in a way individualization is a process of all times, but today it has reached the masses. Religiosity is characterized as do-it-yourself-religion, bricolage, religion à la carte, “patchwork religion”, and so on. People in western Europe have the unmistakable tendency to make their own religion. Even within traditional and orthodox groups, the faithful disagree about fundamental issues (Halman et al., 1987: 46–47).

The process of individualization is closely connected with a process of humanization. The traditional discourse about sin and Hell is still heard in many churches but it has been toned down considerably during the last century. As early as 1938, Paul Valéry noted l’adoucement de l’Église (the softening of the church), how his childhood of strict catechism, austere clergy and religion of fear and terror was giving way to “modern” religion, one without Hell or devil, and with an abstract and humanized God (Valéry, 1974: II, 670–671).

Indeed, few people in western Europe still believe in the existence of Hell and devils (Becker and Vink, 1994: 29). The devil has become an anachronism, a worn-out metaphor, perhaps of some nostalgic value, an interesting attribute of youth culture, a subject for glossy magazines; but of no real value for daily life. Heaven, on the other hand, is still popular and scores much better in the opinion polls (Becker and Vink, 1994). The religion of many modern people can be characterized as a “gay religion”, a term Milton used in Paradise Lost. Suffering, ambivalence, sorrow and pain are repressed. Modern religion is the religion of the psychologists: it makes people happy and healthy, gives them strength and self-esteem (Eslin, 1997: 13). In recent experimental psychological studies, the psychological function of illusion—once criticized by Freud (1927)—is restored. Illusions turn out to be normal
and even wholesome (Taylor and Brown, 1988). Religion is revalued as a powerful coping system, as a highway to happiness and success.

A demonstration of today's self-centred religion is "the hour of power", the television service of Dr Robert Schuller, broadcast every week from the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California (Channel EURO 7). The aim is to give people "a positive and uplifting outlook on life". There is professional music, flowers in all colours, an abundance of light, a perfect show is staged, interrupted by applause. A wealthy, successful audience is addressed by a successful minister: a huge budget, the greatest church, the greatest show on earth, organized by the graduates of the Institute for Successful Church Leadership. The happy-go-lucky church performs miracles every week.

Valéry (1974: II, 670) also introduces a second aspect. God is not only more human, he is also more abstract. Indeed, both qualifications can be found in the beliefs of modern people, but they are contradictory or at least conflicting. Contemporary atheism is linked to these developments, as Borchert emphasizes: "It does not arise out of scepticism and indifference but out of a loss of faith in old images and an inability to find new ones. This lack of contact with God [The original Dutch version reads godloze, godless—Borchert, 1989: 165] can prove to be a good breeding ground for a fresh form of mysticism" (Borchert, 1994: 315).

In June 1997, the international journal Esprit characterized our time as one of religions without God. Many people say they believe, but they do not have a (clear) image of God. They feel what the Dutch writer Frans Kellendonk called "an emptiness in which, if He exists, God would fit beautifully" (Otten, 1995: 53). Today, this way of thinking is no longer the prerogative of a well-educated, esoteric minority. As one of the young respondents we interviewed said, "I pray to God in whom I don't believe, that He will help my friend who does believe in Him—if He exists" (Janssen et al., 1994). How can one be more honest to God?

Paul Valéry, once characterized as a "mystique sans Dieu" (De Bourbon Busset, 1964), sought the mystery without touching it. "Cache ton Dieu" was his motto (Valéry, 1974: 611). But we should not be explicit, even in hiding our God. Movement is the most important aspect of a religious attitude in Valéry's view: "à chaque instant l'athée est en voie de croire s'il est en mouvement, et le croyant est en voie de décoire s'il est en mouvement" (1974: 653). Valéry prefers an abstract, searching, nondogmatic kind of religiosity which Eslin (1997: 13), referring to Bakhtin, characterizes as interactive, or dialogical.

