



## Who gets excluded from 'Christian culture'?

### On culturalised religion, Islam and confessional Christianity

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April 2021

#### *Abstract*

The re-articulation of Christian religion as national (or European) culture has emerged as a widespread trend in current debates about religion in Europe. This has important implications for processes of inclusion and exclusion, since, if Europe is defined in terms of its Christian heritage and identity, the question arises who is being excluded from that symbolic realm. Taking up this question, this paper focuses on the Netherlands, a country that is at once characterised by widespread anti-religious sentiments and a growing re-orientation on Christian heritage and culture in public and political debates. The paper examines two different expressions of what can be termed 'culturalised Christianity': the mobilisation of Christian identity in populist politics and the embrace of Christian heritage in debates about closed and re-purposed church buildings. Exploring the similarities and differences between these expressions, I demonstrate that the culturalisation of Christianity in the Netherlands comes with antagonist stances towards confessional religious communities, not just Muslim but also Christian ones. I further argue that while these manifestations of what can be termed identitarian Christianity and heritage Christianity differ in important ways, they share an underlying desire for rearticulating a sense of self and belonging with reference to a presumed collective past.

Culturalised religion appears to be on the rise. Many parts of the world witness the appropriation of religion as a source of belonging, heritage and cultural identity. In a recent review of the literature on this topic, the sociologists Avi Astor and Damon Mayrl (2020, 209) define culturalised religion as 'forms of religious identification, discourse,

and expression that are primarily cultural in character, insofar as they are divorced from belief in religious dogma or participation in religious ritual'. As these authors note, 'culturalised religion' is a tricky concept, since it could mistakenly be taken to imply a neat separation between 'cultural' and 'non-cultural' religion or, for that matter, culture and religion (210). Indeed, it can be argued that belonging and cultural identity have, at all times, been essential parts of religious life. Moreover, the mobilisation of religion as culture does not rule out a committed personal faith.

Nevertheless, looking specifically at Western European countries that have seen a dramatic decline of institutionalised Christianity, there seems to be an increasing re-orientation on Christianity in which the emphasis is put not on belief and doctrine but on culture and heritage. This pertains, among other phenomena, to political debates about Europe's alleged Christian identity (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016), a revived interest in Christian art, history and architecture (Isnart and Cerezales 2020) and the appropriation of religious symbols – such as crucifixes – as tokens of national culture (Joppke 2013). What makes these engagements with Christian religion distinctive, Astor and Mayrl argue, is that its 'cultural' or symbolic elements are brought to the foreground while its connections with 'traditional' or conventional religious forms 'lend it rhetorical, emotional, and political weight' (2020, 211). This does not mean that this is not 'real' religion, but rather a re-worked engagement with religion under secular conditions (Astor, Burchardt, and Grier 2017, 126–27; Astor and Mayrl 2020, 211–12).

The emergence of discourses and practices of culturalised religion in Europe raises an important question about processes of inclusion and exclusion: if European cultures are defined in Christian terms, then who is included and who is excluded from that symbolic realm? Indeed, in current debates about diversity and belonging the dynamics of culturalisation (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016), be it in religious or other terms, surfaces as a primary language for determining identity and alterity (Baumann and Gingrich 2004). In terms of the inclusion or exclusion of religious communities, the literature on culturalised religion in Europe (which covers a wide variety of social phenomena, orientations and practices) has focused on two important developments: the exclusion of Muslims through political discourses that equate European culture with Christianity (Van den Hemel 2014; Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Brubaker 2017; DeHanas and Shterin 2018; Strømme and Schmiedel 2020) and the privileging of Christianity through narratives and judicial rulings that define Christian

symbols and materialities as national ‘culture’ or ‘heritage’ (Joppke 2013; Oliphant 2015; Astor, Burchardt, and Griera 2017; Coleman 2019; Baumgartner 2020).

