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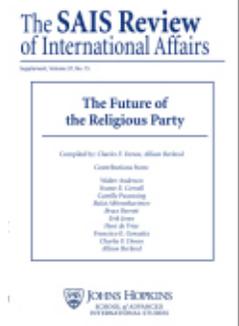
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SAIS Review of International Affairs, Volume 37, Number 1S, Supplement
2017, pp. S-89-S-103 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2017.0017>



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Reverse Breakthrough: The Dutch Connection

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Introduction

During and immediately after World War II, the Dutch term *doorbraak* (breakthrough) became a spiritual rallying cry for political renewal in the Netherlands.¹ It designated the then decidedly progressive idea that religious faith should no longer exclusively, or even primarily, determine one's political views and affiliations with political parties. Its ambition, first formulated by a group of functionaries who were taken hostage by the German occupation in Sint Michielsgestel, was to convince open-minded Roman Catholic and Protestants to join forces with social and liberal democrats and religious socialists to form one broad political party. Such a broad coalition of forces seemed necessary during the postwar period of *wederopbouw* (reconstruction); economic recovery and social consensus was imperative but a multitude of national wounds also required healing.

The term *doorbraak* was used in the concluding lines of a speech by Willem Banning in February 1946, at the founding congress of the Dutch Labor Party (Partij van de Arbeid, PvdA), when it joined the members of several parties that had been dissolved the day before: the Social Democratic Workers' Party (Sociaal-democratische Arbeiderspartij, SDAP), the Liberal-Democratic Union (Vrijzinnig-Democratische Bond, VDB), and the Christian Democratic Union (Christelijk-Democratische Unie, CDU). Individual members from the Christian Historical Union (Christelijke Historische Unie, CHU), which would go on to exist as a separate political entity, signed up with Roman Catholics who had contributed the resistance journal *Christofoor voor God en Vaderland* during the war.²

Deep down, however, the *doorbraak* was a painfully belated reaction against the perils of *verzuiling* (pillarization) that had stifled Dutch society in the interbellum and failed to prevent the rise and political success of National-Socialism. Its roots reached back to the mid-nineteenth century and post-

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Napoleonic age, and it would take time for it to lose its social and cultural grips on the political imagination.³

While the “breakthrough” motif was antithetical to the very opposition between believers and non-believers, which embodied the Protestant Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) that former prime minister Abraham Kuyper founded, it also self-corrected a deeply ingrained anti-religious sentiment that dominated much of the early socialist movement. Yet, as already indicated, the tendency towards *ontzuijing* (depillarization) gained traction only in the 1970s when deconfessionalization finally became a social, cultural, and political factor of some importance. The first breakthrough was an internal matter to the newly founded PvdA, more than anything else. It would take two decades before this phenomenon spread throughout Dutch society and its political culture as a whole.

There are many reasons for this later development that are beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say, the perils of immigration and the post-9/11 obsession with political “radical Islam” had an effect, just as the apparent realization of “a lack of morality and meaningfulness within the narrow parameters of today’s pragmatic politics, the one-sided economic paradigm, and the dogma of enlightened self-interest did.”⁴ Job Cohen, the former successful Mayor of Amsterdam and former unsuccessful leader of the Dutch Labor Party (PvdA), from whom these words are borrowed, adds on to this observation while raising a provocative question. There is, he writes, a worrisome overindulgence that leads to “complacency, which in turn reduces our capacity to fight for the principles we stand for.... Is it possible that there is a moral shortfall that is not being made good on on the basis of a renewed assessment of the sources of social democracy—with which only a few people are still familiar?”⁵

Cohen here seems to echo some of the concerns that informed the debate between Jürgen Habermas and Cardinal Josef Ratzinger on the so-called dialectic of secularization, revolving around the presumed normative deficit of modern, rationalized, and differentiated societies, of markets and bureaucratic states, and of lifeworlds and functional systems. But, as we will see, Cohen offers an original perspective, suggesting that religion, if not necessarily religious parties, may be the very locus or medium in and through which a genuine

Rather, what these debates have produced is a much better understanding of an alternative, somewhat surprising, indeed paradoxical, truth—namely, the apparent inability of modern European democratic states, not least the Netherlands, to more fully appreciate and effectively deal with religion.

solidarity and social cohesiveness—of a “discipline of tolerance,” premised upon “the truth of truth,” as Joseph H.H. Weiler has provocatively called it⁶—can be both envisioned and practiced.

