Religious America and Secular Holland

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Any account of the US-Dutch relationship must address the stereotypes that each cultivates of the other, and deploys freely according to rhetorical need. For many American Christians, the religious experience of modern Western Europe offers a dire warning, with the Netherlands as perhaps the most acute case – as exhibit A, in fact, for the process of total secularization. In religious terms, the Netherlands serves today as a potent rhetorical weapon for moral and political conservatives.

Few deny that European church membership has been in freefall for a generation, as each new survey shows ever-growing numbers willing to proclaim themselves totally non-religious. Meanwhile, burgeoning Muslim populations lead some observers to warn of a coming Eurabia, a continent dominated by the most reactionary forms of Islamic fundamentalism. While native Christian populations have extraordinarily low fertility rates, immigrant Muslims continue to raise large families. For conservatives, the triumph of Islam would offer proper retribution for societies that tried to live without God. So you didn’t like Christian concepts of morality and family? Well, try living under Sharia law!

Not long ago, the conservative National Review published an advertisement for a “Farewell to Europe” tour as early as the year 2010. This tour would offer a last chance to visit before the borders were closed to infidel visitors and total Islamic law imposed. “We’ll relax in a famous German Biergarten with glasses of sweet mint tea!” The Islamic Republic of the Netherlands provides a highlight of the trip: “For this special two-day event, females traveling with our party will be allowed to disembark the plane without a veil!”
Beyond argument, the Netherlands has moved away from organized religion. Despite the country’s dazzlingly rich Christian history, all churches began a steep decline from the 1960s, by whatever measures of belief or practice we may use. Today, barely half of all Dutch people claim any allegiance to a Christian denomination, while over forty percent overtly deny any religious loyalty. Many of Amsterdam’s historic Protestant churches are effectively museums, which occasionally make their premises available for thinly attended services. Islam, however, grows apace. The Netherlands today has a million Muslims, around six percent of the population, and by some projections, that proportion could grow to fifteen or twenty percent by the end of the century.

But a reality check is in order. While nobody can seriously claim that mainstream West European churches are flourishing, the picture is nothing like as bleak as it is often portrayed. Yes, the United States is a much more religious society, and will certainly continue to be so – but we must be careful not to explain the cross-national differences in the simplistic terms of contemporary conservative mythology.

For multiple reasons, it is extremely difficult to compare the US and the Netherlands. Most obviously, the two units are not remotely comparable in sheer size, to say nothing of power. The US is better seen as a subcontinent rather than a mere nation, and as such it includes within it many sub-entities that can be compared neatly and properly to the Netherlands, while others evidently do not. New England, for instance, shares many points of similarity, especially in its Calvinistic heritage, and the subsequent movement to Enlightenment values, and thence to secular liberalism. Today, parts of New England look quite “Dutch” in their radically secular outlook – but these states only comprise one very small portion of the US.

Also, the US has a quite different geographical situation from Europe, a totally different global outlook, and that has been manifested in trading links, migration patterns, and imperial connections. When, for instance, in the late twentieth century, Western nations opened their borders to migrants, the US became as attractive to (Christian) Mexicans and Central Americans as the Netherlands did for (Muslim) Moroccans and Turks. That single fact has been critically important in ensuring that the US would retain a Christian identity, albeit a much more diverse spectrum of Christianity than hitherto.
I will stress two factors in particular that contribute to fortifying the religious character of America, but which have had very different outcomes in Europe. One is immigration, which has of course been a fundamental component of US history, but which has not been anything like so constant in the Netherlands. (Of course there have been immigrant waves before the late twentieth century, but they were sporadic, and of limited scale).

Immigration is so important because migrant communities often become much more religious in their new lands than they were at home. They look to religious structures and institutions for authority as well as for mutual support and aid. Meanwhile, religious affiliations help preserve and define cultural identities in times of rapid flux, and this process becomes even more intense if the group meets discrimination or prejudice. Conversely, the contact with new and alien faiths can motivate native groups to develop and reinforce their own tradition as a kind of reaction. These trends all were obvious in the US during the great migrations between c.1880 and 1924, and have again manifested themselves in the post-1965 new immigration, which largely stemmed from Africa, Asia and Latin America. By 2050, the US will be on the verge of becoming a majority-minority country, in which whites will no longer enjoy absolute majority status. By this point, the US will be 25 percent Latino and 8 percent Asian, both predominantly from Christian stocks – and that does not include African and African-American populations.

Incidentally, the vast size of the US deserves mention here. As Americans move very freely, they are constantly in new homes and cities, and need urgently to find institutional structures that offer instant support and community. Overwhelmingly, they find this in churches and religious institutions. Domestic migration, almost as much as foreign, bolsters and sustains religions and religious communities.

Also shaping religious life are patterns of fertility and family, which operate very differently on either side of the Atlantic. A society’s fertility rate – the number of children born to a woman – proves to be a major marker of secularism and religiosity, although it is much debated whether the number of children is a cause or consequence: does faith follow fertility, or vice versa? Which came first, the chicken or the lack of eggs?

In order for a population to remain stable, an average woman needs to bear 2.1 children during her lifetime: that figure is called the replacement rate. As is well known, European fertility rates have fallen perilously below replacement, to 1.2 or 1.3 in many countries, and the result is a
rapidly aging population that needs immigrants in order to do essential work and maintain services. The Dutch figure is 1.66, although of course that is an average for native white populations, and for immigrants: the figure for native Dutch alone is much lower. In contrast, the US figure is close to replacement, a little over 2.1. By present projections, the US will be the last major power to have anything like such a high rate, which will give the country inestimable advantages in global affairs for decades to come. It also ensures – as we will see - that the US is likely to retain the sizable religious differential that separates the country from Western Europe.

