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Religious Searching in the Netherlands.

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ABSTRACT

The Netherlands changed from a religious and church going society into one of the most secularized countries in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. This change was partly a result of the collapse of the 'pillar system' that was characteristic of Dutch society. All the Churches are divided between conservative and progressive Christians. Dutch Christians live in a post-secularized society, a society in a process of detraditionalisation and de-christianization. However, people are searching for religion.

TEXT

When I joined the Order of Preachers in 1958, the Dutch province had almost 600 members. Today it has 95 members and the average age is 73. The Netherlands numbers 1557 parishes, 1112 priests, often elderly, 286 deacons and 774 male and female pastoral workers. *Officially there are still*

4.6 million Catholics – 28 % of the Dutch population - but many of them no longer see themselves as members of the Catholic Church. Only 8.6 % go to church regularly. 18.5 % of the Catholics are over 65 years of age. The 'Protestant Church in the Netherlands' has 2.5 million members. 73% of those born after 1960 do not relate to any Church. At present, Dutch society seems to be quite allergic to Christian faith.

During the last fifty years Dutch society changed quickly and fundamentally. Before the Second World War Dutch society consisted of 'three peoples rolled into one': Protestants, belonging to different Churches, Catholics, and the group of non-churchgoers: Liberals and Socialists. Each group contained more or less one third of the population. Because of their struggle in the 19th century to get their schools subsidized Protestants and Catholics set up political parties and other social organisations. The liberals and socialists followed suit. The so-called 'pillars' emerged.¹ 'Pillarisation' means that society is split up and organized according to religious confessions and denominations, and political convictions. Each pillar founded schools, a university, hospitals and other institutions of medical care, and also set up papers, radio and

¹ A. Lijphart, *The politics of accommodation: pluralism and democracy in the Netherlands*, Berkely (University of California Press, 1968).

TV stations, a farmers' association, a labour union, and even sporting clubs! One of the best football clubs in my country is called RKC, a Roman Catholic Club, though I doubt if any of the players is a Catholic. Each pillar, this network of organisations, had a strong and sharply defined identity over against the other pillars. 'We are Catholics'; we are not like the Protestants, liberals and socialists. The 'pillars' were, so to speak, states within a state. The leaders of the pillars made use of modern managerial structures, but at the same time wanted to protect their people against modernity, especially against individualism. The 'pillarized' networks dominated and controlled a great deal of politics and public life and influenced the private life of millions of people as well. The Churches provided for the religious, ethical and ideological foundations of their pillars and guaranteed social cohesion.

The Catholic pillar made a great contribution to the emancipation of the Catholics. Until the constitution of 1848 Dutch Catholics were regarded as second-class citizens. Socially most of them belonged to the working class. In 1853 the Episcopal hierarchy was re-established after almost three centuries. In the decades after 1853 the Catholics built up a huge and vast pillar by which they were emancipated from their social,

economical and political deprivation. The pillar transformed the Catholics into proud and self-confident members of Dutch society.

In the Netherlands the social control, exercised through the pillars, was stronger than in most countries of Western Europe. In politics, the state could only be governed if a coalition was formed by at least two of the three pillars. The leadership of each pillar conferred with the leaders of the other two pillars and at the end of long deliberations behind closed doors the birth of a new government was announced. The leadership of each party could easily claim that they had got most out of the negotiations as no one was able to contradict the main negotiator due to lack of information. In spite of the democratic constitution of the country, a small group made all the major decisions. Local Protestant ministers and Catholic parish priests were much respected and had a great influence on public and private life. At least every year, the Catholic parish priest or his curate paid a visit to every family in the parish. One of the customary questions was about when the next child was due to be born. Many Protestant communities were – and some are still - very strict about women's dress – long skirts, no trousers – and Sunday was turned into a real Sabbath: no playing for the children, buying something was forbidden for you made other people work. People were supposed to go to church twice each Sunday: in the

morning to hear a sermon on a scriptural text and in the evening to hear a sermon on one of the questions of the Heidelberg catechism. In the Catholic churches and chapels women had to have their head covered. The suppression of sexuality in both the Catholic and Protestant pillar was quite rigorous; it was a subject that was hardly ever discussed. The psychological climate in the Catholic Church before the Second World War was stifling. Clericalism was strong. The number of religious vocations was high. Many men and women became missionaries to ensure the eternal salvation of those in Africa and Asia, because the official faith was, that there was no salvation for those outside the Catholic Church. Before and after the Second World War about 10 % of the bishops in the world were Dutch. This was due to the missionary activities of Dutch Catholics.