In this paper, I aim to connect these two areas of inquiry by exploring continuities and discontinuities between these two manifestations of culturalised Christianity. I focus on the Netherlands, which offers an interesting context to study this phenomenon given its almost proverbial secular culture. The Dutch tend to pride themselves on their liberal and secular values. Ever since the 1960s, strongly anti-ecclesiastical positions have pervaded popular culture in this country (Van der Veer 2006; Van Rooden 2010; Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016). Yet, in the last couple of decades this country has also seen an increasingly widespread embrace of Christian culture and history (Van den Hemel 2014; 2017; Beekers 2017; Meyer 2019). In what follows, I argue that the culturalisation of Christianity in the Netherlands sits uneasily with confessional religious communities, not just Muslim but also Christian ones (I use the term ‘confessional’ to denote active membership to a particular religious group and adherence to a particular religious creed). In contrast with findings in several other contexts (e.g. Oliphant 2015; Astor, Burchardt, and Griera 2017; Isnart and Cerezales 2020), the promotion of Christian heritage in the cases I focus on in this paper is spearheaded less by Christian actors and organisations than by secular ones. What is more, confessional Christians are at times even understood to jeopardise the preservation – and public accessibility – of Christian heritage. This paper, then, interrogates the complex and ambivalent relations between culturalised Christianity, confessional Christianity and Islam. I first examine the mobilisation of Christian identity in political – especially far right populist – discourses and then move to the revaluation of Christian heritage in public debates more widely, in particularly those concerning the closing down and re-use of church buildings.

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### **Identitarian Christianity**

‘National identity’ was a recurrent topic during the 2017 parliamentary election campaign in the Netherlands. Given the country’s self-consciously secular public culture, it is remarkable that Dutch identity was often defined in religious terms in these debates, especially by political actors operating on the right-wing conservative and populist spectrum (cf. Van den Hemel 2017, 1–2). One of the most vocal spokespersons of this position was Thierry Baudet, the leader of the new right-wing populist party ‘Forum voor Democratie’ (Forum for Democracy). This party received just under 2 per cent of the vote

in 2017 and has quickly risen in popularity since then – in 2019 it gained more votes than any other party for the provincial elections and 11 per cent of the Dutch vote for the European Parliament election.

In the run-up to the 2017 elections, Baudet sent out a tweet – phrased, as if to underscore the point, in Latin – in which he advocated a ‘revaluation’ of Christianity. The Dutch Evangelical broadcaster (EO) subsequently invited him to join a debate on the topic in a talk show aired on national television. In this programme, Baudet identified himself as an ‘agnostic cultural Christian’ and argued that one does not have to ‘literally believe’ in Christianity’s doctrines to recognise the relevance of Christian values for Western society.<sup>1</sup> He said that because we have tried to ‘radically break’ with these values in recent decades, ‘we have orphaned ourselves, we have become detached from our roots’. Christianity, he pointed out, can provide us with a sense of who we are and of what binds us in this time of ‘identity crisis’. And this is where Baudet’s full ideological message reared its head: a reorientation towards our Christian tradition, he said, is particularly important ‘now that we are faced in the Netherlands with a very self-conscious, *totally* different culture, Islam, which does manifest itself, with very different values, where freedom of conscience does not play a role, the equality of men and women is very different, separation of church and state isn’t acknowledged’. Baudet argued that given our current ‘inability to define our own identity’ in relation to ‘this huge challenger that has arrived here’, we need to become aware of ‘the sources of *our* civilization’. These words made clear, rather blatantly and crudely, that his call to reevaluate Christianity was motivated above all by a desire to resist Islam.

The television programme had also invited a couple of confessional Christian public figures to join the conversation. Having listened politely to Baudet’s exposition, they showed little enthusiasm for his extolment of Christian tradition. Frank Bosman, a Roman Catholic cultural theologian and public commentator, said he believes that Christianity is essentially defined by the commandment of love. For him, that means that the religion teaches us to love the other and allow them to lead their own lives. This, he said, pertains to Dutch Muslims in particular. ‘So how can you base yourself on a revival of Christian norms and values and at the same time use that as a kind of leverage to push Muslims out of the door? I feel abused as a Christian by this... imperialist politics!’, he exclaimed somewhat provocatively. Baudet could count on little more approval from Carola Schouten, at the time a Member of Parliament for a confessional Protestant

Christian party (ChristenUnie) and currently the Secretary of Agriculture. Being a Christian, she said, is not only about the kinds of ideas and inspiration that Baudet talks about, but also about attempting in one's everyday life – 'with the Bible in one's hand' – to do good. She remarked: 'You cannot talk about Christian culture without also talking about the person it was named after, and how He defines the good life.'

