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Introduction: Religion and revolution, the 1960s and the religious history of the Low Countries

Bart Wallet

The 1960s have acquired almost mythical status in Western collective memory as an era of liberation, the beginning of a brave new world in which the individual gained her/his freedom from stifling collectives. Yet for others the same decade symbolizes an era of decline of almost biblical proportions, the source of all kinds of evil, the period in which traditional morality and collective institutions such as churches came under attack and rapidly gave way to new articulations of identity. These two evaluations of the 1960s have in common the interpretation of this decade as a seismic period of change in which traditional political patterns were challenged, new cultural expressions came to the fore, and most of all religion lost its privileged position as main provider of collective morality. A quick scan in databases with Dutch language newspapers and journals demonstrates how the ‘sixties’ in popular imagination are closely tied to concepts such as secularisation and deconfessionalisation. The 1960s are perceived as the start of a period of declining religion and religious structures.¹

Scholarship has challenged these popular interpretations, often indebted to popularisations of the classical secularisation thesis. First, the notions of religion and secularisation are in intensive processes of redefinition, in which both often are no longer presented as sheer opposites, but rather as part of a continuum, that leaves space for all kinds of interactions between the two.² Second, the debate on the evaluation of the ‘sixties’ has also been re-opened. Was this really the decade in which things started to change, or should we look at the 1950s, or rather at the 1970s? This results in new historical reconstructions that embed the 1960s in longer trajectories of changing cultural conditions, thus enabling us to better distinguish between continuities and discontinuities.³

1 Consulted are Delpher for newspapers and journals until 1995 and NexisUni from media since 1995, using strings such as “jaren zestig”, “zestiger jaren”, “Jaren 1960” en “sixties”.

2 Hunter, ‘Secularisation’; Paul, *Secularisatie*. For a reformulation of the secularisation thesis: Martin, *On Secularization*.

3 Van Rooden, ‘Oral history en het vreemde sterven’; Van Dam, ‘Constructing a Modern Society Through “Depillarization”’.

With this thematic issue, *Trajecta* seeks to contribute to these debates. We want to challenge popular one-dimensional interpretations of religion in the 1960s and instead offer more nuanced approaches to questions of religion and secularization in this decade.⁴ In what respect, we wonder, was religion a source of inspiration for those involved in the ‘cultural revolution’? How did individual people combine religion and new types of belonging? How did established religious institutions act and react to challenges from without and from within? And how did new types of religious identification develop in Belgium and the Netherlands – ranging from evangelicalism to Buddhism and Islam? We aim to rediscover religion as one of the sources behind the processes of cultural renewal that have commonly been associated with the 1960s.

The papers presented in this volume and the upcoming ones of *Trajecta* sketch a varied and nuanced image of the changing roles of religion(s) in the ‘sixties’, ranging from analyses of religious art and architecture to youth culture, press, relief work and army chaplains. Taken together they enable us to briefly revisit a few of the most important issues at hand in order to further academic debate on the religious dynamics of the 1960s in the Netherlands and Belgium.

Periodisation

The ‘sixties’ have become more than just a decade, now functioning as a metaphor for the associated cultural revolution. The elements that made up the cultural revolution, and that are still today perceived as its heritage, are deeply rooted in preceding historical periods. First, it picks up on the Enlightenment tradition, especially in its more radical variant, emphasising individual freedom and secularism. Second, as demonstrated by Rüdiger Safranski, it continues the project of Romanticism, with its emphasis on authenticity, freedom of expression and the inner soul.⁵ Third, it is tightly knit to the phenomenon commonly labelled as modernisation, starting in the nineteenth century and culminating in the ‘sixties’ as an era in which many aspects of modernity enjoyed a breakthrough in Western societies.⁶

Today, these complex and intertwined intellectual and cultural backgrounds to the ‘sixties’ have received ample attention in scholarship. Yet it is good to stress here how much the 1960s were part of much longer processes that started way before the period itself, and continued no less steadily thereafter.

