

Summary

Christians in the Netherlands

Church participation and Christian belief

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Summary

Trends in church attendance and Christian belief

This report describes a number of important changes in religious participation in the Netherlands, like those recorded in recent decades based on population surveys. In addition to population surveys and figures provided by churches themselves, interviews with religious leaders and observations (in migrant churches) were also used.

The following questions served as a guide for this study: Which developments have occurred in church attendance and in Christian belief in our country? To what extent are these consistent with the international picture and what is the international picture? Do these developments vary between denominations; are there differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants? Are they occurring to the same extent and in the same way among younger and older people? What do they mean for Dutch society?

Europe is out of step with the world when it comes to religion; the Netherlands is slightly below the average in Europe

Section 2 starts by looking at the worldwide situation and the position of religion in various other European countries. Christianity and Islam are the two largest religions in global terms. As far as Christianity is concerned, this was already the case a hundred years ago; but in recent decades the number of Muslims has been catching up quickly. The Pew Research Centre estimates the number of followers of these two world religions to be almost 2.3 billion and at least 1.7 billion, respectively, and expects these numbers to grow by 0.6% and no less than 7%, respectively, between now and 2060. The number of Christians is expected to rise rapidly in Africa and Asia, in particular. Europe is out of step in global terms, in this respect. Church membership and church attendance have been falling in Europe for decades.

Overall, the Czech Republic and the Scandinavian countries have the fewest believers, within Europe. The Netherlands' position is slightly below the average. Compared to other European countries, our country has a high percentage of people who do not attend church. At the other extreme are the traditionally Catholic countries such as Poland, Ireland, Portugal and Austria, where about three-quarters or more of the population still count themselves as part of a religious community. Those countries are also where we find the lowest numbers of people who say they never attend church. One noteworthy observation is that within Europe there is hardly any relationship between the degree of secularisation within a country and the importance that the inhabitants attribute to religion as way of forming social bonds and finding inner peace and comfort. When it comes to the public role of religion, Europeans tend to be less convinced of its value.

Secularisation is continuing, especially among Catholics

Section 3 describes how the Netherlands has, in certain respects, been a secular nation for many decades already. This is apparent both from the churches' own numbers and from

various surveys. Churches have declined in influence, authority and popularity in many respects, including the percentage of Dutch people who have been brought up with religion, who see themselves as part of a church community, who attend church regularly, and who ask for advice from a minister, pastor or other clergyman when they have a spiritual problem. Church membership and church attendance have declined in recent decades among all birth cohorts of the population and fall to a lower level with every successive birth cohort. The slow rise of secularism has been much greater among Catholics, and has become more pronounced since the early 1980s. The decline in religious socialisation has also been strongest in Catholic communities.

When it comes to the future of the major Dutch churches, the flag has been flying at half mast for some time now. Presumably, this will have an effect on wider society. Among regular church-goers, for example, we find more than twice as many volunteer workers than among non-church members, and they are also overrepresented in the informal care sector.

Estrangement from and selective affinity with the Christian faith

Section 4 confirms that secularisation in our country manifests itself not only through the steady decline of churches, but also through a growing estrangement from the traditions of Christian faith. This trend is the strongest among later birth cohorts. Where certain tenets of faith are still endorsed, they are endorsed selectively, with little willingness to embrace Christian doctrines in their entirety.

The basic tenets of the Christian faith have enjoyed diminishing support among Dutch people since the mid-1960s. This includes the belief in a personal God, that Christ is God's son, that the Bible is the word of God, and that there is life after death; on all these fronts there is less support for the traditions of Christian faith. Fewer and fewer Dutch people are certain of ever having experienced God's presence, or read the Bible regularly. It is therefore unsurprising that fewer and fewer people define themselves as decidedly religious. This decline is being accompanied by a sharp increase in the numbers who reject religion outright in relation to the points mentioned, or at least strongly relativise any faith they may have. In some respects, there is sympathy for the social role of religion and the church including among non-church-goers. Nevertheless, there remains a significant correlation between church attendance (membership and church attendance) and religiosity and valuing the church.

Greater involvement among young people, especially in the Protestant church

As far as estrangement from the church is concerned, the picture among younger Dutch people is generally consistent with the overall picture. Within churches, however, there are differences; there, the most recent birth cohorts are actually more involved with the practices of church life. When it comes to faith, too, the trend among young people in the church contrasts with that among young people more generally; in fact, young church-goers tend increasingly to embrace all aspects of faith more strongly. Closer analysis

reveals that this strengthening of church involvement and an affinity with religion is primarily a characteristic of young people in the Protestant church.

Christian migrants: an extensive and multiform environment

Christian migrants have hitherto been under-researched, although in terms of their numbers alone they are an increasingly important faith group in the Netherlands. Section 5 is devoted to this group. Precise figures are still lacking, unfortunately, but it is estimated that there are about one million Christian migrants living in the Netherlands, distributed between a few thousand churches, congregations or parishes that on average have a few hundred members.

