

Holland's Post-Secular Future / Christianity is dead. Long live Christianity!

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Amsterdam

When the "corporate prayer" movement first started in 1996, few people in Holland took any notice. Why should they have done so? After all, Holland's manifest destiny was to become a fully secularized country, in which prayer was considered at best an irrational but harmless pastime. That was then. Cue forward to 2006, when prayer in the workplace is fast becoming a universally accepted phenomenon. More than 100 companies participate. Government ministries, universities, multinational companies like Philips, KLM, and ABN AMRO--all allow groups of employees to organize regular prayer meetings at their premises. Trade unions have even started lobbying the government for recognition of workers' right to prayer in the workplace.

The idea that secularization is the irreversible wave of the future is still the conventional wisdom in intellectual circles here. They would be bemused, to say the least, at a Dutch relapse into religiosity. But as the authors of a recently published study called *De Toekomst van God* (The Future of God) point out, organized prayer in the workplace is just one among several pieces of evidence suggesting that Holland is on the threshold of a new era--one we might call the age of "post-secularization." In their book, Adjiedj Bakas, a professional trend-watcher, and Minne Buwalda, a journalist, argue that Holland is experiencing a fundamental shift in religious orientation: "Throughout Western Europe, and also in Holland, liberal Protestantism is in its death throes. It will be replaced by a new orthodoxy."

According to Bakas and Buwalda, God is back in Europe's most notoriously liberal country. Or rather: The Dutch are moving back to God. It seems an implausible hypothesis. After all, Europe was supposed to have entered the realm of post-Christianity, to use C.S. Lewis's term--a state of eternal unbelief from which there is no return. And yet, Bakas and Buwalda claim, the Dutch are turning back. Take the almost unnoticed reintroduction of crucifixes and other religious artifacts into the classrooms of Catholic schools throughout the country. Years of gradual but seemingly unstoppable secularization have given way to a reaffirmation of old religious identities. The change is also starting to affect the attitudes of pupils at these schools. In a recent newspaper interview, a head teacher at a Catholic secondary school in Rotterdam observed, "For years, pupils were embarrassed about attending Mass. Now, they volunteer to read poems or prayers, and the auditorium is packed."

There's also the remarkable critical and commercial success of a number of openly Christian writers. Holland's most prestigious literary prizes were awarded in 2005 to books dealing in a sympathetic way with Christian issues of faith and redemption. The Libris Literatuur Prize went to the Catholic author Willem Jan Otten for his *Specht en zoon* (Specht and son) while the AKO Literature Prize was awarded to Calvinist Jan Siebelink's *Knielen op een bed violen* (Kneeling on a Bed of Violets). Siebelink's novel sold nearly 350,000 copies in its first year, making it the single bestselling Dutch-language book of the past decade--apart, that is, from a new Bible translation published in 2004, which sold more than half a million copies (in a population of 16 million people).

The success in the Netherlands of the so-called Alpha Course program--a sort of Christianity 101 for beginners--is another case in point. The Alpha formula, first developed at Holy Trinity Brompton in London, aims to provide small groups of interested people with an introduction to Christianity through a series of meals-with-discussion evenings. Since its inception in 1997, 120,000 people have taken the Dutch version of the course. The number of related courses is growing by around one hundred a year. Prison Alpha, Business Alpha, Student Alpha, Youth Alpha, and more recently the Alpha Marriage Course: Collectively, they seem to have struck a chord in Holland's secular society. Jan Bakker, national coordinator of Alpha Holland, admits he is as surprised as anyone about the success of the program: "There are still those who laugh at Christianity. But there's a growing group, most of them young people, who are genuinely interested, for whom this is all completely new."

There's statistical evidence to back up the "new orthodoxy" hypothesis. First of all, there's the undeniable fact of the continued decline and fall of the old liberal religious order. Worst hit are the mainstream Protestant churches, whose membership declined from 23 percent of the population in the late 1950s to 6 percent today. According to government

estimates, by 2020 this figure will have dwindled to a mere 2 percent. The decline of liberal Protestantism has been matched by that of liberal Catholicism. The once-powerful Catholic Eighth of May group--a liberation theology movement born out of a mass meeting on May 8, 1985, to protest against Pope John Paul II's visit to the Netherlands--was disbanded in November 2003 because of lack of interest among its rapidly declining membership. More broadly, aging Catholic congregations mean that Roman Catholicism, too, will likely face another decade or so of declining membership. From 42 percent of the population in 1958 and 17 percent today, membership could fall to as low as 10 percent before leveling off around 2020.