Several aspects stand out in this discussion: the first is the way in which Baudet decouples 'culture' from 'belief', passing over Christian doctrines and focusing on the religion as a source of identity and belonging. His Christian interlocutors in the televised debate reject this move to focus selectively on what might be called the 'high culture' of Christianity at the cost of its teachings and moral prescriptions. Of course, not all confessional Christians in the Netherlands would assent to Bosman's plea to love the 'Muslim other'; antagonistic or ambiguous sentiments towards Muslims can be found among segments of the Christian population too (see e.g. Balkenhol and Van den Hemel 2019; Van den Hemel 2020b). Yet, most would object to the strict separation between religious culture and religious doctrine. Secondly, Baudet unabashedly invokes Christianity as a means to demarcate a 'Western self' over and against a 'Muslim other'. He juxtaposes an allegedly confused Dutch or Western society that is uncertain about its identity, with an 'Islam' that he defines as 'self-conscious', 'manifest', 'totally different' and a 'huge challenger'. Finally, Baudet seems to effortlessly pair Christian culture with liberal and secular values such as gender equality and the freedom of expression. This is remarkable because during the cultural struggles following the 1960s, such liberal values rather tended to pitted over and against the norms of Dutch Christian traditions (Kennedy 1995; Righart 2004; Van der Veer 2006).

This 'identitarian' (Zúquete 2018) mobilisation of Christianity and its distinct elements outlined here are representative of a larger trend in far right populist politics in Europe (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Brubaker 2017; DeHanas and Shterin 2018; Strømme and Schmiedel 2020). Whether it is the Front National in France, the Lega Nord in Italy, Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary or the Schweizerische Volkspartei in Switzerland, far right populist parties have increasingly employed references to Christian culture and symbols in their political messaging (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016). This reorientation towards Christian culture is also increasingly found among more mainstream right-wing, conservative political actors (Van den Hemel 2014; 2017; Roy 2016). These political actors make use of a populist 'political style' that opposes the

righteous ‘people’ to both ‘others’ and ‘elites’ (Moffitt 2016, 43–44; DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 180). In European contexts, the ‘others’ referred to are usually minority groups with a migration background, especially those identified as Muslims. In far right populist narratives, they are understood to threaten the culture, tradition and security of ‘the people’. Meanwhile, ‘elites’ are accused of betraying their own culture by indulging in cosmopolitan and liberal ideologies (Marzouki and McDonnell 2016; DeHanas and Shterin 2018). Against this background, Christianity has emerged as a potent symbolic resource for defining European cultures and distinguishing these from – especially Muslim – post-migrant cultures.

Rogers Brubaker (2017, 1199) argues that the Christianity mobilised in these populist politics is not what he terms a ‘substantive’ one. It is an identitarian Christianity that focuses on ‘symbols of belonging’ rather than ‘practices of worship’. In Europe’s secularised context, he suggests, ‘[i]t is precisely the ongoing erosion of Christianity as doctrine, organization, and ritual that makes it easy to invoke Christianity as a cultural and civilizational identity, characterized by putatively shared values that have little or nothing to do with religious belief or practice’ (1199). Populists’ references to Christian identity coincide with a promotion of liberal and secular values including freedom of speech, gender equality, gay rights and philosemitism (1194). In this regard, Olivier Roy points out that right-wing populists set out to defend Christian identity by promoting secular and progressive values that ‘the Church itself does not support’ (2016, 198).

Brubaker (2017) posits that this seemingly contradictory politics follows above all from a heightened concern with Islam. As antagonism toward Islam has increasingly become a ‘master frame’ for national populist movements in Europe (Vossen 2011, 180), Brubaker suggests that populists selectively embrace liberalism, secularism and cultural Christianity as means of demarcating their national and European culture and way of life, and setting these apart from those of Muslims (2017, 1204). The emphasis on Islam, he posits, has inspired a move in Northern and Western European populisms from nationalism to civilisationism:

The definition of the constitutive other in civilizational terms invites a characterization of the self in the same register: the preoccupation with Islam calls forth a corresponding – and increasingly explicit – concern with Christianity, understood not as a religion, but

as a civilization, as coextensive with “the West”, or with what used to be called “Christendom”.

(Brubaker 2017, 1200)

In this analysis, Christianity is presented by and large as an empty signifier. As Brubaker summarises the populist narrative: ‘Crudely put, if “they” are Muslim, then “we” must, in some sense, be Christian’ (1199). Other scholars have similarly argued that the role of Christianity in this populist politics ‘seems to be almost entirely identitarian and negative’ (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 178) and that most right-wing populist parties in Europe ‘are Christian largely to the extent that they reject Islam’ (Roy 2016, 186).