One might ask whether such a mystical and intellectual religious life can be the perspective of the average believer. Perhaps it is impossible and any religion will end in clear-cut images and definite dogmas. The humanization and the individualization of God and religion are examples of this trend. However, Emile Durkheim (1912) places anonymous, abstract, and undefined forces at the heart of religion. Durkheim explicitly acknowledged the importance of the fixation and materialization of symbols (Janssen and Verheggen, 1997). Ideas cannot float freely. All human thought is bound to material objects. To believe, people need visual and concrete images to
convey their ideas. In the end, they even worship ants, plants, sticks and stones. Nevertheless, at the core of religion dwell "undefined powers", "anonymous forces"; there is "an abstract power" (Durkheim, 1912: 285–286). Religion is a power that cannot be reduced to its manifestations. It can be revived and re-created at any time. For Durkheim—see his famous definition of religion (1912: 65)—the concept of "God" is a manifestation of religion, not an elementary form of religion.

Dutch History, the Politics of Accommodation

The general western European cultural trend of individualization, humanization and abstraction is expressed in each country in relation to its history and structural conditions. The religious history of The Netherlands is a highly complex affair. Only the main aspects can be mentioned here.

The number of religious groups was already remarkable, long before the introduction of today's new religious movements. Dutch national history as a multi-religious society is still visible as a geographic phenomenon (Knippenberg, 1992). Before secularization, Islam and the new religions appeared on the scene in the 1960s, the Dutch socio-political domain consisted of a coalition of many independent religious and ideological groups. Initially, The Netherlands (a plural term) united cities, thereafter provinces (Daalder, 1968). By the end of the 19th century, the relations between the different groups (Catholics, Protestants in several denominations, socialists and liberals) had become peaceful. Every individual obtained the right to vote and any group could organize its own educational system. In the end, every group formed its own society and thus the pillars of Dutch society. They were the way to, as well as the goal of, emancipation (Thurlings, 1978). Each pillar comprised its own sub-society, based on its specific philosophy of life. Socialism, liberalism and humanism also came to function like religions. The government stood like a tympanum on the pillarized temple of Dutch society, but its functions were limited. The main function was to guarantee the independence of the several groups and to distribute subsidies fairly among them. It kept aloof from education and moral training.

Until the Second World War, The Netherlands was a society of peasants and merchants, living in villages and predominantly small towns. The vast majority of the people were members of a church. Paradoxically, non-religiosity was dominant in the rural areas in the North (Knippenberg, 1992: 232–233; cf. McLeod, 1998, in this issue). After the war, when colonial possessions in Indonesia and their commercial profits were lost, an accelerated and successful programme of industrialization was started (Righart, 1995: 35–45). The country urbanized and lost its rural character. Between 1960 and 1980 the Dutch people developed anti-authoritarian, democratic opinions on politics, sexuality and religion (Middendorp, 1979). In the fast-growing cities, these processes accelerated and between 1971 and 1986 urbanization and non-religiosity proved to be clearly correlated processes (Knippenberg, 1992: 240–241). The cultural revolution that reached the masses in the 1960s had the effect of an earthquake on the building that was
Dutch society. All pillars shook and several came down. The young turned their backs on traditional society in massive numbers (Janssen and De Hart, 1993).

An Experimental Garden

In order to describe the confrontation between Dutch history and the European secularization process, we will draw a distinction between the micro, the meso and the macrolevels. As Willaime (1996: 313) has argued, several similarities, mainly at the microlevel, can be found in studies on European religion. The individualization process in particular seems to be a European cultural trend, not one confined to The Netherlands. But it should not be forgotten that this process functions in a context and influences developments at the meso and the macrolevels as well. The mesolevel of Dutch society was the religious ideological “pillar”. The rapid deterioration, even collapse of the Catholic, Protestant and secular pillars caused a dramatic change. Finally, what is sociologically perhaps the most interesting phenomenon in The Netherlands is at the macrolevel. In a country that consisted traditionally of minorities, a majority has recently appeared on the scene, and this individualized majority is now looking for a moral centre for the whole of Dutch society.