4 Continuing the trajectory sketched in: Van Dam and Van Trigt, ‘Religious Regimes’.

5 Safranski, *Romantik*, 370-394.

6 Weir, *Secularism and Religion*, 1-28.

The more immediate context needs also to be included into the picture, as various contributions in this *Trajecta* issue rightly argue. First, the presence of the history, heritage and memory of the Second World War was all around, and part of the seismic shock caused by the war reached Western societies only in the 'sixties'. In particular, the Holocaust received more attention, resulting in part from the 1961 Eichmann trial. This left a large imprint on the rethinking of ethical questions, public morality and political solidarity with suppressed peoples. Second, the 'sixties' are located in the heart of the ongoing Cold War, which not only constituted a political and military stand-off between East and West, but also an ideological clash within Western societies between capitalism and communism. These large questions loomed over the cultural debates of the 1960s and inspired both proponents and opponents of Marxism. The topic of religion and the secular in this period is neatly connected to each of the two wars and the pertinent ethical and philosophical questions raised by these.

While the metaphoric use of the 'sixties' is quite unchallenged, the historical embeddedness of the 1960s in the preceding and succeeding decades is also stressed by many scholars in the articles in *Trajecta*. Already by the 1950s, cultural shifts occurred in Western societies. These shifts continued to develop throughout the 1960s and gained even more widespread support during the 1970s.⁷ This results in a more layered understanding of aspects of the 'cultural revolution', including religious phenomena and the development of secular spaces. It also reveals the fact that many so-called traditional institutions that were so widely respected in the 1950s, including the churches, were among the spaces that served as cradle for cultural, political and religious renewal.

By far one of the most important considerations for critical studies of the 'sixties' is to beware of finalism. In contemporary ideologies the 1960s are often presented as the period that, for better or for worse, is the cradle of today's western culture. This implies that often quite linear trajectories are suggested from the 1960s until today, including on religion and the secular. In practice, this means that the 'sixties' are interpreted as a major break with a predominantly religious, Christian worldview, and the turning point towards a rapid secularisation of society. From the present situation of quite secularised Belgian and Dutch societies, the interpretation of the 'sixties' is heavily coloured and perceived as secularising.⁸ The *Trajecta* volume, however, raises the question of whether or not this does justice to the motives and objectives of many leading figures in the 1960s. It argues that religious convictions were

7 Harinck and Van Trigt (eds.), *In de vergifkast*; Sengers, *The Dutch and Their Gods*; Paul, 'The Sociological Myth'; Hellema, *Nederland en de Jaren zeventig*, 11-19.

8 Cf. Gauvreau and Heathorn (eds.), *The Sixties and Beyond*.

among the major components behind the 'cultural revolution' and many agents themselves interpreted the 1960s as an era of religious renewal and rebirth. Due to finalistic assumptions, these perspectives from within the 1960s have been overshadowed for too long by perspectives developed afterwards.

Geography

One of the dominant trends in contemporary historiography is to reconstruct the past beyond the realm of the nation-state. This means reclaiming hitherto overlooked spaces such as regions and cultural realms and reassessing the local and the global levels. The field of Global History, for instance, is studying the worldwide flow of ideas, ideologies, products, and artifacts, connecting various parts of the world in political, cultural, and economic structures. This has been a promising path, especially for the study of the 'global sixties', as the cultural dynamics unleashed in the decade swept throughout the western world. Still, many studies of the era restrict themselves to the national level.