All this is not to say that the secularization narrative with its emphasis on the privatization of religious beliefs necessarily holds its ground. Rather, what these debates have produced is a much better understanding of an alternative, somewhat

surprising, indeed paradoxical, truth—namely, the apparent inability of modern European democratic states, not least the Netherlands, to more fully appreciate and effectively deal with religion. This inability is exemplified by the difficulty the Dutch society and its elites have experienced in recent decades in accommodating the influx of Muslim immigrant workers. Add to this the effects of the recent European refugee crisis and a fuller, even more daunting challenge arises. After all, these demographic trends raised the specter, if not of the false myth of a “Muslim tide,”⁷ then at the very least of the increasing realization of mounting difficulties in social integration and tolerance. As I have argued elsewhere, it is hard to imagine how this could be addressed, much less succeed, without placing the question of mobile religious canons front and center. And, by the same token, it is difficult to believe that so-called *inburgerings* programs, framed as Dutch language and civics courses, should work as one-way streets only.⁸

In the postwar context and contemporary climate, there seems to be no longer an obvious or traditional role and, indeed, no immediate future, for religious parties of either the conservative or progressive persuasion. While in the meantime, in the Netherlands, the largest among them, the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) has welcomed non-Christians, notably Muslims, in its midst and on its lists in elected, even decisive parliamentary roles, just as Labor Party (PvdA) and Green Party (Groen Links) have done as well,⁹ this does neither address nor resolve the more fundamental issue at stake.

The Decline of Religious Politics?

As has been amply documented in historical studies of the post-War era, religious parties have steadily declined in number. Religious parties held a parliamentary majority from the beginning of the 20th century up until 1963, but as of 1967 that ended. Even though religious dominance in politics may have lasted much longer in the Netherlands than in neighboring European countries, Christian Democrats are no longer the indispensable coalition partners they seemed to be until quite recently. A series of governing coalitions between conservative and progressive liberals, joined with social democrats, have proven this. While this may be good, democratically speaking—reminding voters that no party in the system of political representation should hold a monopoly by being indispensable—it raises serious questions with regard to the representation of religion in the public or political domain. It is now common to note that the liberal and social-democratic government coalitions, no matter their parliamentary majorities, have often failed to “hold things together.”

Eginhard Meijering, in his *Hoe God de Tweede Kamer verliet* (How God Left the House of Representatives), has documented how measured political debates “with the Bible in hand,” which were quite common until the 1960s, are now rarely seen as the norm.¹⁰ Such references were found during major controversies such as the railroad strikes in 1903, the Vatican’s envoy in 1925, the moment the socialists joined the government in 1939, followed after the war and during *Mandement* (public condemnation), issued in 1954 by the Ro-

man Catholic Conference of Bishops of the faithful voting for the Labor Party. They lasted roughly until the removal in 1973 of the *zegenbede* (invocatio Dei) in the Royal Queen Juliana's *Troonrede* (Speech from the Throne), with which every parliamentary year has opened since. Even more recently, during the tense discussions surrounding the legalization of abortion and euthanasia, explicit arguments based on the Bible played a central role. With extensive reference to the proceedings of Dutch parliament and declarations of intention by newly formed coalitions, Meijering documents the steady reduction of citations from Scripture.

In Meijering's view, it is already clear that although the small CU or ChristenUnie and SGP or Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij will continue to thrive, albeit with an excessively low percentage of the electorate, the largest Christian Democratic party, the Christen-Democratisch Appèl or CDA, will inevitably further water down its original Christian inspiration in favor of a merely "general religious" ideology. The party might survive as a merely "typical" party at the heart and center of the political spectrum. As Meijering states, the CDA should ultimately no longer be considered "a Christian party." Indeed, even as a general religious and not demonstrably Christian party of the political middle to conservative part of the spectrum it might soon lose its remaining signature identity completely. In this respect, it merely followed a broader tendency that took effect since the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, during which highly contentious issues regarding the support of developing nations, but also the emerging recognition of the importance of international human rights, were repeatedly addressed on the basis of moral appeals that expressed "a kind of secularized Christian politics."

Other observers, such as the historian Peter van Dam, have recently disputed Meijering's claim and insisted that the term "Christian" has continued to appear 71 times in both 1920 as well as in 1985 in parliamentary deliberations. Van Dam suggests that even if direct references were increasingly absent there could be no doubt that notably Christian principles still largely govern the thinking and policies of religious and, in some cases, non-religious parties alike. At the very least, a more differentiated analysis of religion's less publicly manifested and more "ethical" turns in both ideological and practical matters may be called for to better assess what has in fact happened in the post-World War II era. Just as a new generation of sociologists of religion have long suspected that church attendance does not explain a turn toward secularization or a turn to religion, so also explicit "God talk" does not cover the full range of religion's ongoing, perhaps even increasing, role in everyday politics. The religious tradition, it now seems, serves as a virtual archive and repository or resource from which the most diverse groups of political players, whether political parties or informal publics (sometimes, mass movements) may draw inspiration as they see fit.