The religious link with fertility rates demands some explanation. Based mainly on studies of Europe, conventional wisdom blames the fertility revolution on secularization. According to this view, in traditional societies, religious sanctions support the family ethos, and convince women to define motherhood as their major role in life. As religious loyalties decline, women are more likely to go into the workplace, and to reduce family size. According to that view, the high US fertility rate is a reflection of its religiosity, while the low Dutch figure is a clear manifestation of secularism.

But the reduction in family size in turn contributes to making society more secular. Only by taking children out of the picture can we appreciate how much of the institutional life of any religion revolves around the young. At the height of the Euro-American baby boom in the 1950s and 1960s, churches of all shades devoted immense effort to teaching and socializing the young, whether in Sunday schools or classes for first communion or confirmation. While teenagers and young adults might drift away from religious practice, they would likely return when they had families of their own, children to whom they hoped to pass on values and a sense of community.

But then, take away the children. Imagine cities filled with households with only one child or none. Those couples define themselves entirely in terms of their companionate relationship, and find little need for organized religion, or for its moral structures. And if “ordinary” marriage is no longer based on children and the continuity of family, why should the right to companionship be denied to homosexual pairs? In such an environment, advocates convincingly present gay marriage as a logical extension of the loving companionate relationship, a manifestation of universal human rights. The more widely such rhetoric is accepted, the weaker the case that can be made for any sexual morality that is based on religious sanctions. Organized religion becomes an abhorred symbol for the traditional restrictions that they see as constraining freedom – sexual freedom, contraceptive freedom, restraints on gender equality.
And as German philosopher Rüdiger Safranski has noted, the demographic shift has a still more profound cultural impact. The loss of children, he remarks, “results in a dramatic lack of maturity in the way people choose to live their lives. . . . For childless singles, thinking in terms of the generations to come loses relevance. Therefore, they behave more and more as if they were the last, and see themselves as standing at the end of the chain.” Without a sense of the importance of continuity, whether of the family or the individual, people lose the need for a religious perspective. Personal hedonism is the only principle by which political arrangements can be judged.

If in fact fertility rates are so critical for religious life, then this is a fact of enormous significance for the Netherlands, and specifically for its Muslim populations. Increasingly, over the past thirty years, Europe’s notorious fertility transition is spreading worldwide. Some Latin American countries already have population profiles considerably older than the US, and many Muslim lands are now recording the sharpest fertility drops ever recorded. In just twenty years, Iran has slipped from 6 children per woman to well below 2, and Algeria’s decline is comparable: Morocco and Tunisia also have sharply falling rates. Globally, something stunning and unexpected is happening. Iranian ayatollahs and North African mullahs had better enjoy their present social hegemony, because they are not going to be keeping it much longer. Their status and reputation will likely collapse, much as happened with Catholic priests in Western countries.

It is in that light that we should consider the Muslim demographic “invasion” that has so panicked many Western observers. All immigrant communities have higher birth rates than the native populations, but these rates decline sharply in the second and third generations. Dutch Muslims, moreover, mainly come from countries like Morocco and Turkey, where fertility rates are plunging, as women play a much more active role in the economy. Perhaps Europe and the Middle East will indeed come to share similar cultural and demographic patterns, but because the Muslim world comes to look more European, rather than the other way round. As populations stagnate around the Mediterranean, European countries will have to look further afield for essential labor, and that means dipping ever deeper into Christian Africa.

Yes, the Netherlands may come to be a more mixed society than it was historically, albeit with a degree of ethnic diversity much smaller than anything Americans are used to. But that is a far cry from a kind of conquest by Muslim extremism. Only by using the most egregious kind of
stereotyping can we assume that all people of Middle Eastern origin must be religiously inclined, or that all Muslims are fundamentalist or extremist. A prime sources of tension within the Dutch Muslim communities is the growing assertiveness of women, and the desire of girls and women to play a full part in the wider society, however much that violates traditional religious assumptions. Such female aspirations are a prime detonator for Islamist extremism, which is in large part a young male revolt against women’s progress. As fertility rates decline, Dutch Muslims will increasingly assimilate to their host society, including in their religious forms.

And yes – astonishingly for Americans - the Netherlands still has a Christian life. Even if only half the population still identify with a church, that is a very sizable share of the population, and churches play a larger role in life the further we look outside Amsterdam. Even in the metropolis, new churches thrive, buoyed by a major influx of Christian immigrants – from Africa, and from the former colony of Surinam. (I am obviously drawing here on the work of Professor Hijme Stoffels, among others)

The limitations of the secular dream become obvious in the sprawling landscapes of South-East Amsterdam, a working-class zone that tourists never penetrate. When these streets and apartment complexes were laid out in the 1960s, Dutch planners envisioned a wholly godless future, so the section would clearly have no need for a church. But then the African Christian immigrants arrived, in their thousands. Today, the South-East has perhaps a hundred booming churches, although none comes vaguely close to the architectural glories of the medieval buildings in Amsterdam’s Centre. A number of the new churches, in fact, are in converted garages and back rooms. Even so, the humble circumstances do little to cool the enthusiasm.

Dutch religion, in short, differs vastly from that of the US, and that difference is unlikely to disappear, or even shrink in the foreseeable future. But that assertion does not mean accepting apocalyptic visions of religious annihilation or ethnic turmoil. The time may eventually come to write the obituary for the Christian Netherlands – but not in this century.