

The Dutch way of doing things: The Netherlands: There is an open attitude towards sex, drugs and euthanasia and a novel approach to religion

Part of a Series: God in the Marketplace: Religion in the Public Square

Doug Todd

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AMSTERDAM - The first and only time I showered naked with a female stranger was in this city of social experiments.

It was the early '70s. It was a youth hostel. There was me, another guy and two attractive young women in a large shower room. Nobody flirted. Nobody got excited. But the shower experience set my image of the Netherlands forever: liberal, egalitarian, tolerant, matter-of-fact.

I haven't heard whether co-ed showering still goes on in Dutch hostels, but as almost everyone knows the Netherlands has evolved into a country with remarkably open-minded approaches to sex, drugs, prostitution and euthanasia. Less well-known is its novel approach to religion.

The Netherlands' 16 million people -- who pack themselves behind an elaborate network of dikes in a country the size of Vancouver Island -- tend to find innovative solutions to problems. They've brought this knack to the tensions caused by religion.

Even though fewer Dutch people attend religious institutions than in Canada, the Dutch generally welcome non-coercive public expressions of religion, spirituality and ethical discussion.

Many see public religion as a way to integrate people from all walks into one cohesive civil society.

Here are 10 ways the Dutch have welcomed religion, spirituality and ethics into the marketplace of ideas:

1. The national government has a unique policy of providing full funding to religious schools -- as a result two-thirds of its young people attend Catholic, Protestant or Jewish schools, including many who aren't religious.
2. The country's well-organized secular humanists support the full-funding of religious schools, in part because it permits them to teach humanist values at their own learning institutions.
3. Students at Dutch schools have "mentors," who offer non-sectarian personal or spiritual guidance.

4. The mayor of Amsterdam, a Jew, has said religion should be public because it helps integrate people into society.
5. Holland has a highly diverse news media, including one newspaper with seven reporters covering religion and philosophy.
6. Holland has three publicly funded TV networks devoted predominantly to religion, spirituality and ethics.
7. Holland's mosques operate like community centres, featuring cafes, barber shops, hamams and Al Jazeera TV.
8. Unlike Canada, Holland has many Muslims serving in high political office.
9. A body of religious leaders and secular humanists formally advise the Dutch government.
10. The country's top soccer team, Ajax, is considered Jewish. When I joined almost 60,000 singing, chanting, cheering fans at an Ajax game, it was wonderfully strange to see the Star of David in the team's logo.

Religious tolerance

The Dutch people's creative approach to public spirituality has been seriously tested in recent years, however.

The remarkable rise and shocking assassination of eccentric Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn seemed to call into question Holland's vaunted religious tolerance.

Fortuyn, an openly gay politician, was murdered in May 2002. The trial of the man convicted of gunning him down was taking place when I was in Amsterdam this spring.

The murderer confessed he shot Fortuyn -- who had denounced Islam as "backward" and Holland as "too full" -- because he feared his hate-mongering against the country's rapidly rising Muslim population.

Fortuyn's popularity was based on his paradoxical assertion that the Dutch shouldn't tolerate Muslims because Muslims aren't tolerant of homosexuals (or sex outside marriage or soft drugs or prostitution).

Fortuyn's political party went on to surprising success after his murder, leaving nervous many of the country's 900,000 Muslims (who make up five per cent of the national population and 15 per cent of Amsterdam's population -- compared to two per cent of Canada's total).

However, his political party has struggled in recent months because of infighting. And though some Dutch retain sympathy for Fortuyn's hard line against Muslims, the rest of the country seems to have gone back to trying to find a way to bringing Muslims into their tolerant fold.

Amsterdam's museums are on the front line of a bold battle to march religious and spiritual issues into the public domain, in a way never seen in Canada.

The incredibly popular Ann Frank Museum -- housed in the building in which the famous Jewish family tried to hide from the Nazis -- culminates in a provocative religious controversy.

After touring the four-storey Frank family building, thousands of visitors a day are directed toward an exhibit in which a notorious Muslim imam from Rotterdam is shown declaring homosexuality "a contagious disease."

An adjacent screen contrasts the story of the brutal murder of gay Wyoming student Matthew Shepherd. Visitors are asked to air their views on whether the imam's explosive religious opinions should be tolerated.