If this is at all plausible, there is also a much brighter future for precisely those "secular" or, as the French say, "laic" parties that break from the self-imposed, and hence not necessarily legal, ban on inviting and engaging with religious discourse and spiritual motifs in the public sphere. This is especially crucial for those parties that open themselves up to the post-secular realization that religion and religious sensibilities remain important—perhaps, the

most important vehicle-through which social cooperation and integration of newcomers takes effect.

A Shaken Nation

As Ian Buruma recalls in *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance*, the Netherlands, at least in the view of its social and political establishment, holds on to a Humanist as well as a “radical Enlightenment” culture of openness and tolerance. This may be one explanation why it has experienced much more difficulty in coping with issues of hospitality and accommodation than the more traditional immigration countries, such as the United States and Canada. Post-war and early twenty-first century Dutch public life, Buruma claims, remained largely characterized by “Calvinist restraint,” “bourgeois disdain for excesses,” and “phlegmatic preference for consensus and compromise.” By the same token, in the 1990s, during the so-called “purple” government coalitions of conservative economic liberals and social-democrats (at the exclusion of Christian democratic parties), the so-called “poldermodel” of consensus-based economic and social policymaking became the answer to all existing and potential political conflicts in the “welfare state.” As a consequence, elites—in spite of their officially professed “multiculturalism”—remained largely dominated by the sensibilities dictated by “Our Kind of People,” reminiscent of the confident and complacent authoritarianism of the establishment figures, the “*regenten*” that the seventeenth-century Dutch Golden Age painter Frans Hals portrayed so faithfully.¹¹

Overall, Buruma recounts a disturbing tale, documenting the inability and unwillingness to face a larger problem that hardly limited itself to the effects of mass immigration from Islamic countries to the Netherlands’ major cities. Buruma references the perception or imagined detrimental effects of disempowerment as a consequence of European unification and the ongoing process of globalization. Secondly, he mentions there was a general sense that the substitutes for the early and mid-twentieth century pillarization, with its social compartmentalization and so-called “consociational” conception of society reinforced by the subsequent “erosion of organized faith,”¹² in the end offered no sustainable cultural and governmental alternatives. Especially, amongst the so-called “progressives,” including the social-democratic and radical socialist left, there was an abrupt shift “from a position of automatic, almost dogmatic advocacy of multicultural tolerance to an anxious rejection of Islam in public life.”¹³ As Buruma suspects, this was the result of “a certain yearning for something that may never really have existed, but whose loss is felt keenly nonetheless,”¹⁴ to this very day.

Overall, Buruma recounts a disturbing tale, documenting the inability and unwillingness to face a larger problem that hardly limited itself to the effects of mass immigration from Islamic countries to the Netherlands’ major cities.

Questions regarding national identity and of religion continued to simmer until Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders entered the scene.¹⁵ Populism, aligning with the right much more than the left, became the new kid on the block. This concept of populism became both the darling and the devil in the eyes of both the public and the media, although a turning point may have been reached with, first, local, municipal and provincial, and then, the parliamentary elections of March 15, 2017. Wilders made a fatal miscalculation when he led a mass gathering on election night with chants of “Fewer Morroicans, please.” It was a fatal miscalculation, as he had now become a toxic commodity. Even Christian Democrats and conservative market liberals from here on had to shun him, now that a crucial line was crossed, on national television. The 2017 election may well have signaled the moment at which Wilder’s support or, at least political efficacy and lasting influence, reached its limits. The Party for Freedom’s or PVV’s failure to become the largest party, however, represents a deeply ambiguous situation as (1) established parties, such as the conservative, business-minded “liberal” People Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the CDA incorporated populist themes even while vowing not to share power with Wilders’ creation, and (2) as its relative defeat meant that a seemingly unbrakeable wave of right-wing populism, at least in Europe, had now lost much of its inevitability. And whether this was a reflection upon the first months of the erratic Trump administration or not, this did bode well for the national elections in France and Germany soon to follow in which anti-Muslim and anti-European sentiments run deep.¹⁶

Flashback: the Fortuyn Fallout

The anthropologist Peter van der Veer—who documented and analyzed the widely reported murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004 by Islamist activist of Dutch and Moroccan descent, Muhammad Bouyari—preceded with the 2002 assassination of Pim Fortuyn by an animal rights activist, Volkert van der Graaf. Fortuyn’s assassination occurred just days before the general election that his political party Livable Netherlands (Leefbaar Nederland) might well have won. And what a relief it was on part of all those who appreciate the upside of “the multicultural drama,” to cite Paul Scheffer’s words, that the perpetrator, in this early case, was not an immigrant or Muslim, even though he claimed to have acted in defense of the latter. These events have haunted Dutch politics ever since, in one form or other.¹⁷

