

European Forum on Media, Religion, and Democracy

Brief introduction of the situation in the Netherlands for the benefit of European Forum on Media, Religion, and Democracy (2013)

Institutions

- Knowledge Centre Religion and Development (www.religion-and-development.nl)
- Oikos Foundation (www.stichtingoikos.nl/english)
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Religion in the public domain¹

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1. Introduction

The role of religion in the public domain is the subject of heated debate in The Netherlands. The role of the media is highly significant, if not essential. The media highlight and give voice to utterances of religion, the debate about it, the unease and irritations. However, the media are not only a medium between an incident (occurrence) on the one hand and the onlookers and participants on the other. They are also party to it. Primarily in the sense that they decide what, how and by whom it is communicated. Secondly in the sense that they themselves are more or less connected with a movement in the ideological landscape.

The discussion about religion in the public domain has increased in intensity every since September 11, 2001. Initially the unease was directed at Islam, subsequent to the attacks, including the visible presence of Islam in Dutch society. Later the focus of attention fanned out to other religiously inspired behaviour and ideas that were considered as conflicting with modern and enlightened civilisation. This unease about religion is expressed in a whole series of major and minor incidents and debates.

In particular the examples relate to integrity of the human body (genital mutilation, circumcision, covering the body, touching), food (ritual slaughter, dietary laws), sexuality, the position of women (education, the right to vote, work) and children (upbringing, education). All kinds of policy issues come into play: religious buildings, the training of religious leaders, subsidies and/or tasks commissioned to religiously inspired organisations (including denominational schools, youth work, broadcasting organisations, churches as election venues, etc), pastoral care in health care institutions, prisons and the armed forces. It is not always very clear what the distinction is between religion, tradition or culture.

¹ Non-scientific introduction to the Dutch context

The goals of the gathering of 22 November 2012 was not to better document these examples. What the initiators did want - together with a number of those directly involved - was to explore what the backgrounds of the secular unease in the media are in regard to such expressions of religion. Pieter Van Os accepted the challenge, as political philosopher and journalist with NCR Handelsblad. This newspaper has an elite, liberal and secular image. Next, four people shared their experiences with secular reactions to their religiously inspired activities or ambitions: Özcan Hidir (Islamic University of Rotterdam), Edward de Kam (Youth for Christ), Tamarah Benima (rabbi) and Pieter Kohnen (VKMO-Catholic Network). Leading the discussion was religious studies scholar and journalist Ruben Altena. The presentation by Pieter Van Os and a summary of the gathering have been included.

2. Dutch context

The origin of the Republic of The Netherlands is inextricably connected with the Reformation. The first decennia of the Kingdom of The Netherlands fit the image that The Netherlands was dominated by Calvinists. Until the constitution of 1848 the Dutch Reformed Church was closely linked to the state. Other religious denominations were tolerated. The Netherlands owes its considerable number of very impressive hidden churches to this tolerant attitude. Everyone knew where they were, but the buildings were not allowed to be recognisable as churches or synagogues in the street. This situation did not mean that there was great harmony among the Calvinists. The tensions between moderates and the strictly orthodox flared up time and again. The elite (merchants, regents) usually held more liberal religious views, while the common people felt more at home with orthodox religious beliefs. That is not to say that all Dutch held explicit ideas about faith or unbelief.

The constitution of 1848 gave other religious denominations the space to be present in Dutch society. The close ties between the Dutch Reformed Church and the Dutch state deteriorated step by step. These developments went hand in hand with a gradual differentiation of society. Domains such as science, the economy, culture and education tore away from the direction of regents (state) and clergy (church). Each domain followed its own dynamics with its own values, standards, practices and knowledge. The religious domain became one of many others. This form of secularisation was not accepted by all Christians. Some, notably those who were connected to the former reformed state church, held with their old, sometimes theocratic ideals. Others accepted the new situation and developed new strategies. One model was the distinction between the church as institution and the church as organism. The church as institution was manifest mainly in the religious domain and generally stayed away from interference in other domains such as politics, science or the economy. The church as organism comprised the presence of Christian organisations in the pertaining domains, such as in education, politics, health care, science, the media, literature etc.

The specific nature of those domains and the diversity of views within them were acknowledged. The purpose was and is to create space for personal views and practices and to steer developments in a personally desired directions. This method is also known as pillarisation (*verzuiling*). Its origins lay in the emancipation of the Christian Reformed² and their emancipation. In the course of the 20th century this method was more or less copied by Catholics, social democrats and humanists, followed

² Protestant minister, journalist, scientist and politician Abraham Kuijper is inextricably connected with this development.

by anthroposophists and evangelicals and Reformationalists. By the end of the 20th century this approach was suggested to Muslims as well.

By the end of the 20th century the confessional pillars are seen to lose in meaning. Already after the Second World War the obviousness of the joining of forces by Christians was challenged in various domains. Would it not be better to join forces with all people of good will on the basis of shared objectives and/or interests?