In spite of this decline of the old religious establishment, however, the century-long wave of secularization seems to have crested, and may even have begun to recede. The Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) finds that the number of self-described Christians stopped declining as early as the beginning of the 1990s. Among the under-20s, the number has started to increase in recent years. If the CBS figures are to be believed, in 2005 a small majority of the Dutch population (52 percent) still called itself Christian. The figures are disputed, however, by another major government research body, the Social and Cultural Planning Agency (SCP). The SCP uses a stricter definition of religiosity, allowing only those who not only describe themselves as Christians but also belong to a particular church to be counted as "real" Christians. The others, the so-called "fringe Christians," are not attached to a particular church and are excluded from the official head count. Even by the SCP's strict standards, Christians still form a 40 percent plurality among the wider population. Much like the CBS statistic, the SCP's 40 percent figure hasn't changed since the early 1990s.

From both sets of figures, it seems clear that something of a high-water mark for secularization in Holland was set in the last decade. What is less clear is what is happening now and what happens next. If 40-50 percent of the population are Christian, yet only half of these are in traditional churches, Protestant or Catholic, what is going on with religion in Holland?

The reason the Christian population of Holland has stopped shrinking and is likely to avoid further decline is a phenomenon that until now has been largely overlooked by commentators on Dutch politics and society: Christian immigration. Analysts usually focus on the one million Muslim immigrants and their offspring who have made the Netherlands their home since the early 1950s. But in the past decade, Muslim immigration has been overtaken by a larger stream of immigrants, namely Christians from Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe. An SCP estimate puts the number of Christian immigrants in Holland at around 700,000-- and rising fast. Recent immigration reports suggest that for every new Muslim moving to Holland, there are at least two new Christian immigrants.

They meet in churches like the one led by Rev. Stanley Hofwijks. Shortly after arriving from Suriname in the mid-1970s, Hofwijks became the pastor of a small Amsterdam-based charismatic Christian community of just under 40 members. The congregation met in a room in a local Dutch Reformed Church, which at the time still counted around a thousand members. They are long gone. The church building now belongs to Hofwijks's evangelical church, Maranatha Ministries, which numbers some 1,800 members. Hofwijks anticipates his congregation will eventually outgrow the building. He is already looking at buying and converting an old warehouse that would hold around 2,000.

Hofwijks is not surprised by the explosive growth of his congregation: "If you look closely, you'll see that only the traditional churches are affected by secularization. Almost all nontraditional churches are growing, and growing strongly. The reason is simple: While the message stays the same, the methods change to suit the times. If people want it, we'll have flags, loud music, people jumping up and down in the pews, even hip-hop. But Jesus remains the same as he was 2,000 years ago. The Word never changes." His main challenge is not secularization but increased competition from other immigrant churches. Amsterdam already counts around 170 immigrant church communities, and new ones are founded every month. Hofwijks doesn't seem to mind: "Competition is good, it keeps you humble. It also keeps you focused on what really matters: following God, being close to Him."

As Hofwijks leans back in his chair, the building starts to shake to the sound of loudspeakers bellowing 100-decibel praises to the Almighty: "COME, NOW IS THE TIME TO WORSHIP!!" It's the start of a youth service in the church's main hall. Around 150 young people have gathered to spend their Friday evening in praise and prayer. They're part of another recent Christian phenomenon: the so-called youth churches, congregations of under-30s who gather in school buildings or sports halls to worship God, sometimes in rather unorthodox ways ("Skateboarding for Christ").

The doyen of the Dutch youth churches movement is Henk Jan Kamsteeg. He is a member of the pastoral team ("Wow, that sounds old-fashioned! Why not call me an initiator, or a group leader?") at the Heartbeat youth church, founded three years ago in the medieval market town of Amersfoort, about 40 miles east of Amsterdam. The church, which has a

congregation of around 1,200, meets once a month in a Christian cultural center in one of the town's modern suburbs. Kamsteeg witnessed firsthand a phenomenon that, according to the old secularization thesis, was virtually unheard of: large numbers of young people deciding of their own free will to attend church services--and coming back for more. When he announced the first service three years ago, he hired a hall that seated a maximum of 500 people. On the night, 850 turned up--though nothing special had been done to advertise the event. "I've long since ceased to be amazed about the amount of interest in youth churches," says Kamsteeg. "Twelve-hundred people showing up, two services a night, you almost take it for granted. But deep down I still know how remarkable it really is."