A case in point was the shameful treatment of the Somali-born, Ayaan Hirsi Ali (Magan), a former member of parliament (VVD) and an outspoken critic of Islam, the suppression of women, and female circumcision who almost lost her Dutch passport due to irregularities in her initial application to be admitted as a refugee. The matter led to the eventual fall of the Dutch government following the ill-fated decision of its immigration VVD minister, Rita Verdonk, to adopt an intransigent position. As a defender of the so-called right to offend, Hirsi Ali was the author of the script for the short film “Submission I” (2004), directed by the murdered van Gogh, which can still be viewed online. In sum,

the whole affair became a *cause célèbre*, turning Hirsi Ali into a lightning rod (for both sides) in the controversies surrounding Islamic immigration in the West.

Van der Veer sketches the wider historical and sociocultural contexts against whose foils we should place the murders of Fortuyn and van Gogh. This is of importance especially if we wish to gauge the devastating impact they had on the political and intellectual climate in the Netherlands, subsequently bruising its longstanding reputation of tolerance and diversity. He suggests that the murders exposed the deep-seated insecurity and fragility of the much-cultivated and somewhat self-congratulatory self-image of liberalism, and showed the inability of Dutch society to deal with the fact that its apparent newcomers were there to stay, or rather, had already become part and parcel of a radically changed social and political landscape. Slowly, the Dutch began to realize that immigrants would not correspond to a unilaterally imposed model of integration, with the expectation of cultural, or often even linguistic, adaptation. In other words, van der Veer claims, the incidents of, first, Fortuyn's and, then, van Gogh's assassinations were more revealing of a Dutch national and global identity at its crossroads than of Islam and its perceived rising global reach and militancy. The unwillingness or incapacity to come to terms with this partially explains why the responses of the cultural and political elites to these events were, with few exceptions, so unhelpful.

In sum, the whole affair became a cause célèbre, turning Hirsi Ali into a lightning rod (for both sides) in the controversies surrounding Islamic immigration in the West.

Holding Things Together

In the fall of 2006, a second film, entitled "Submission II" debuted. Hirsi Ali co-authored the script with van Gogh shortly before his murder. This second installment focused on Islam and homosexuality. Sources quickly reported that the Dutch government at The Hague put a crisis team in place well in advance, anticipating backlash from the film. Yet nothing happened. Hirsi Ali even announced a "Submission III," which would feature God, Allah, himself. No preparation for that release has been planned.

Those more constructive approaches than those of artistic and mediatic provocation, counter-reaction, and quasi-military state apparatus repression were thinkable and desirable at the level of practical and pragmatic national governmental and local municipal policy in modern democracies seemed clear. Job Cohen, Mayor of Amsterdam since 2001, offered one of the most spectacular examples of an old-new approach that has lost nothing of its original appeal at the local level. Indeed, it not just from Cohen's deep pragmatics but also from his sophisticated theoretical writings that the term "reverse breakthrough" is borrowed. In a lecture rounding off a symposium of the Wiardi Beckman Trust, the scientific bureau of the PvdA, Cohen introduced the subject as follows:

I've been a social democrat since the age of eighteen, but being a secular Jew, I know virtually nothing about religion. I'm not like Willem Banning, the free-thinking Protestant minister and founding father of the Dutch Labor Party, who in 1946 formulated the "breakthrough" idea on the basis of his life as a Christian and his profound experience of socialism. I'm a pragmatic social-democratic politician who, as mayor of the biggest city in the Netherlands, has come to the conclusion that religion is a significant factor in the politics of the twentieth century. I discussed this assertion in depth in my lecture entitled "Binden" ("Uniting") in December 2003. . . . In order to play a credible role in politics in the twentieth century, every political movement—including the Dutch Labor Party—must ask itself how it sees religion as a political factor. Or, to put it another way: if religion is a political factor in twenty-first-century society, social democracy must establish a relationship with religion. This means more than looking beyond current horizons to different religions and their believers: it is also a process of reflection about the moral foundations and objectives of social democracy.¹⁸

A "reverse breakthrough," then, would consist in the joining of hands of secularists and people of faith with the aim of addressing the "moral shortfall" in contemporary democracies, albeit not in search of some presumed, lost Judeo-Christian past, which never existed in a pure, homogenous form. Rather, such renewed breakthrough would have to happen with the increasing realization that the pragmatic concepts that guide us in political and juridical matters—such as solidarity and justice, equality, and responsibility, but also dependence and gratitude—cannot be understood, invoked, or applied, without taking their religious connotations, once again, into consideration. Cohen continues:

Just after the war, Christians had to be convinced that they could work together with the Dutch Labor Party across denominational borders to create a fair and social society. Now, secularists in the party, who make up the overwhelming majority, could be persuaded that they can also consult these religions regarding moral reevaluation. Such collaboration with believers from the different denominations can be worthwhile in achieving the goals of social democracy and resolving issues about which we all feel the same. And the inspiration that

emanates from a faith can be a fountainhead in realizing social democratic aims without the need for one to be or to become a believer. The alternative is decline and the absence of social inclusion.⁹

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All of this implies that one recognizes religion as "essential" to democracy and a fortiori to the social democracy that European labor parties have supported for over a century. Cohen's claim means that one acknowledges that religions are "partners in creating a just society."²⁰

Yet to achieve these goals does not require that one converts the political landscape in confessional terms, undoing the postwar breakthrough. Quite the contrary. As Cohen emphatically declares:

We reject the idea of political parties along denominational lines, but we also reject the notion that religion is a purely private matter...[W]e must explicitly

acknowledge the right of churches to speak out regarding political and social life for the sake of the spiritual and moral welfare of the people. In the twenty-first century, this continues to mean giving churches and other religious groups freedom to manifest themselves in the public domain—including within the party—and to play an active role in public debate. On the one hand, believers are swayed as a result; and, on the other hand, these views, precisely because they are part of public discourse, can be critically analyzed, as is right and proper in every public debate. This is because giving the churches leeway does not mean simply accepting everything they say. Listening critically to one another and participating in dialogue and discussion are requirements for the optimal use of the scope offered within the public domain. Giving the churches room to manifest themselves in the public domain is not a charter to demand their views about everything under the sun, or license for them to give such views.²¹

Speaking of churches in the present context may still unduly narrow this task, since different non-ecclesially based or non-confessional spiritual communities will increasingly have something to say. Cohen also leaves no doubt that the proposed reverse breakthrough would have to include openness toward an increasing contribution of Islamic populations and organizations on social and political issues, both as a voice in the public domain and via so-called secular bodies of representative government (i.e., the two chambers of parliament, provincial estates, and city councils).

In making his claims, Cohen does not imply that the neutral basis of the state and its constitution, as well as parliamentary democracy, should be jeopardized; “the state itself is not organized on the basis of any ecclesiastical or religious foundation whatsoever” and “only a secular state creates the freedom to accommodate the great diversity of groups, lifestyles, ideologies, and religions that is characteristic of modern Western society.”²² Yet, Cohen argues that the negative and positive principles of freedom no longer suffice. Reverse breakthrough also requires a “*positive* elaboration of the constitutional freedom... In other words, freedom of religion is defined not only as the right not to be harassed by the government or by others, be they well-meaning or malicious, but also the right for a religion to be active in the public domain.”²³ That different religions continue or begin to do so would, in fact, be a necessity in a pluralistic, democratic society.

Over the years, Cohen has gained enormous popularity and respect, especially in the wake of the murder of van Gogh, a relentless critic of Cohen. Like Hirsi Ali, Cohen was explicitly singled out with a death threat in the letter stabbed onto van Gogh’s chest. When Cohen called upon the city population to “kick up a ruckus and make yourself heard,” a call to which some 20,000 demonstrators, including many from the Muslim community, responded by gathering on the central Dam square, the effect was remarkable. This outlet of outrage defused tension and undercut the much-feared subsequent occurrence of acts of reprisal; many such acts occurred in other parts of the country where strong leadership, such as Cohen’s, was not present.

Cohen’s response to “kick up a ruckus” also set a counterexample against some of the more irresponsible inflammatory comments by Dutch politicians in the heat of the moment. Following a career as a university professor of law and a rector magnificus of the University of Maastricht, Cohen had already

played a prominent role in national politics. He was the architect of some of the Netherlands’ new and tougher asylum procedures and determined the direction of immigration policies as an undersecretary of state for *Vreemdelingenbeleid* (Immigration Policy) from 1998–2000. Cohen was also responsible for the introduction and legalization of same-sex marriages. The Netherlands was the first country to do so and Cohen’s leading role in setting the new policies did not win him favor with the immigrant, and largely, Muslim community.

