A Feverish Decade

The Religious Heritage of the 1960s in the Netherlands

[GER GROOT]

For a long time the Netherlands was one of the most Catholic countries in the world. That may well come as a surprise. If there is one religious denomination with which the Netherlands is invariably associated it is Calvinism. Art (from Rembrandt to Mondrian), literature (from Multatuli via Wolkers to Maarten 't Hart), morals (windows without curtains, allowing a full view of a sinless interior), business (diligence, thrift and a spirit of commerce), and sobriety, which needs no explanation: rightly or wrongly, everything is considered to breathe the spirit of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and the Authorized Version of the *Bible*. It seems it was only thanks to the latter that Dutch developed into a real cultural language in the first place. In the eyes of Europeans from further south, even Dutch Catholics think and behave like Calvinists in disguise.

Nonetheless, until the 1960s more than half of the Dutch population was Catholic. Admittedly, the majority of them lived in the southern provinces 'below the rivers', which had in the past long been governed by the central government like some sort of colony, where the inhabitants had little say. But further north, too, overwhelmingly Protestant areas had significant Catholic communities, from Rotterdam, which relied mainly on immigration from Catholic Brabant for its labourers, to the fishing village of Volendam, north of the capital, which always competed boldly with the very Protestant island of Marken opposite.

After the Protestants seized power in Amsterdam (the Alteration), in 1578, Catholic masses were officially banned, it is true, but the authorities turned a blind eye to the many conventicles. Only when the last impediments to the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy were removed, in the constitution of 1848, and the new constitution actually came into force, five years later, was it clear how strongly the Roman Catholic Church had withstood oppression. Although the last anti-papist articles were only removed from the constitution in the 1980s, the newly won freedom led, in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, to a Catholic triumphalism that got itself noticed in both urban and rural areas with large neo-Gothic people's churches.

This was the era of the 'rich Roman Catholic life', to which the weekly *De katholieke illustratie* bore witness in its column, *Uit het rijke Roomsche Leven*, with its colourful and lavish (and for those days revolutionary) pages of photos.

It was the era of large families, which were seen by the Protestants, with their considerably fewer children, as a major demographic threat; the abundant processions that were allowed only on the streets of the southern provinces; the thousands of silently praying men who, with their *Stille Omgang* through Amsterdam's red light district, commemorated the Miracle of the Host in clandestine protest against the ban on processions; the avuncular priests and nuns of which every family had a few; the exuberant social life along strictly confessional lines; and the immense passion for missionary work, which led the Netherlands to send its excess of priests, nuns and monks all over the world to spread faith, healthcare and literacy.

Numerically the proportion of Catholics in the Netherlands was never more than a good fifty percent, but the country exceeded every other nation in religious fervour. The fact that Dutch tulips decorate the papal blessing *Urbi et orbi* (*'Bedankt voor de bloemen'* – Thanks for the flowers – said Pope Wojtyla in shaky Dutch which became a much-copied pronunciation), has its origins in an adoration of the Holy See that stretches far back for generations. No less than one third of the Zouave army that unsuccessfully defended the Papal States against Garibaldi's nationalist troops in the 1860s consisted of Dutchmen. They gathered in Oudenbosch, in Brabant, where a small museum still keeps their memory alive.

Aggiornamento

There is hardly any of that vitality and confident triumphalism anymore though. Catholic social life has disappeared or been integrated into neutral organisations. The Dutch Catholic trade union NKV merged in 1976 with the 'red' NVV

Trappist Abbey, Zundert, the Netherlands, 1995 © Annie van Gemert

Dominicanen, Maastricht: a bookshop made in heaven

to form the neutral Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV). Architect Pierre Cuypers's neo-Gothic churches have been demolished or changed into carpet shops or apartment complexes. Only a few parish churches continue to eke out an existence with a flock that has shrunk to a few dozen almost exclusively elderly parishioners and a pastor who must serve a handful of other churches, too, due to the shortage of priests. Instead of sending missionaries out to faraway countries overseas, the Archdiocese of the Netherlands now imports priests from other parts of the world, because it can no longer even meet the shrinking demand with its own recruits.