The microlevel: do-it-yourself-religion

Experiment and experience are central topics in contemporary European culture, especially for young people, who design their own religion. They are not looking for an established creed but for a profound experience (Campiche, 1997: 96–166). They no longer have fixed names and clear definitions of God because there is no shared language to talk about God. In a Belgian survey, Hutsebaut and Verhoeven (1991) found that the correlation between the definitions of God that young people gave over a period of two years was equal to zero. God has to be invented and defined again and again. Clichés are fading. Less and less people see God as a father, although hardly anyone sees God as a mother. In our own research, most young people defined God as “someone or something”, a vague power “somewhere” (Janssen et al., 1990, 1994).

In the New Age circuit, religions are formed as syncretic recombinations of diverse religions from all over the world, kept together under the pressure of personal experience. Stenger (1989) describes New Age religion as a handy way to give people an opportunity for experience and experimentation in dealing with modern problems of self and reality. A lot of products—books, CDs, herbs and potions—are displayed on the shop counters. One can choose according to one’s taste and daily needs. One does not have to become a member of a group. Clearly, the individual is the focus of New Age religion, not the group or humanity, as Durkheim saw it. In The Netherlands many people are interested in New Age-related issues and practices. In a national survey among well-educated young adults, we found
that at least 30 percent had substantial experience in the para-cultural field: they read astrological literature, believed in reincarnation, practised yoga, etc. (de Hart and Janssen, 1992). Recently, the Social Cultural Planning Bureau of The Netherlands published an extensive study on the saliency of new religions in The Netherlands (Becker et al., 1997: 135). About 25 percent of the people had indeed had some experience in the para-cultural field. One might ask what the effects will be in the long run. Does New Age offer a new religion or is it the hype of the fin-de-siècle? Be that as it may, the consumers of New Age religion are in no way as strict as traditional believers in The Netherlands.

New creeds and ideas receive the benefit of the doubt. Astrology and all kinds of paramedical healing rituals are taken seriously. Many people, not only the young and well-educated, are willing to suspend their disbelief: not disbelief, but “a belief that slips towards probabilism and the science of the paranormal” is characteristic, as Lambert (1993: 68) observed. It is remarkable that in an era of secularization so many people believe in old and sometimes scientifically improbable ideas and practices. The secularization process does not seem related to a process of Enlightenment, but more to a “secularization of superstition” (Vergote, 1976).

The point is not whether this type of religious belief is correct or not. It is there and a lot of people adhere to it. As noted earlier, the undogmatic and abstract trends in this new religiosity offer new perspectives. As Stenger (1989) approvingly observes, personal responsibility is a central value in the creed of the new religiosity. People can no longer hide behind authorities or a heavenly father. But new answers give rise to new problems. The old religion had to deal with the so-called theodikeia, the justification of God in an unjust world. But, psychologically speaking, the adherents of today’s self-religion are confronted with perhaps a more complex problem. They have to reconcile the world in themselves. They are facing an egodikeia. If the self became a problem in western culture, as Baumeister (1987) put it, because people more and more have to construct their own reality and make sense of a complex world themselves, it will become even more of a problem when the self is deified. High competence is needed to reconcile the world to oneself, and one might ask whether most people have that competence at their disposal. The social philosophy of the new religions is weakly developed. Egoism and selfishness lie in wait (Eslin, 1997: 13, 18; Hanegraaff, 1995: 434–435).