Yet, remarkably, Cohen’s leadership contributed to a sound policy that paired a soft-spoken style and modesty with courageous statesmanship during his tenure as mayor of the city of Amsterdam, which by now held almost half of its population from non-Dutch descent. This is even more remarkable in a society which, in spite of much ideological noise, does not pride itself for being a nation of immigrants. As Cohen declared to *Time Europe Magazine*:

Immigrants have always been part of our city and Amsterdam is, and remains, tolerant. Jews should not be afraid to walk the streets wearing their skullcaps, Moroccans must be able to find jobs, and homosexuals must not be insulted. The only ‘us and them’ that exist are the citizens who want to live together in peace and those who don’t.²⁴

In an article by Russell Shorto, published in *The New York Times Magazine* in May 2010, Cohen was introduced by the following heading: “Can a Jew who reaches out to Muslims be the next Dutch prime minister—and a model for Europe?” While his role as Mayor, Cohen also played the part of an intellectual who issued a steady stream of theoretical and juridical policy papers, notably his 2005 “Multutali lecture.”²⁵ The lecture followed a series of earlier public addresses in which Cohen lined out a consistent and daring approach to the question of the relationship between Enlightenment, tolerance, and civil multicultural society, with church and state, national identity, and the integration of “strangers.”²⁶ Cohen argues that historically and in more recent times, the Netherlands has been a nation of minority groups, cities and provinces, pillars and parties; each of them has had to pragmatically compromise their interests as they negotiate with those who make up the changing—and always partitioned—majority from which they are demarcated.

To this general pattern that runs from the Golden Age through the nineteenth century and the twentieth century should be added the gradual recognition of the dignity and equal treatment of others (workers, women,

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homosexuals, etc.), followed in the 1960s and 1970s by a wave of migration of guest workers. Cohen uses the term “minority” as a fairly descriptive category, while acknowledging that it has come to designate newcomers or, worse, “allochtonen” (i.e., newly migrated or immigrated ethnic groups)

which happen to be mostly Muslims. At the same time, what has emerged for the first time in Dutch history is a majority culture, which identifies itself as secular, liberal, and white. Since the members that make up this larger group

no longer perceive themselves as a minority (as they would have in the past) with a monolithic identity, they are less inclined to perceive and respect others as different.

Cohen further argues that the process of democratization and individualization up until that last development (and thereafter) badly prepared the Dutch for their acknowledgment of—and dealing with—“strangers” and their “differences.” The mounting of international conflict and tension, as well as an undeniable rise in petty criminality and outright hostility in the streets of major cities, created a further and widely distributed sense of uncertainty and both perceived and real threats. With shared group values lost, mutual expectations become opaque and the pursuit of mere self or minority interests prevail. The result is self-centeredness, a retreat from other minority-majorities and, almost inevitably, intolerance and radicalization.²⁷

Cohen focuses on the juridical checks and balances, for example between the freedom of expression and its limits, that allow citizens (individually and as members of a group) to make and defend their claims, to articulate their grievances, and to seek that justice be done. The most important problems are not so much of a legal but of a societal and cultural, even existential nature; they concern not exclusively matters of politics or policy, but the confrontation of “styles” or “ways of life,” in both the neighborhood and on the street. To address these adequately would entail a response that does not hesitate “to use the religious infrastructure of the city,” tap into one of the original, etymological connotations of the very term “religion” (from the Latin *religare*, to bind), and to see religious tradition and practice as a “source of social cohesion.”²⁸ This is all the more urgent now that we live in what Cohen calls a “society of strangers.”²⁹ In one phrase: “religion works.”³⁰ It works as an identifying force where mobility across borders and, hence, the attachment to national and ethnic communities is less and less prevalent or sustainable. It works as a “solidarizing”³¹ factor in that it offers economic and charitable networks for emancipating groups where modern democratic societies and increasingly global cities increasingly seem to fail them; lastly, religion fills a spiritual vacuum that no other ideological or normative framework addresses at the same level of depth or with the same practical fervor.

Indeed, to learn from these daily practices would seem more relevant than the—equally legitimate and now strategic—appeal to the judgment of courts. Not unlike Habermas, Cohen warns against a relentless “juridification” of society as the path to greater equality, integration, and inclusiveness. Fear, he claims, is a “bad counsel” and to avoid (further) “polarization” requires efforts—the “mobilization of positive forces”—and specifically invested time on the part of so-called minorities and relative and alternative majorities alike. Examples of such processes would be to create sites of encounter within the public domain, in the popular media, moderation of insults, and the cultivation of more informed perspectives on others and, thereby, oneself.