From Rome's most faithful and enthusiastic church to the wasteland of a mission area; seldom has the Catholic secularisation process been as disconcertingly fast and wholescale as in the Netherlands. In retrospect, the archdiocese looks like a balloon that was blown up to grotesque proportions and that has now deflated spectacularly after the tiniest of pinpricks. It leaves a memory of a bizarre extravagance that filled every minute of people's entire lives, but whose remains have disappeared now on the scrap heap of lost faith.

Common wisdom has it that the catalyst of all this is to be found in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). It promised to bring the church 'up to date' (*aggiornamento*), but in fact it seems only to have revealed how hopelessly outdated the Catholic world had become. Emblematic of this was the documentary book about the years 1925-1935, which the journalist, writer and poet Michel van der Plas published in 1963 under the same title as the aforementioned column in *De katholieke illustratie*, *Uit het rijke Roomsche Leven* (From the Rich Catholic Life). Drawing on a large number of written sources, Van der Plas showed how stifling and small-minded that life had been. Quotes from the back cover left readers in no doubt about the way Catholics used to think about themselves: 'Roman Catholic is top', 'The best novels are no good', 'God wanted the class system' and 'A red Catholic is a dead Catholic'.

While the council continued in Rome, the book became a bestseller, with more than ten reprints in a short space of time. However, there was no tension

or contradiction between the two – or at least not yet. During the council years and the period shortly afterwards, Catholic religious fervour did not suffer in the slightest from the exposure of what meanwhile is felt to have been old-fashioned bigotry. Both the main highlights of Vatican II and the funeral service of the much-loved Pope John XXIII, who had convened it, were watched by huge numbers of viewers on Dutch television. Indeed the Pope's death that same year, 1963, plunged even some non-Catholic Dutch people into mourning.

Meanwhile, on the fringes of the council, progressive theologians, exegetes and liturgists played an important role as advisors and experts, so revolutionary that they gradually acquired a public face too. The Flemish-Dutch theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, along with men like the Swiss Hans Küng, the German Karl Rahner and the Frenchman Yves Congar, formed the vanguard of what had previously been called *la nouvelle théologie*. In open dialogue with philosophy (from existentialism to Marxism), inspired by a reading of the Bible in which its Jewish roots were expressly recognised, and eager to modernise liturgy to meet contemporary demands, they prepared the ground for the modernisation decisions that were taken at the council.

For the first time, Catholic theology, which until then had had little to say to lay people, went public both in writing and via radio and television, which had just become a mass medium. Edward Schillebeeckx, still wrapped in his Dominican habit in those days, became so popular that he was interviewed on the socialist television channel VARA, in the late 1960s, by the public's favourite journalist Mies Bouwman in her talk show *Mies en Scène*, every broadcast of which invariably became the talk of the day throughout the country.

A second Reformation

For the average Catholic, theology became a much-discussed phenomenon in the 1960s. Finally, Bible exegesis was something to get worked up about. Traditionally it had been something of a secret that was carefully kept out of sight of the faithful. Matters of faith were for the clergy and Rome; theories about them (to the extent that there were any) belonged in the seminaries. Even the fierce modernist struggles around the turn of the previous century had not put an end to the ignorance of lay people. On the contrary, the tensions aroused by them (like the later worker-priest movement in France) had once again convinced the doctrinal authorities that there would be no end to it if 'the people' were taught more than devotion and obedience.

Thanks to the Second Vatican Council, Catholic theologians and biblical scholars emerged from their isolation – and found a large and receptive audience in the Netherlands. Catholic schools organised evenings at which their views were explained to the parents. On the radio and television there was a busy schedule of debates and educational programmes. It was a period when family parties in Catholic circles invariably ended in fierce theological debate – about the vernacular liturgy, clerical celibacy, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the expectation of a hereafter and, yes, the existence of God.