The mesolevel: the delta of religious groups

The secularization process will certainly not result in a complete breakdown of the old religious institutions. In The Netherlands, as elsewhere, these will not really disappear and for the time being will have an impact that is clearly greater than what would be expected considering their numbers of adherents. Most groups are well organized and have a long history of survival. It is generally known from research that Dutch believers are convinced and very active. In most countries, nationality and religious affiliation are connected. In The Netherlands they are not. But when people are church
members, they accept the consequences. Though Scandinavian countries and The Netherlands are similar in their religious opinions (Campiche, 1997: 106–111; Becker and Vink, 1994: 27–30), at a structural level the differences could not be greater. While Scandinavian countries have very high membership rates and The Netherlands the lowest, considerably more people (as a percentage of the total population) attend church in The Netherlands.

There are recent indications of a revival of interest in traditional religions. Evangelical groups gather in large meetings (Stoffels, 1997) and Catholicism is a chic item in the newspapers. The sociologist Zijderveldt even spoke of a re-awakening of Catholicism (NRC Handelsblad, 8 June 1996). Closer analysis (I. Janssen, 1997) shows that most of the new Catholic believers are re-starters (as Bourgeois, 1993 had already observed for France). Most of the young adherents of the evangelical movement are typically “born-again” children of orthodox Protestants. Stoffels (1997) aptly speaks of “the circulation of the saints”. This is an example of religious renewal by the “galvanization” (Kepel, 1991) of Christians by birth. This process of galvanization should not be overlooked, but the fact remains there are few new converts. Statistically, Christianity is still going downhill, although recent figures predict a slower decline (Becker et al., 1997) or even a stabilization of religiosity (Otten and Geurts, 1997).

While the number of religious adherents is declining, the number of religious groups with sincere and committed believers still grows. All kinds of modern religious movements are thus added to the numerous traditional groups. The Dutch cultural landscape has become a vast delta of religiosity, a fertile breeding ground for birds of all feathers.

The macrolevel: the rise of a new majority

Since its independence, the Dutch Republic has been a multi-religious society. Although the Reformation was closely connected with the statebuilding process, a great part of the country continued its Catholic tradition at the cost of discrimination and exclusion from public office. After the French invasion in 1795, church and state were definitively separated. During the 19th century, repressed minorities of Protestants and Catholics prepared the third phase and completed the construction of the pillarized society. Since the 1960s another change has been taking place (Van Rooden, 1996). A country of minorities is developing into a majority of non-affiliated people. The present political coalition of liberals and socialists is an expression of this new majority. One of its aims is the demolition of the pillarized society. One of its problems is the construction of a new society.

In most of the secularized European countries, at least the memory of a shared religious past is part of the national identity. People “believe without belonging” as Davie (1996: 175) observed in the United Kingdom, or “belong without believing” as Riis (1996: 119) observed in Scandinavia. In the Dutch case, such solutions are inconceivable, because there is no shared religious history. Besides, a Calvinist orientation, as a structuring element of national identity (Martin, 1994: 105), is dominant among both believers and
non-believers. Who belongs has to believe and who believes has to belong. The church cannot function as the ultimate centre of a secularized society as in Sweden where the church is a part of the public space, the welfare state, and national identity (Bäckström, 1997). Traditionally the Dutch government keeps a maximum distance from religion. The Dutch, in fact, employ the American model. In the European market model, as described by Michel Albert (1991), religion is a mixed commodity, whereas in the American model it is a trade commodity. In The Netherlands religious groups are treated like independent companies.