In the sixties and the seventies of the 20th century the 'pillarized' society in the Netherlands broke up. During the Second World War people discovered that they had more in common than they had thought before. Moreover, the pillars had given people a sense of security so that they became less afraid to leave their pillar and to meet members of other pillars on equal footing. They met as individuals: the process of freedom of the individual had started. This process was enhanced by a great improvement in economic prosperity. In 1959 wages increased by 18%

and Dutch society became a consumer society. This development enabled people to make more decisions of their own concerning their life style, their work and the environment they wanted to live in. Career, education, family life, sexuality, political conviction, faith, became subjects of personal choice. Moreover, a new religious group, the Muslims, became part of Dutch society. *This created a dialogue with the world religions.*

Because social control, exercised through the pillars, had been very strong in the Netherlands, so the revolt against it in the sixties and the seventies had more impact in this country than elsewhere. The numbers of those who left the Churches during the sixties and the seventies were higher than in the neighbouring countries. Between 1960 and 1969, 149 members of the Dutch Dominican province left the Order.

When the pillars collapsed, authenticity, personal growth and emancipation were supposed to point the way to the future. To take one's place in the new fragmented world would only be possible by looking for a personal way of life, which is authentically yours, to enable you gradually to find your 'true' self and set you free from the pressure of the social 'system' and the 'establishment'. Religion did not disappear

but became focussed on the question on how to relate to the inner core of the individual Self. *The Platonic and Augustinian dualism and hierarchy of a spiritual world, that is supposed to exist above our material world and is seen as its source, disappeared.*² *Spirit and matter may still be distinguished but the spiritual world reveals itself in the material one, transcendence is to be found in immanence, and eternal life is found in the quality of everyday life.*

Today, 'pillarised' society has vanished almost completely. The Churches influence has been eroded, and the same happened to the 'pillarised' institutions which depended on them and the values represented by them. Because the leadership of the pillars acted in a patronizing way many people, who wanted to break free, abandoned the ethical and religious contents of these pillars as well. Many Catholics began pleading for changes in the liturgy; for the abolition of celibacy; for more democracy in the Church; for more ecumenism (today intercommunion is an ordinary practice in many parishes); for a greater participation of layman and laywomen; and latterly for the ordination of

² See for this neo-platonic paradigm and its collapse: A. Lascaris, 'Faith in God in a Postmodern Age' in: *Bulletin ET* 10 (1999) Nr 1, 25-28.

women. Parishes cannot survive without the efforts of numerous laypeople, most of them women, who do not only clean church buildings or take care of the administration, but also conduct funerals, preach and lead 'Word and Communion' services that have replaced the Eucharist in many places because of the lack of priests. At some places, members of different Churches come together and celebrate the Eucharist without a Catholic priest or protestant minister being present.

The Vatican reacted to the changes by appointing new bishops who were poor communicators, but whose loyalty and obedience to the Vatican were not in doubt.³ Anonymous letters from conservative Catholics in Holland formed an important source of information for the Vatican. Contrary to their colleagues of forty years ago, today's bishops are not able or even willing to bridge the gap between religious traditions and modern society. On the contrary, their efforts seem to aim at widening the gap between Church and society. In this way they want to protect the Church from what they consider as the dangers of

³ See for the Vatican policy concerning the Church in the Netherlands in the eighties: A. Lascaris, 'Dutch Catholicism: A Church Facing Exile?', in: *Doctrine and Life*, 30 (1980) 80- 89; 'The Dutch synod one year later', in: *Doctrine and Life* 31 (1981) 647 - 654. 'A Disappointing Tale: The Dutch Catholic Church 1970- 1980', in: *New Blackfriars* 66 (1985) 138- 146.