Looking back at Dutch Catholicism in the 1960s, we can see a sort of second reformation happening. The Bible, which until then Catholics had only been allowed to read in a much-abbreviated form, was suddenly available to them

uncensored and immediately raised questions. In the liturgy, not only did the priest turn his face to the people, he also turned what had previously been a sermon mainly about piety into an important moment of education and explanation. The suddenly comprehensible language of prayers and hymns gave rise both to doubts and to the need for further clarification: what did all the dogmas that were stressed in it actually mean? Some were of the opinion that the clergy would understand their flock a lot better if they had an ordinary family life, like the Protestant clergy. And was the 'pillarised' isolation, in which the Catholic part of the population had been a nation in itself, inward-looking and self-absorbed, still of this time?

By no means everyone was convinced of the need for a far-reaching modernisation and many began to have doubts when the *aggiornamento*, which had initially been greeted enthusiastically in the Netherlands, began to show some revolutionary traits. In the early days, however, these appeared to be just the growing pains of a new fervour, which did indeed break through in many places in the Catholic Church. The new freedom with which matters of faith could be discussed and the hitherto unheard of extent to which a thrilling understanding of it could be gained during those discussions and instructional evenings did, it is true, lead to division and disunity. But most of all it led to the realisation that the church had begun a new life, possibly even a resurrection from what was increasingly being seen as a glorious but in the meantime dead-end path.

In fact there had been signs as early as the Second World War that Catholic isolation, triumphalist but ever more oppressive as it was, would eventually become unsustainable. Whether the experience of resisting the German occupation had contributed to this or not is a moot point. Even the underground resistance was divided up and organised along confessional and ideological lines. But the mutual dislike and closed mentality of pillarisation no longer fitted with the assumption that everything would be different after the war. The breakthrough concept, in which socialists and Christian movements sought rapprochement, gained ground.

Basilica in Oudenbosch, a replica of the Roman St. Peter's Basilica

The Parrot, conventicle (‘Schuilkerk’),
Kalverstraat, Amsterdam

The Episcopal Charge

It was still too early for that though. In 1954, in the notorious ‘Episcopal Charge’ (Mandement), the Dutch bishops whistled the faithful back into the corner of the strictly Catholic world and its organisations. Catholics were strongly advised against membership of the Dutch Labour Party and membership of socialist trade unions was prohibited. As we have seen, it was only a stay of execution. A little more than twenty years later, the two trade unions merged into one central union. From the very start the ‘Mandement’ was lagging behind the facts. The prohibition on listening to the socialist VARA radio was cheerfully and massively ignored. In the 1960s, the bishops had little choice but to go along with the unstoppable developments amongst churchgoers themselves.

In the meantime they were probably of the same mind. The role of Bernard Alfrink was typical: as Coadjutor Archbishop in 1954, he had participated in issuing the Mandement. In the 1960s, as Archbishop of the Netherlands, he turned out to be a careful but responsive church leader who, together with the other bishops, convened a Pastoral Council in 1966, where lay voices had a very important role to play.

For the most progressive Catholics Alfrink and even the Pastoral Council were still much too timid in their desire to reform. For the conservatives, who gradually began to assert themselves more and more, even Vatican II was verging on the unacceptable. But in the midst of all the turbulence of the period the intensive dialogue between the leaders of the church and the lay people at the Pastoral Council counted internationally as a shining and promising example of what the church could signify in the future. Bishops like Bekkers (he too had a memorable conversation on TV with Mies Bouwman), Bluyssen and, to a certain extent, Alfrink too enjoyed popularity and prestige in the Netherlands both inside and outside the Catholic Church.