However, such a policy creates an unexpected problem. Willaime’s thesis that every politically sovereign institution is inevitably faced with a corresponding religious problem (1996: 291) is confirmed in a paradoxical way. The policy of religious detachment by government leads to government’s own moral involvement. Ignoring the social importance of religious groups, the body politic contributes to the emergence of a moral vacuum and the state is called upon to fill it up. The non-affiliated majority adopts the state as the centre of morality. New symbols are invented. The Second World War replaces the Dutch Revolt of the 16th century (Ter Borg, 1996: 139) and the heritage of Anne Frank becomes a holy shrine of morality. Young people visit her house in Amsterdam; the tree she could see from her hiding place was recently repaired at high expense; her diary was published in a critical edition. A holy house, a holy tree, a holy book: even a secularized society cannot avoid them. They represent what Edward Sapir (1934) called “condensational symbols”, things that carry a multitude of shared ideas and emotions. In the Netherlands, a new-style “Holy Week” has been shaped during the last decade. It begins on the 30 April, the birthday of the Queen, culminates on the 4 May, Remembrance Day for the victims of the Second World War, and ends a day later on Liberation Day. In 1997, the Minister of Education launched a national programme for moral education on 5 May. “Cohesion” has been made a theme for research and education. Young people are increasingly involved in the commemoration of the victims of the recent past. A national committee associates current moral themes with the festivities of Liberation Day. In 1997 the theme was “neighbours”: politicians, writers, artists and students were involved. Not that remarkable perhaps, but historically typically un-Dutch, as moral education had always been a pillarized affair.

Conclusion and Discussion

Secularization is a multi-dimensional process. It cannot be described solely by analysing individuals. The constant endeavours to do so remind one of the tradition in Russian sociology, mentioned by Dobbselaere (1981: 28–29), of focusing on individual opinion and behaviour. The underlying assumption seems to be that the ultimate decisions regarding religion will be made in the heads and in the hearts of individual people. But even individualism functions in a context and has impact on social processes at the meso and the macrolevel.
In The Netherlands, the number of church members has declined severely and more rapidly than in most other countries. The absence of a national religion in the history of The Netherlands and the religious abstention of the state have converted religion into a commodity. Nevertheless, an ever-growing number of religious groups will retain their position in the religious market and continue to have an impact that exceeds their numbers. The majority of the Dutch are sailing between the relatively small isles of these groups that form a grand archipelago of “remnants and renewals”. They do not settle down on one of the isles but call temporarily at several ports. Gradually they are becoming the majority, one which has lost contact with the isles from which it departed.

As a result of these processes, The Netherlands is faced with the same problem Durkheim saw France confronted with at the end of the 19th century, how to create morality and cohesion in a non-religious society. For the first time the Dutch are looking for national cohesion. In the pillarized society, social identity was not based on nationality. In this respect, the Dutch situation resembled the Australian society that Durkheim sketched in Les formes élémentaires. Not the tribe but the totem was the point of reference. Now that the tribe is merging, a national platform for morality has to be created. For the first time since state and church were separated, the Dutch government is challenged to create the structural conditions of national awareness as a basis for shared morality. It is an interesting paradox that while religious pluralism is becoming a European phenomenon, a new majority arises in the very society that was pluralistic by definition.

The culte de l’homme that is at the centre of Dutch civil religion is surely endowed with a European perspective. But as is well known, religion in Europe is a complex affair and in each country the situation is completely different (Baubérot, 1994). In fact, religion is a non-issue at the European legislative level and the treaty of Maastricht has no paragraph on it. The chairman of the European Parliament (Klaus Hänsch) declared that a joint agreement on religion is impossible and unwanted due to big differences between the nations (Evangelische Kommentare, August 1996).

Willaime (1996) observes a process of globalization at the individual level. He speaks of a “Europeanization from below” (p. 314). There are several indications that support this observation and the importance of the western European values of humanization, individualization and abstraction as the constituent elements of a culte de l’homme has been underlined. As Dobbelaeere (this issue, 1998) shows, Durkheim was rather optimistic about the globalization of this humanized, abstract religion; an optimism that is also found in his study on religion (1912: 413, 607 and 635; Durkheim uses the French terms universaliser and internationaliser). One wonders whether that optimism is justified. The individualized religion of the European people has different consequences in different countries. Also, individualism is a sociological, context-bound phenomenon. Moreover, it is contradictory and controversial. Many people are sincerely looking for a new religiosity with a mystical outlook, based on the best European values. But at the same time tendencies towards superstition and egoism continue to emerge.
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