Since the founding of the first Dutch youth churches in 2001, their numbers have risen significantly--from 45 churches serving around 10,000 young people in 2003 to 88 serving more than 20,000 in 2005. In a way, these youth churches are the tip of another iceberg on the path of the *SS Secularization*. The number of churchgoing Christians is still dropping among all other age groups, but among the under-20s it is rising again, and by a significant margin. A CBS survey noted that between 2003 and 2004, church attendance among under-20s rose seemingly inexplicably, from 9 percent to 14 percent. As expected, the survey prompted a skeptical response from social commentators. Not from the SCP, however: In a recent report it basically confirmed the CBS's findings, observing that "it is noticeable that since 1997, the secularization curve among 16 to 30-year-olds has leveled off. In the last few years, it even seems to be declining."

Apart from being a herald of potential change from secular to post-secular society, youth churches are also an indicator of another significant development, namely the move away from the church of bricks and mortar to a less clearly recognizable, more informal setting. Youth churches seem to meet anywhere but in traditional church buildings: cultural centers, sports halls, school assembly rooms, parking lots, even in night clubs. The idea is that something that less resembles a traditional church might prove more welcoming to potential new believers. It is perhaps also an attempt by this new movement to put distance between itself and mainstream churches who, in the eyes of many young Christians, represent the failure of the "old approach." According to Kamsteeg, if Christianity in Holland is to have a future, it has to develop a new way of doing things, possibly also in new locations: "Young people are genuinely interested in Christ. They're just not into two-hour sermons, dreary music, and drafty old buildings." The ultimate consequence of this approach is yet another new phenomenon: that of the house churches.

In his living room in the old university town of Leiden, Kees Westhuis, 41, explains the essence of the house church idea: "We don't want to *go* to church, we want to *be* a church." Westhuis was raised in the Dutch Reformed tradition, but found himself increasingly frustrated with the worldly concerns of his local church: "During one meeting of the church elders, debate turned to the cost of refurbishing the church buildings. I found myself wondering whether, instead of spending all this money on bricks and mortar, we wouldn't be better off spending it on evangelizing in the community."

The answer to Westhuis's concerns came to him in the form of a book that has inspired the founding of most house churches in the Netherlands: German author Wolfgang Simson's *Houses that Change the World* (first published as *Häuser, die Welt verändern* in 1999). The most appealing aspect of the house church, according to Westhuis, is its simplicity. At its core, the house church is based on the practice of the earliest Christian communities of the first century: small groups of people meeting in each other's houses, sharing a meal and worshipping God. Westhuis: "The idea is that you don't just share a meal once a week, you actually share your lives. It's a radical departure from modern life, which leaves most people feeling increasingly lonely."

The Dutch house church movement, according to recent studies, has witnessed remarkable growth over the past decade or so: from a mere handful in the 1970s to just under 20 in 1990 to around 100 in 2000, and continuing upwards since then. Henk Vink runs a website offering support and facilities to budding home churches. He estimates that most of Holland's 200 cities now have at least one home church in them. The first time Vink realized something big was happening was when he organized a series of regional conferences for people interested in house churches. He'd expected small groups of maybe 10 people per meeting; instead more than 50 people showed up at each of the 12 regional meetings: "It's evidence of a growing spiritual hunger in society. People are really searching for truth."

He may well be right. The question, though, is whether Christianity is best placed to profit from this development. For better or for worse, Dutch Christianity is now largely an underground phenomenon. If an average Dutchman has any picture of Christianity, it is of empty pews and derelict church buildings. Dutch Christians have increasingly withdrawn from the public sphere, either voluntarily--as in the case of the house churches and the youth church movement--or because they lack the confidence to speak publicly about their faith to an unbelieving audience. If they do enter the public sphere, as in the case of the Alpha course, they do so under a neutered, de-Christianized guise: not imposing their views, merely inviting people to come along, have a meal, and ask any questions they like. They may be successful, but a city

upon a hill they are not--more like a city in wartime, its lights hidden behind thick dark curtains. Any genuine seeker might stumble past it without knowing it was even there.