But it did not last. In the 1970s the Vatican intervened hard and, with the appointment of new, considerably more conservative bishops, forced a change of direction intended to bring Dutch Catholics back on the track of their traditional loyalty to Rome. The Vatican did have some cause for concern. The most

radical parishes (which now called themselves *ecclesia* or, in the style of the Protestants, 'congregations') had de facto left the Archdiocese. Where devotion to the Pope had once been unsurpassed anywhere in the world, there was now sharp criticism of the ultraconservative, yes even perverse ecclesiastical and power structure for which the clergy were blamed. Little by little the modernisation of the Catholic Church in the Netherlands seemed to have turned into a genuine second Reformation.

Rome's severity had the opposite effect though. More and more congregations and *ecclesias* that had been in the vanguard of the modernisation movement cut their ties with the church, and their loss was not compensated by a stampede to more conservative parishes. The anachronism of denominational organisations in every conceivable area rapidly disappeared and left behind a church that could only offer people something in the strictly religious field. In as far as a social life still existed in the face of an increasingly noticeable tendency towards individualisation, it operated in a society in which religious and ideological denominations acted less and less as dividing lines.

When Pope John Paul II first visited the Netherlands, in 1985, his reception was cool. The majority of the once large and enthusiastic Catholic section of the population showed itself indifferent; a progressive minority showered him with criticism and reproaches. They were the last heirs of the enthusiasm that had raised Dutch Catholics to great heights in the 1960s. In a sense the religious experience was greater than ever during those years; at least it was proof of a 'rich Roman Catholic life', which had paled in colour, it is true, but not in devotion.

Nostalgia

It lasted no more than ten years. Since then the Catholic Church has survived on the fringes of Dutch society. Developments in the 1960s were not the cause. At most they accelerated a process that would only start a few decades later in the mainstream Protestant churches and has since assumed even more dramatic forms. By the start of the twenty-first century, the Netherlands was a secularised country.

We should not be fooled by appearances though. Migrant churches and both fundamentalist and revivalist Protestantism are flourishing sources of 'modern' religiosity. The Catholic Church may be languishing, but the typically Catholic domain of rituals, liturgical sensuality and sensitivity to mystique have clearly made their way into both explicitly religious and quasi-religious movements and celebrations, and obviously meet a deep-seated need. Whilst church organisational structures disappear, the legacy of religious *forms* enjoys increasing, eclectic popularity – varying from atheist liturgical services to service companies like 'rent-a-priest', which aim to give important moments in life a fitting cachet. Even the traditionally scientifically rational Humanist Federation now offers secular wedding and funeral rituals, in which it blatantly borrows from church traditions.

So, the religious heritage of the 1960s in the Netherlands is in several respects ambiguous. It was not the increasing secularisation that characterised it, but a modernist resistance to the disintegration that was already making

Group of victorious Zouaves. Reenactment during or after the Italian Campaign in 1859

itself felt beneath the surface in the by then outdated traditional forms of devotion. The resulting feverish modernisation and reflection led in subsequent decades to a backlash that appears, however, in its turn, to be equally temporary. The traditional churches will not recover quickly and definitely not in their pre-1960s forms. But religion is by no means finished – certainly not in a country where it has traditionally been deeply cherished by both Protestants and Catholics.

Even the recently arrived Islamic faith will presumably not be able to avoid this dynamic eventually. For the time being it manifests itself in a fundamentalism that is not so very different from pre-war Catholicism and Calvinism, at least in its stricter forms. The reproach is often made that Islam 'has not yet gone through the Enlightenment'. But more to the point perhaps is the realisation that it has not yet experienced the 1960s. At the moment, that heritage, so much broader and more relevant than the eighteenth-century demand for the (dogmatically acknowledged) existence of God, is probably far more important for a lively religious culture.

It is a risky heritage with an uncertain outcome. It is still possible that it will make extremely short shrift of religion. But that is unlikely. If the 1960s were proof of anything religious, it was of a burning religious enthusiasm, not indifference. It is precisely the latter from which we seem to be suffering at the moment. The heritage of the 1960s is perhaps mainly evident in a gnawing nostalgia for a time when there really was something ideological at stake. ■

Translated by Lindsay Edwards