The policy of our journal is to simultaneously study the Belgian and Dutch cases, thus enabling scholars to assess cultural continuities across national borders, and to identify differences and varieties. Although most articles still restrict themselves to one of the two nation-states, bringing them together in one volume already opens up the possibility for cross-border analysis. Various overlapping regional concepts seem to have played an important role in the religious dynamics of the 1960s. First, the cultural arena shaped by the Dutch language, stretching from the north of the Netherlands to the south of Flanders, probably even including part of French Flanders. Some media were read and watched across the borders, while intellectuals and their books went back and forth. Second, the predominant Catholic identity of Belgian society and the southern provinces of the Netherlands likewise constituted a cultural space of exchange, inspiration, and internal dialogue. The Second Vatican Council resulted in widespread calls for change and renewal in the Catholic dioceses across the Low Countries.⁹ Such transnational spaces of communication propelled the spread of new ideas and ideologies, even though it could work out very differently given the dissimilar political conditions on both sides of the national border. The articles in these issues invite a reconstruction of the regional networks beyond the nation-state as vital cultural realms in order to understand the dynamics of the 1960s.

9 See the issue of *Trajecta* 2013 devoted to the Second Vatican Council and the Low Countries.

International influences, especially from America, France and Germany, have not gone unnoticed in present scholarship. New types of solidarity with oppressed peoples developed during the decade, resulting in networks of support and relief work in the so-called Third World. Religion and religious networks quite often played a significant role in these activities in Africa, Asia and Latin America, but also contributed to exchanges and the transfer of ideas to the Low Countries. Now, what the postcolonial angle means for the religious dynamics of the 1960s in Belgium and the Netherlands is still notably under-researched, and also this *Trajecta* issue will unfortunately not contribute much to this as of yet. The processes of decolonisation of Indonesia (1945-1949), Congo (1960), and Suriname (1975) as well as post-war migration had an important impact on the religious landscape. New strands of evangelicalism migrated to the Low Countries, as did various types of Islam and Hinduism. Religion and migration became deeply entangled histories. Moreover, Eastern religions and spiritual practices became attractive for pockets of society disillusioned with established religions and Western models of thinking.¹⁰ The 1960s thus were a crucial decade in the pluralisation of the religious landscape, only further developed by labour migration from the Mediterranean area.¹¹

Religion and the secular

This *Trajecta* issue departs from two premisses. First, in order to properly assess the dynamics of religion and religiosity in the 1960s it is imperative to include the secular. Not by claiming, as some do, that the secular itself is another type of religious belonging, but rather since the secular becomes an important discursive element in contemporaneous and contemporary debates on religion in the 1960s. Analysing religion cannot be done without including the secular, and – vice versa – studying the secular is impossible without including the religious.¹² Both are not understood as merely exclusive opposites, but rather as two sides of a wide spectrum.¹³ As the philosopher Charles Taylor has argued, religion and the secular both vie for the adherence of westerners, neither being the default option any longer.¹⁴ Religious and/or secular belonging have become dynamic categories, where people relate

10 Campbell, *Easternization of the West*.

11 Knippenberg, 'Secularisation and the Rise of Immigrant Religions'; Çitak, 'Religion, Ethnicity and Transnationalism'.

12 Willaime, 'La sécularisation'; Brown, 'Gender, Christianity, and the Rise of No Religion'.

13 Cf. Weir, *Secularism and Religion*, 66-104; Dobbelaere, 'Religion and Politics in Belgium'.

14 Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

to differently in various phases of their lives. So, instead of static concepts, they are here perceived as dynamic, fluid and performative spaces.

Second, it is pertinent to speak of religion rather than church(es), meaning that these contributions need to be read as operating in the field of religious history rather than church history. The latter risks restricting itself to the dynamics of established church institutions, whereas the former includes all forms of religiosity, including non-traditional ones, and beliefs and practices within and without churches, synagogues and mosques. This helps to analyse bottom-up processes, the rise of new types of religious belonging, and the myriad ways of combining elements from various religious and non-religious traditions in everyday life. Consequently, this also deconstructs a discourse focusing on the perceived breakdown of church institutions, instead highlighting the flexibility and fluidity of religion both within and without traditional religions and religious institutions.