Should Christians and their denominations not take on their social responsibilities themselves, instead of leaving them to a host of Christian organisations? This so-called 'breakthrough' (doorbraak) was manifest predominately in circles of the Dutch Reformed Church³. The safety and familiarity of their own group continued to be cherished at that time: you were a confirmed member of the reformed church, a member of the Christian broadcasting channel (NCRV), the Christian Union (CNV) or farmer's organisation (CBTB, KNBTB), sent children to Christian schools, bought your groceries from a Christian grocer, voted for a Christian political party (ARP) and ended up in a Christian home for the elderly or hospital (Diaconessenhuis). It was not until the 1970s that this compartmentalisation began to crumble. Secularisation was spreading. New generations no longer automatically held the beliefs of their parents and grandparents. Decompartmentalisation, secularisation and individualisation went hand in hand.

Parallel to this process many Christian organisations changed in character. This was evident in education, health care, the media and also development aid. They conformed to the ruling customs in their domain, were confronted with conditions for subsidies⁴, also opted for mergers and wrestled with giving substance to their Christian identity. The organisations were assessed according to general criteria such as efficiency, efficacy, transparency, yield, entrepreneurship, quality systems etc. The ideological identity had to somehow try to stay standing in this business-like framework. The influence of the state (subsidies, procedures) and the market (competition) forced the identity of many segregated organisations to the sidelines.

3. The current Dutch context

Christians constitute a minority in Dutch society, now at the beginning of the 21st century. A minority which is also organisationally (and theologically) divided. Christians and Jewish communities now also have company from other substantial minorities such as Muslim and Hindu. Current discourse has become predominately secular in nature. Regarded from that perspective religion has become a matter of personal choice without public or political meaning. This idea rubs the wrong way with the self-understanding of many - certainly not all - of the faithful. Many believers hold the opinion that their faith affects their entire life, including their public and political life⁵.

³ The original state church from the 19th century.

⁴ Education, health care and also development aid are to a significant degree financed from general means (taxes and insurances) with all of the subsequent conditions involved.

⁵ This conviction is certainly not limited to Christians and Muslims who are known to be conservative or traditional. The public stance of churches, for instance with regard to immigration and social security also fit within this framework.

Far into the 20th century the majority of the Dutch population belonged to a Christian congregation. Christian inspired political parties were in a strong position of power. Non-Christians formed a minority. This situation was undoubtedly also reflected in rules and legislation. Rightfully or not, some rules and legislation and all kinds of habits are now experienced as being remnants of a Christian era of the past. There is a search - from resentment or not - for alternatives⁶.

The question is how much space is given to the various religious minorities. How to deal with the different convictions and customs? From a secular perspective they need to adapt to current rules and legislation. That applies both for individual believers as well as their organisations. Then the discussion is about the degree to which changes are wanted or feasible, how liberal or conservative these perspectives must come to apply.

The secularised demand total adaption as a matter of principle⁷; the liberals leave room for negotiation. These liberals do of course hold fast to their policy, but go in search of possibilities to respect the conscientious freedom of individuals. They also want to allow (some) room for the contribution of standpoints in the public and political debate that do not correspond with the standpoints of the majority.

Seen from a religious perspective this matter is viewed differently. Religiously inspired convictions and life styles have in them something of a holy duty.

- The first effort of 'believers' is to ask for space to be allowed to live in one's own circle (community) according to own convictions and traditions, behind their own front door. Much is allowed, but the debates are predominately about physical integrity of children and the positions of women and homosexuals within those communities.
- The second effort is to also be allowed to do these things in public. This is the basis of all those debates about clothing, symbols, buildings, bell-ringing, calls to prayer, etc. The debate is more heated when public functions are involved (the police officer, civil servants, the judge, teacher, etc).
- The third effort concerns the social, political and economic limiting conditions necessary to be able to live according to own convictions and traditions. Generally speaking this concerns amendments to rules and legislation, in society (mixed swimming), of specific professions (doctors, butchers), in chains between producers and consumers (chain management, dietary laws).
- The fourth effort is the remodelling of society according to own views of an ideal society. It is not sufficient to be safeguarded from abortion or euthanasia one's self, but both should be actively forced back.

⁶ D66 and VVD are leading in this matter. The Dierenpartij (Animal Rights Party) distinguishes itself on the issue of ritual slaughter, directed predominately at Jews and Muslims.. SGP, CU and CDA lead the opposition, sometimes from their own perceptions of common good, sometimes acting in the specific interests or convictions of others..

⁷ Examples: positions of homosexuals and sexual education at a very limited number of reformational schools; the refusing registrar (civil registrar who conscientiously objects to (own) involvement in marriage between people of the same gender).

This fourfold effort gives the impression of a thought-out strategy. And it may well exist, but the point is that the variety between and within this 'religious perspective' is unusually great. Even the distinction between liberals and secularized does not do justice to that variety. Many will absolutely not recognise themselves in such a conservative, perhaps even fundamentalist agenda and the corresponding convictions and traditions. What we see is that especially the secularized are heard in the media, time and again in an almost predictable fashion. The impression arises that we are faced with a choice of principle with regard to religion in the public domain, the freedom of religion or universal human rights, as if the moment has arrived of a separation of the spirits. This suggestion is extremely dangerous, because it can be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Something is clearly at issue here, namely how to deal with diversity. The art is to make reasonable practical choices amid all these dilemmas, together with those involved, in the center of society.