(post)modern society. The bishops seem to hope to preserve the traditionally strong identity of the Catholic Church and of her faith, morals and doctrines. They lay great emphasis on the difference between laypeople – among them the pastoral workers - and the ordained deacon and priest. Their policy is focussed on promoting vocations of priests in the Tridentine tradition. Actually, there are many theologically very well qualified and academically educated lay pastoral workers in the Dutch Catholic Church, partly because of the lack of priests. The bishops consider these lay workers, however, as a necessary evil. They tolerate the existence of lay pastoral workers because they need them, but the bishops do not encourage and support them in their work. They tell them what they are not allowed to do because they are afraid that their ministry undermines the sacramental and sacred character of the Church. Time and again the bishops emphasise the unbridgeable gap between laymen/laywomen and priests. They fuse parishes; the territory of a new parish may well cover the territory of a former deanery. Such a mega parish, consisting of seven or more units, may have one priest and three or four pastoral workers. Either the priest or one of the members of the pastoral team is the leader and fulfils the task of a parish priest.

Even though the situation of the Church in the Netherlands would have been better if the Vatican had reacted in a more creative way the process of dechristianization would not have stopped. There are great challenges for today's Christians: the collapse of the pillar structure; the rejection of the dualism of spirit and matter; the new way of reading Scripture as a theological text (full of metaphors, rather than as a historical and devotional text); the discovery of the historical character of Christianity; the desire to make decision-making in the Church more democratic; the development of science; the prosperity created by economic rivalry; the call of politicians to spend more money and to consume more goods. The collective search of individuals for the development of the inner Self does not fit in with the attempts of the Churches to maintain or create communities of believers.

Religion is not disappearing in the Netherlands. Many people are looking for an answer to their questions: What is the meaning of their life? How should they act in a world full of uncertainty? And, what should they hope for? Moreover, religion has become a topic of public debate again because of the growing Muslim population. There are almost one million Muslims in the Netherlands out of a population of more than 16 million. Most Muslims originate from Turkey and Morocco; most so-called Moroccans are Berbers who

do not speak Arabic, but have their own language. The Muslim migrants are wrestling with the question of how to relate to a secular and democratic society. Being a Muslim minority is for them a new experience. Many people link the threat of terrorism with the Islam and with religion in general.

Christians are a minority in the Netherlands as well. Concerning the Catholics they can be divided roughly into three 'groups' or rather strands of thought.

- A small, but powerful conservative strand, sometimes even fundamentalist, is often supported by the bishops. The few young Catholics often belong to this group. I expect that this strand may become much stronger in the future. For apart from the Muslim migrants, there are about 800,000 Christian migrants.

Many of them belong to an evangelical or a charismatic movement.

- A strand that adopted the ideals of ecumenism and of a multiform Church that they saw embodied in the movements around Vatican II. For them theology means, first of all, interpreting the world in relationship to God, rather than, explaining and justifying the doctrine of the Church.⁴ The members of this strand to which I belong myself, are getting old and are disappointed because they are confronted on the one hand with the ideal of uniformity of Pope John

⁴ See Thomas Aquinas Sum. Theol. I,1,a.7c.

Paul II and pope Benedict XVI, and on the other hand with the pluralism of society in which everything goes. They have transferred their doubts and questions to their children, the next generation, but this generation did not pick up the commitment of their parents to the Church in spite of their doubts. It is uncertain whether this strand will have a future. For openness and vulnerability, the qualities of this group, are not easy to live with.

- A third strand oscillates between the two groups; its members are often not aware of the historical developments of the last fifty years because they were too young at the time of Vatican II.

So the future of the Church in the Netherlands may well be in the hands of the conservative strand. Its members are a part of the conservative majority in the Catholic Church world-wide. Will they dominate the Church of the future?