The papers assembled here document the dynamics between religion and the secular. On the one hand, it appears that the realm of the religious is one of the spaces where secular ideas are tested, developed and even adopted, often in conjunction with religious elements. On the other hand, there is a lot of religiosity in the secular realm, where both traditional religions, *petits religions* and new religions inspire people in their individual development, quest for authenticity, international solidarity and activism. Both religion and the secular are indispensable lenses for better understanding the complexities of the cultural revolution. Religion and the secular appear to be overlapping areas with fluid borders.

Within the realm of the religious several processes take place instantly.¹⁵ First, as recorded, religious spaces were breeding places for the cultural revolution, political engagement and societal renewal. Second, within established religions there are many who experience the 1960s as an era of religious renewal, a period of a new renaissance or reformation, that would lead to more intense religious experiences and to churches better equipped to deal with everyday life.¹⁶ Third, yet others perceived the cultural changes and progressive religious renewal with growing suspicion, leading to new types of religious mobilisation resulting in the creation of a counterculture. These include traditionalist Catholics declining the innovations of the Second Vatican Council, instead clinging to the Tridentine liturgy and dogmatics; but also conservative orthodox Reformed protestants, regrouping in self-chosen segregated spaces with schools and media of their own liking; and finally, evangelicals, inspired by American examples, combining

15 Cf. for contemporary American developments: Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening*.

16 Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II*; Luykx, 'Andere katholieken en de jaren zestig'.

strict Orthodox beliefs with contemporary communicative and media strategies.¹⁷ All these processes taken together resulted in a growing pluralisation of the religious landscape, with considerable overlap with secular spheres.

Individual and collective

At the heart of it all, there seems to have been a renegotiation of the individual and the collective spheres. There was a clear tendency for more autonomy for the individual, including the emancipation of women and sexual identities. This resulted in processes of adjusting laws to new conceptions of the relations between state and citizens. It also meant new attention to authenticity as the individual's strategy to construct her/his own identity independently from prescribed collective patterns. The quest for authenticity translated in growing attention to psychology and psychiatry, just as much as to old and new types of spirituality. This may or may not have had a religious angle, it clearly operated in the larger market of religious emotions, sentiments and practices. Oriental religions, yoga, sufi mysticism, born-again evangelical spirituality and the monastic Communauté de Taizé each vied for the individual's soul and offered rituals and ideas instrumental in the quest for the inner self.¹⁸

Ultimately, another very much simultaneous process took place, namely the development of new forms of collective mobilisation. Political activism reached a new high and mobilised many in parties, associations, unions, and clubs. Next to activism on behalf of local or national political issues, of particular interest here are new types of worldwide solidarity. Relief work and political activism went hand in hand, directed at poorer nations, decolonizing countries and people suffering under oppressive political regimes. Whereas class was one of the mobilising forces, ideology and, indeed, religion is as well. Global religious networks form a major context for the rise of all kinds of NGOs devoted to fair trade, human rights, environmental issues and relief work.¹⁹

Stress on the authentic self and engagement on behalf of larger, often global issues were not opposites but went hand in hand. Collective organisation relied more and more on the individual's expressed will to engage, rather than following paths traditionally taken by this generation and preceding ones. This resulted in new organisational structures, changing the societal landscape, with more agency for individuals. It also meant

17 Wallet, Krabbendam and Prins (eds.), *Evangelicals in the Low Countries*.

18 Knibbe, *Faith in the Familiar*.

19 Van Dam, 'Moralizing Postcolonial Consumer Society'.

more fluidity and flexibility, with changing political conditions, cultural trends and economic demands. Some initiatives solidified their position, many others faded away.

The papers presented in this volume and the upcoming ones invite scholars to reflect once more on the dynamics of religion and revolution in the 1960s. They document the transformation of religions and the transformative power of religion in societies and they demonstrate the myriad entanglements of the religious and the secular. Just as much as the cultural revolution provoked countercultural mobilisation of religious groups, it was prepared, conducted and received by others who equally invoked religion into their project. The shifting borders and ongoing engagement between notions of religion and revolution are among the results of these papers.

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