What that seeker will find, and very visibly, is Islam. While Dutch Christianity is making the move from church buildings to living rooms, sports centers, and factory halls, Dutch Islam is moving in the opposite direction. At the Kostverlorenvaart in the Amsterdam suburb of De Baarsjes, the foundations are being laid for a new mosque, with a 110-foot-high dome and 140-foot-high minarets. "We don't want to pray in basements and school buildings anymore. We want a proper mosque," is how Fatih Dag explains the idea behind this project. Dag is chairman of the board of the local Aya Sofia Mosque. He says he understands local objections to the scale of the project: "Of course, if I were living in Turkey and people wanted a big new church next to my house, I might object too. But the fact is that we are here, and we're here to stay. And we want a place to worship." Indeed, in all major towns in Holland, building projects are under way for the construction of supersized mosques.

They're symbols of Dutch Islam's remarkable growth over the past 30 years, from less than 1 percent of the population in 1970 to 6 percent today. According to SCP predictions, that growth is set to continue to around 7.5 percent in 2020--a significant increase, to be sure, but nowhere near the apocalyptic figures predicted by those who fear Holland will become a majority Islamic country by the end of the 21st century. One reason it won't is that Islam, at least in its Dutch variant, is not a proselytizing faith. When asked about the importance of proselytizing, Dag volunteered that, on his list of priorities, trying to convert the indigenous Dutch population comes "just about last." Even the most optimistic estimates of Dutch Muslim organizations put the number of converts to Islam at no more than a few hundred a year. With immigration from Islamic countries grinding to a halt and birth rates among the Muslim community further approximating average Dutch birthrates with each new generation, it seems unlikely to say the least that visions of a caliphate in Holland will come to pass in this century--or the next, for that matter.

Since they don't seem to be interested in spreading the good news of Muhammad, the main priority of the Islamic communities in Holland will be to fight off the twin challenges of apathy and apostasy. Apathy is not yet a challenge in a community that defines Islam largely in cultural rather than religious terms. But once the third and fourth generations of offspring of the original immigrants start to replace the first generation, these cultural ties will start to lose some of their binding force. At the same time, it's far from clear that Dutch Islam will be able to keep religious liberalism at bay indefinitely. With government sponsorship--and the accompanying demands of gender neutrality--of university-based imam training courses about to become a reality, the day is not far off when the first feminist and gay imams will start preaching in mosques in Holland. There is no reason to assume Islam will be any better placed to deal with this liberal onslaught than mainstream Christianity was in the 1950s and '60s.

In the meantime, Islam is already finding itself in a difficult position fighting off another threat, namely that of apostasy. Traditional approaches--honor killings and *fatwas*--have caused outrage among Holland's general public and political class. That doesn't mean these intimidation tactics won't be effective in the short term--in a recent article in a Dutch political magazine about Islamic converts to Christianity, most sources would talk only on condition of anonymity. But in the long term, they won't work if they don't have the full force of the law behind them (as they do in most Islamic countries). Inevitably, Christian evangelists will try to develop ways of communicating with the Islamic community with a view to converting its members. At Alpha Course Netherlands, they're already receiving requests for Alpha course material specifically aimed at an Islamic audience. Alpha Netherlands coordinator Jan Bakker was quick to stress that there is no formal plan to develop such material. But, he added, "we never really have a pre-prepared plan for anything. We just wait to see where God wants us to move. If this is one direction He wants us to take, then we'll take it."

It seems unlikely, then, that Dutch Islam will prove to be a serious long-term competitor with Christianity. The latter has little to fear from a rival that refuses to proselytize and has yet to go through the refining fire of the struggle with religious liberalism. Christians may even profit from their encounter with Islam. Muslims may not seek to convert, but unlike their Christian counterparts, they do speak confidently in public about their faith. And through their building projects, they also show that God can still be a very visible presence in the community. If Dutch Christians want to learn again what it means not to hide your light under a bushel, they could do worse than look at their Islamic neighbors.

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