The various migrant churches can be classified in various ways. One important distinction is that between the mainly Western migrant churches that have existed in the Netherlands for centuries, such as the Walloon or Norwegian Churches, and more recently established, mainly non-Western migrant churches. The latter have emerged as a result of decolonisation and the arrival of political (refugees) and economic (migrant workers) migration from Africa and Eastern Europe. Another distinction is between migrant congregations within the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant Christian migrants (e.g. Pentecostal congregations) and Orthodox Christian migrant communities. Additionally, there is a difference between migrant communities that consist mainly of expats, who are usually economically well-off, and migrant communities that consist mainly of refugees or migrant workers, who usually have a much weaker socio-economic position.

Migrant churches offer their members various kinds of social support, such as organising language lessons or helping with job applications. They also offer their members emotional support and the opportunity to share and practise their faith with others from the same ethnic community, in their own language and culture. Living far away from home, this provides Christian migrants, such as refugees and economic migrants, with support and a sense of community, especially those who have recently arrived. A place of worship, a general lack of funds, and bureaucratic procedures and regulations are the most important issues that immigrant churches in the Netherlands encounter.

Voices from the field: responses and commentary from key informants

Based on the findings, extensive discussions were held with representatives from a number of religious communities; section 6 reports on these.¹ The perceptions of what religion is all about and which direction religion is moving in appear to diverge widely on a number of points. While some view the careful observance of religious precepts as essential, for others it is the belief in God that is central, and others still apply a broad and inclusive approach whereby religion can include a very diverse range of spiritual experiences, and for a fourth group this is illustrative of religious decay and is an excellent reason to reject the current zeitgeist. These different perspectives are also reflected in views on the process of secularisation. Some see secularisation as a positive concept that enables people to take their own responsibility for their own faith or as a challenge that will motivate the churches

to adapt, while others see it as a modern scourge and a dangerous development that leads to people adopting the role of God themselves.

One point on which all church representatives agreed was that they are mainly critical of an overly rigorous separation of church and society; in their eyes, religious faith should not remain exclusively behind the closed doors because it has something to offer society. We also discovered common ground in widely shared doubts regarding the viability of faith outside some form of church or community context, and an emphasis on the social functions of religious community life. In addition to this, and by extension, the respondents also mentioned the importance of tradition and authority. Religious belief was placed within a tradition whereby one learns something that one could not simply learn for oneself. Within that tradition, some see the Bible as the absolute source of all authority, while for others the church, its rituals and figures of authority also play a role. All of these have come under pressure in recent decades. What are the implications of this? All the respondents agreed that the need for an answer to the big questions regarding the meaning of life is not diminishing. Opinions were divided over whether or not churches and religious communities will continue to play an important role in this respect, however.

The Netherlands is secularising and transforming: towards new forms of morality and sense-making?

The concluding remarks of section 7 place the findings of this report in a broader perspective. The results are linked to the existing literature. In light of the trends observed, this section looks back and ahead, and the question of whether we are on the brink of a post-religious Netherlands is explored.

Many elements of Christian tradition are in retreat (such as church-going, religious knowledge, the literal interpretation of the Bible), while others seem to be disappearing less quickly (including prayer, the belief in a spiritual dimension) or even undergoing a revival (spiritual experiences). Some elements of the current picture are relatively recent, but history shows us that others have a long, centuries-old tradition. From a worldwide perspective, a completely different picture emerges. The geographic centre of gravity of Christianity has shifted towards the southern hemisphere over the past century.

In three respects, it can be concluded that the Netherlands is secularising: basic Christian convictions and practices are becoming less and less widespread in their traditional forms; the influence of religion and religious institutions on everyday life is diminishing; and religious organisations are adapting their messages to modern ways of life. But both religion and secularisation are multidimensional phenomena. Rather than religion disappearing, we are currently seeing that a selective affinity with religious truths is coming to predominate, and that sometimes religious notions are being reinterpreted and transformed (e.g. the blurred distinction between belief in God and belief in a higher power, prayer as a form of self-reflection). All of this raises the question of how this transformation from traditional Christianity to more personal notions of spirituality is taking shape. How do the ever-growing numbers of Dutch people who no longer have any ties with a church or with the Christian faith view the purpose of their lives? This question will be explored in a sub-

sequent report, part 3 of this trilogy of religious studies by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP).

Note

- 1 Representatives of the following organisations were consulted: The Roman Catholic Church of the Netherlands, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, the Remonstrants, the Jehovah's Witnesses, The Council of Churches in the Netherlands, the Dutch-Israelite Denomination, the Muslim Contact Organ and the government bodies.