Another inspired attempt at advancing spirituality and frank religious discussion is under way a few hundred metres down Prinsengracht Canal, at the Bible Museum.

I was immediately taken by one of the Bible Museum's sensual, earthy exhibits: "The Scents Cabinet," which offered smells of the Biblical period.

Opening up jars, I took in the pungent odour of myrrh, which "the wise men offered to baby Jesus. I enjoyed soapy-smelling acacia, the sweetness of cedar, the perfumy lotus and the woody galbanum -- imagining how Biblical figures used these fragrances as offerings to God.

The Bible museum also permanently runs a hard-hitting movie about the tragic battle over which faith should control Jerusalem's sacred Temple Mount. The filmmakers interview strong-minded Jews, Christians and Muslims, all of whom express no desire to share the site.

The Bible Museum, in addition, features a wonderful child-friendly exhibit on the prophet Abraham, emphasizing how the Biblical patriarch could be a unifying figure for Jews, Christians and Muslims.

The Bible Museum's lead role in building a more positive place for Christians, Jews, Muslims and others in Holland goes beyond its thought-provoking exhibits, though.

The Bible Museum also hosted the first meeting of The Council of Worldviews and Religions (including secular humanists), which now directly advises the Dutch national government, in a public way unmatched in Canada.

Here are more creative things the Dutch are doing to bring spirituality and values to the fore. They're broken into four spheres:

POLITICS

The mayor of Amsterdam is leading those who argue more space should be

given to religion in public life.

"Religion can and should contribute to integration," says Job Cohen. The more Muslim immigrants are encouraged to use their mosques to learn the Dutch language, to network, to find community support, Cohen says the less likely they are to engage in crime or fall by the wayside.

The Dutch were badly divided by religion in the 19th century, when Catholics and Protestants hated one another. In response, the Dutch debated the problem and found the best way to reduce antagonism was to set up a system of "pillars" in which the government actively supported Catholics and Protestants (and later Jews) as distinct but equal cultures.

When in doubt, when faced with a controversy, the Dutch don't ignore political challenges (as often happens in Canada) -- they set up a committee, says Nathal Dessing, a scholar for The Study of Islam in the Modern World, a government-funded institute ranked one of the best in the world. "The Dutch don't like conflict, so we try to find compromises," Dessing says with a smile in her office in the medieval university town of Leiden.

Dessing's task on the nation's 15-member Islam and Citizenship Committee is to help Muslim migrants with health and volatile gender issues. She's "encouraging debate among Muslims on the role of women and the place of homosexuality."

Meanwhile, on the outskirts of Amsterdam, leather-jacketed Turkish immigrant Haci Kraceur talks about his role on another government advisory body. He's trying to get the government in The Hague to help teach the country's Muslims about world religions, particularly so they don't fear and hate Jews during this time of Middle East conflict.

With 30,000 grassroots members, Kraceur says his organization, called Milli Gorus or National Vision, encourages Muslim immigrants to fully embrace the Dutch approach to religious freedom and free speech.

He calls on Dutch Muslims to avoid living in all-Muslim neighbourhoods and open up the country's 400 mosques to everyone with cafes, bakeries and Turkish massage parlours. "We don't want to be fundamentalists -- to revive 15-century Islamic culture."

The Dutch government, not afraid to charge head-on at sensitive religion-related issues, recently decided to try to integrate Muslims into mainstream society by requiring all immigrant Muslim imams to learn the Dutch language.

EDUCATION

Sarah Nixon, a Dutch-speaking 15-year-old, had just returned from a weekend retreat to a monastery when I met her.

For three days she joined other students from her Catholic-run school and lived like Benedictine monks, getting up at 5:15 a.m., eating in silence, taking part in a string of services.

"We walked around and watched the sun rise. It was pretty cool. I liked the silence. It was fun to pull back from the crazy world and take time to think."

Like millions of Dutch students, Nixon is a non-Catholic attending one of Holland's Catholic schools. Sixty-two per cent of Dutch schools attend either Protestant or Catholic schools.

In light of Holland's "pillared" approach to religion, the country's constitution protects the right of everyone to have a government-funded religious education until age 17.

At first the success of these loosely "sectarian" schools seems odd, since Holland is one of the world's most secular societies. A scant 10 per cent of the population regularly attends a religious institution (although 60 to 70 per cent believe in God).