In his 2002 Cleveringa lecture, Job Cohen had already suggested that the main question in modern European societies, such as the Netherlands, was always going to be whether “a new adhesive” could enable both so-called “autochthonous” (indigenous) and recent immigrants to “glue society together”³²

under radically new, post 9/11, conditions.³³ The possibilities for “accommodation” of immigrant populations Cohen imagined could, perhaps, be relayed to a new sense of “belonging” that would begin by giving religions of their respective origins public face and place once again. In his words: “The easiest way to integrate these new immigrants might be through their faith. For that is just about the only anchor they have when they enter Dutch society in the twenty-first century.”³⁴

This was a suggestion that provoked an avalanche of criticism. If religion was not the problem, as Cohen’s detractors objected, could it be the beginning of an answer to much broader-socio-cultural issues? Could religion be a source for social cohesion where all other societal tendencies—not least those related to globalization, new media technologies, such as the Internet, etc.—had become centrifugal forces that seemed to steadily undermine every sense of “belonging” for autochthonous and immigrant populations alike? Was the very sense of “belonging” not, ultimately, a nostalgic-romantic fiction, a retrospective projection, and not much more?

“Reverse breakthrough,” then, means the turn of secular political parties and their most thoughtful politicians to a reappraisal of so-called “public” religion. This while undoing some of the intellectual and moral impetus

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with which the original *doorbraak* moved precisely away from pilloried parties of an explicit religious signature in the name of a more *personalist* and *privatized* register.

One further necessary step, however, has not been made in the proposed. Instead of the future of religious parties, one might want to envision a future for general or

popular lay parties, left and middle, that are willing and able to engage—and where possible accommodate—not just liberal confessional and ecclesial but also orthodox and heterodox theologies, viewpoints, and ritual practices. These would, necessarily, include the greatly diverse and, often, highly nuanced experiences and sensibilities that come with them. After all, not just religious socialism or personalism—indeed, not just the watered-down Christian humanism—which, for the original *doorbraak* or breakthrough, formed the horizon, must be considered of being capable of contributing to civic integration and social harmony, cultural tolerance, and political innovation. Historically and to this day, most slowly emancipating groups and especially newcomers, immigrants, and refugees have enriched the societies that accepted them. The Netherlands, since the early years of the Dutch Republic, has long been associated with a more radically enlightened practice and moral standard in these matters, something it would do well to remind itself of in the present, global day and age, with its rise of populist resentment, both on the left and the right.

Conclusion

It is only recently that a more fundamental discussion has emerged to address these issues head-on in the Dutch context. The Wiardi Beckman Stichting, the aforementioned scientific bureau of the social-democratic labor party, Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA), organized a symposium on religion and politics in June 2006 and the Netherlands Scientific Council of Government Policy, Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (WRR), in The Hague founded a project group on “Religion and the Public Domain” to explore the possibilities of an official report with policy recommendations to the Dutch government. The latter report followed a series of earlier interventions by this advisory body which focussed on questions of national identity, the role of Islam, and Turkey’s admission to the European Union.

All these reports have provoked vehement discussion in the national media and have invited several critical reactions from scholars, government officials, and pundits alike.³⁵ The dust on these matters may still be settling but it should be noted that, perhaps significantly, a final revised report on religion and the public domain with actual policy recommendations to the Dutch government was neither solicited by the government nor completed and published unsolicited by the WRR (as it has the mandate to do, if it so chooses). Yet, the preliminary study went through a host of empirical data, several rounds of consultations with social scientists, municipal, provincial, and national public functionaries, including then Mayor Job Cohen, as well as new rounds of reflection and adjustment that enriched and complicated the discussion and refined the conclusions. This much is clear: insofar as the principal (i.e., conceptual and normative) framework for its analysis was concerned, the WRR, on the whole, promoted a “post-secular” stance.³⁶ In other words, it argued that its considerations and overall recommendations did not intend to revise existing legal or constitutional arrangements—notably, the relationship between Church and State (which in the Dutch context is complex and subtle)³⁷—but rather to contribute to a change in perception and thereby to a realignment of social, cultural and political forces. Such realignment would, no doubt, have to begin by changing the vision and attitudes of top and mid-level government officials and their advisors, but then also, more broadly, of public educators, journalists, and other media representatives. In short, what should be realistically aimed for is, in this view, less a re-confessionalization of the public sphere, or an advocacy of religious politics, but a more general, indeed, global “breakthrough” in “reverse.” Such reorientation alone could help one imagine the establishment of new and old forms of social “binds;” binds that are, strictly speaking, based neither on natural rights nor on laws, and yet, make up the new social contract as they “hold things together,” as Cohen urges.

Notes

¹ Herman J. Seldenhuis, ed., *Handboek der Nederlandse kerkgeschiedenis* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 2006), 792–794.

² Herman Noordegraaf, “Doorbraak toen en nu: zestig jaar Partij van de Arbeid,” in *Socialisme & Democratie* 63, no. 1-2 (2006), 9–15.