Here we are confronted with an important issue. It may well become the topic of the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI. In a postmodern world, these Christians wish to have a Church with clear boundaries, in which people have a strong identity over against people who are Protestant, Orthodox, Muslim, Buddhist or Atheist. 'We are Catholics because we are not Protestants, Muslims etc.'

However, communities with a strong identity are often based on scapegoating. We are strong and we are one because we are all against this person, this group or this system, for instance against individualism and against modern life. In such communities, individuals are supposed to sacrifice themselves on behalf of the community. Sacrificial language abounds. Such groups have a hierarchical structure for the dividing line between 'us' and 'them' is internalised as well. The violence of the scapegoating system is concealed. The scapegoat is supposed to be evil and has to be driven out, but at the same time it unites the community and is the source of the internal peace. It is therefore 'sacred' in the sense of something that is a taboo. It inspires fear and it seeks to be idolised and worshipped. In Europe, the Jews were the scapegoat par excellence: they were strange and evil, but, of course, Jewish medical doctors were supposed to be better doctors. In my opinion the Vatican document 'Redemptionis Sacramentum', published on 25 March 2004, shows many traits of this kind of thinking with its rigid rules, its emphasis on the nature of the Eucharist as a sacrifice, on the sacred, *on the 'essential difference' between laypeople and ordained ministers, and on the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Lay people are not allowed to preach in the celebration of*

Holy Mass. It is not licit for the faithful to hand the host and the chalice from one to another. This document tries to play down the ritual of the Eucharist as a sharing of bread and wine in which the risen Lord is present. Its plea for the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament underlines the static character of this interpretation of the Eucharist with a primacy of 'transformation' over 'distribution' as in the ritual of the Old Roman Mass.⁵ The faithful are invited to kneel down and adore rather than to share with one another and to be sent out into the world in which so many people are starving. Priests should celebrate daily, even if it should not be possible to have the faithful present (with the consequence that there is no real breaking and sharing). It conceives the Church mainly as the communion of pope, bishops and priests, instead as the people of God, as was usual during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and immediately afterwards.

Most Dutch Dominicans prefer an open Church in which the members are vulnerable and have a weak identity. They reject the strong dividing line between laypeople and ordained ministers. Bishops, priests and deacons should serve the community by promoting mutual

⁵ Cf. J. FitzPatrick, *In Breaking of Bread. The Eucharist and Ritual*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 213.

communication, communication with God and with those who are strangers. The community, the people of God, is the bearer of the liturgy. It is called to be a non-violent, non-repressive community, gathered together around the victim, not united in order to take revenge or to assume the attitude of the eternal victim, but committed to forgive and to respond to violence by non-violent, often paradoxical solutions.

Though the Dutch province of the Order of Preachers is dying, it is still full of life. It uses its very limited manpower and its money to maintain several organisations, which help laypeople to help themselves and to find their rightful place in the Church. The province runs an adult education centre in the priory at Huissen (DAC), a conference centre in the priory at Zwolle (De Doorgang), two places where young people can meet each other and discover something about themselves and their faith - again in Huissen and Zwolle -, an organisation to teach people to read scripture (DTS), and the small study centre for theology and society (DSTS) with two Dominican friars and two women theologians – for I think we need the contribution of feminist theology if we want to be a theological centre in our society. In February 2005, this study centre

published a book in honour of our confrere, the well-known theologian Edward Schillebeeckx who became ninety in November 2004.⁶ *He has always pleaded for the Church as the people of God, against a magic, 'sacred' interpretation of the ordained ministry and in favour of its ministerial, serving, character.*

What will the future Church in the Netherlands look like? Will she be a small stronghold, defending itself against the world outside, built like a pyramid in which all things come from above and the laity depend on the clergy, or will she rather be like a circle, gathered around the crucified one, vulnerable, always open to newcomers, in which people have different tasks and functions with the leadership as one of them?

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⁶ *Ons rakelings nabij. Gedaanteveranderingen van God en geloof.* (M. Kalsky, A. Lascaris, L. Oosterveen eds) Meinema, Zoetermeer, 2005.