Religious or not, Dutch students like the schools' ambience, including an openness to spirituality. Sarah, who was born in Canada, could have chosen to go to any school she wanted in Holland, but she chose the Catholic one in her Amsterdam suburb of Hoofddorp because it had a good feel to it, and religious roots.

Sarah loved her retreat with the monks. But she doesn't want to become a nun. If she were to lean toward any religion, it would probably be Buddhism. She's spiritually eclectic, having attended in her youth a Dutch-government-funded Waldorf school, which is part of a spiritual movement known as anthroposophy.

Each week Sarah and every other student at her school takes a course in religion, spirituality and values. Catholicism is never forced on students. Even when students debate Catholic doctrinal touchstones, the teacher leaves the discussion open-ended and non-judgmental. "We had to write a paper about what we thought about abortion.' She never pushed an anti-abortion line."

Sarah's experience offers a model for Canadian religious and worldviews education, which can be pluralistic and positively life-shaping whether it occurs in public or independent schools.

Even the country's vibrant population of secular humanists, whose offspring attend either religious schools, public schools or institutions run by humanists, want their children to learn about world religions and other worldviews.

As the rise of Pym Fortuyn revealed, however, opposition to publicly funded religious schools exists in Holland.

It gained momentum in recent years when some Dutch began fearing Muslim students were being taught to oppose open-minded aspects of Dutch life.

Still, Dutch theology student Derek Suchard recognizes most Dutch people, despite low-level grumbling about Muslims, like the option of sending their kids to a taxpayer-financed religious school of their choice. Any Dutch political party that advocated getting rid of it, Suchard said, would risk political suicide.

NEWS MEDIA

Elma Drayer is one of seven reporters who specialize in religion and philosophy at Der Trouw, one of Holland's leading newspapers.

When I tell Drayer her newspaper has more full-time religion and philosophy reporters than does the entire country of Canada, she looks surprised, lighting another cigarette to take it in.

Der Trouw has a circulation of about 130,000. It is considered one of the country's intellectual newspapers. It's deeply rooted in the Dutch Resistance to Nazism during the Second World War and the Protestant Christian Reformed Church.

Der Trouw, says Drayer, serves both faithful Protestants and young readers who are not religiously attached. Through Der Trouw, Drayer recently organized a major event for the country, in which thousands of Protestant "preachers' kids" gathered to share their life experiences.

The country's Catholic newspaper, de Volkskrant, has a circulation of 300,000 and targets both church-going Catholics and a mainstream audience.

Like in Britain, the Dutch news media is full of diverse and opinionated voices, religious and otherwise. The Netherlands also boasts a Catholic newspaper, a socialist newspaper, several right-wing newspaper and some tabloid-style newspapers.

The wide range of newspapers in Holland was the largely happy result of the country's commitment to the "pillars" approach, in which each segment of society was encouraged to carve out its own place, unique but part of the mainstream.

ENTERTAINMENT

The pillars approach is also key to another generally successful aspect of Dutch culture: Multi-worldview TV networks.

There are three public TV channels and four commercial ones in Holland. Dutch religious, humanist and cultural groups air their programs on the three public stations, often in prime time.

The Catholic channel has sponsored contests that take suggestions for new saints or seek "Heroes of the Year" (such as a girl who stood up to bullies). The Protestant channel tells fictional stories from a Christian perspective. As well, it became heavily involved in Der Trouw's Preachers Kid Day, obtaining great ratings.

The Netherlands' multi-worldview approach to broadcasting was instituted to offer distinctive programming and give all groups in Dutch society a voice, says Drayer. "I can't think of anyone who's objected."

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Holland has gone a long way to make its multifaith society work by keeping religion in the public square.

At the same time, Canada has also developed into a relatively tolerant and stable country because its citizens have had to learn how three distinct cultures and their religions -- English Protestantism, French Roman Catholicism and aboriginal spirituality -- could get along.

It's tempting to believe the Netherlands, on balance, is more advanced when it comes to keeping spirituality in the public sphere. But it would be foolhardy to outright endorse an unusual and complex policy such as 100-per-cent funding of separate religious schools, without detailed analysis.

It would be more prudent to simply conclude Canadians could learn from closely studying the Netherland's brave and largely successful experiments at integrating religion and spirituality into its rich and lively democratic society.