³A classical study of the so-called “*verzuiling*” or “pillarization” is Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in The Netherlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

⁴Job Cohen, “Sociaaldemocratie en religie: een omgekeerde doorbraak?” in *Binden*, met een inleidend interview door Bas Heijne (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 2010), 208. An English translation appeared under the title “Social Democracy and Religion: The Reverse Breakthrough,” in Hent de Vries, ed., *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 620.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Hent de Vries, “*Invocatio Dei*, la discipline de la tolérance, et la vérité de la vérité. J.H.H. Weiler et la Constitution de l’Europe,” special issue on “Les religions et la question de la vérité,” Yves Charles Zarka and Philippe Capelle, *Cités* 2, no. 62 (2015), 27–62.

⁷Doug Saunders, *The Myth of the Muslim Tide: Do Immigrants Threaten the West?* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 2012).

⁸Hent de Vries, “A Religious Canon for Europe? Policy, Education, and the Post-Secular Challenge,” *Social Research* 80, no. 1 (Spring 2013), 203–232. Special Issue on “Political Theology,”

⁹On the different responses of the Dutch political parties to immigrant Muslims populations, see Marcel Poorthuis and Theo Salemink, *Van Harem tot Fitna: Beeldvorming van de Islam in Nederland 1848–2010* (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2011), 315ff.

¹⁰Eginhard Meijering, *Hoe God verdween uit de Tweede Kamer: De ondergang van de christelijke politiek* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 2012).

¹¹Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 46, 48ff. See also Christopher Caldwell, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam, and the West* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 307–312, on the critique of the Dutch multiculturalist model of “Integration with Maintenance of One’s Own Identity” and especially Pim Fortuyn’s idiosyncratic proposals to salvage a multiculturalism in which “Judeo-Christian culture” would be immunized against the threats of Islam as a “living religion” (*ibid.*, 311).

¹²Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam*, 244.

¹³*Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁵In November of 2008, Ian Buruma gave the Cleveringa lecture in Leiden, entitled “A Question of Decency.” In it, he expounded the notion of *Zivildcourage*.

¹⁶Ian Buruma, “How the Dutch Stopped Being Decent and Dull,” *New York Times*, March 12, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/opinion/sunday/how-the-dutch-stopped-being-decent-and-dull.html?_r=0.

¹⁷Peter van der Veer, “Pim Fortuyn, Theo van Gogh, and the Politics of Tolerance in the Netherlands,” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 527–538.

¹⁸Cohen, “Social Democracy and Religion: The Reverse Breakthrough,” 618–619.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 621.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 622.

²¹*Ibid.*, 622–623.

²²*Ibid.*, 624.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Time Europe*, Vol. 166, No. 15, October 10, 2005.

²⁵Job Cohen, “Meerderheid en minderheden,” *Binden*, 65–95. An English translation appeared under the title “Can a Minority Retain Its Identity in Law? The 2005 Multatuli Lecture,” in *Political Theologies*, ed. de Vries and Sullivan, 539–556.

²⁶On the issue of “Vreemden [Strangers],” Cohen pronounced the Cleveringa lecture at the University of Leiden, in November 2002, in Cohen, *Binden*, 33–64.

²⁷A government-commissioned report, published in June 2006, by the National Council Against Racial Discrimination, in collaboration with the Anne Frank Foundation, and Leiden University, found that some 475,000 people (which is almost half of the Netherlands residents of non-Western origins, especially Moroccans, Turks, and descendants from families in the former colonies of the Netherlands Antilles and Suriname) indicated that they suffered from discrimi-

nation during job applications, at school, in verbal and psychic abuse in public transportation, bars, etc. (*The International Herald Tribune*, June 15, 2006).

²⁸ Cohen, *Binden*, 185-186.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 195, cf. 33 ff.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 244.

³³ *Ibid.*, 138.

³⁴ Job Cohen, cited after Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam*, 245.

³⁵ A host of publications and initiatives indicated a growing awareness of the urgency of these questions in relation to religion. See the special issue of *Christendemocratische Verkenningen*, the quarterly journal of the scientific bureau of the Christen-Democratisch Appel (CDA), edited by Erik Borgman, Gabriël van den Brink, and Thijs Jansen, *Zonder geloof geen democratie* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2006), and Marcel ten Hooven and Theo de Wit, eds., *Ongewenste goden: De publieke rol van religie in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Sun, 2006).

³⁶ See my contribution to the project group and publication in question: Hent de Vries, "Religion and Media: A Political Theological Problem," *Geloven in het publieke domein: Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie*, ed. W. B. H. J. van de Donk, A. P. Jonkers, G. J. Kronjee and R. J. J. M. Plum (Den Haag, Amsterdam: WRR/Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 447-471.

³⁷ Sophie van Bijsterveld, *Overheid en godsdienst: Herijking van een onderlinge relatie* (Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2009).