### **Religion and the desire to ground ‘native’ culture**

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However, the interpretation of identitarian Christianity as merely negative or devoid of content is debatable. Brubaker suggests that the ‘civilisational’ preoccupation with Islam invites a parallel concern with Christianity-as-civilisation. Yet it is not self-evident that self-identified secular political actors characterise European civilisation in terms of Christianity rather than, say, the Enlightenment or liberal secularism. Indeed, looking at the Netherlands, which constitutes a central case in Brubaker’s analysis, earlier right-wing conservative discourses that were already concerned with Islam tended to emphasise the secular and liberal principles of Dutch or Western culture, and the Dutch ‘emancipation’ from – Christian – religion (Prins 2007; Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010; Sunier 2010; Verkaaik 2010). The prevailing sentiment in these discourses was that the strict morals of Muslims, in the words of Peter van der Veer (2006, 119), ‘remind the Dutch too much of what they have so recently left behind’. Given this earlier – and in many cases continuing – focus on secular freedom in response to Islam, I argue that the invocation of Christianity among right-wing populists cannot be sufficiently explained by pointing towards widespread concerns with Islam alone.

In his work on the political mobilization of notions of Christian – or ‘Judeo-Christian’<sup>2</sup> – culture in the Netherlands, Ernst van den Hemel (2014; 2017; 2020b) addresses this shift in right-wing discourses about religion. He argues that the emergence of appeals to (Judeo-)Christian tradition is inadequately understood if it is seen as mere populist opportunism or criticised for being inherently contradictory – even if these critiques are often justified. He posits that these appeals should be taken seriously as a

conservative, rhetorical practice that self-consciously crosses the boundaries between the religious and the secular. These narratives about Christian culture, he explains, are consistent with a longer tradition in conservative ideology of appealing to – and retrospectively constructing – tradition as a means of grounding the community. It is ‘a performative-linguistic act, an invocation rather than a description, that has as its goal the simultaneous defence and construction of a community that is perceived to be under threat, by appealing to a tradition that cannot be grasped in rational, objective terms’ (Van den Hemel 2014, 68). Religion provides what might be called a ‘heavy’ cultural resource for the formulation of an essential and indeed almost transcendent sense of tradition. In this way, culturalised (Judeo-)Christianity gives a felt substance to national identity while at the same time construing Muslims as inherent ‘others’ for whom this identity is ultimately unattainable. As Van den Hemel (2017, 17) has it: ‘Religion, defined as part of a framework of heritage, tradition, and national identity, is a suitable way to “ground” culture firmly both in its (religious) past, and in a present in which one needs to believe in the superiority of secular majority culture’.

Identitarian Christianity also carries specific content in a more intellectual sense. When elaborating the relation between Christianity and secularism, those advocating the significance of Christian identity occasionally point out that they are not talking about contemporary religious practice but about the cultural roots of European societies. The relation is presented as a genealogical one: Christianity and, more broadly, Judeo-Christianity, is perceived as the unique source of the liberal, democratic and secular values of contemporary Europe. From this perspective, the Christian tradition has allowed Europeans to take leave of religion, to become secular, whereas Islamic tradition is seen to prevent Muslims from becoming truly secular and embracing principles such as the separation of Church and state (Van den Hemel 2017, 10; cf. Brubaker 2017, 1200). This narrative presents a simplified version of scholarly understandings of the cultural-historical relationship between – particularly Protestant – Christianity and secularism (see e.g. Gauchet 1997; Asad 2003; Taylor 2007). Many political actors invoking Christianity, however, are not making a nuanced genealogical argument that situates religion as the past cultural foundation of secularism. Rather, they stress the importance of Christian symbols – such as religious festivals, crucifixes and Christian sites – for the safeguarding of European identities *today*. They are engaging less in an intellectual

interpretation of cultural history than in a politics of belonging that centres on distinguishing a 'native' European Self from a Muslim Other.

Proponents of nativism in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe appear to be increasingly embracing notions of religious culture precisely because religious history is felt to provide a *more* solid foundation of national identity than secular and liberal values such as gender equality, individualism or freedom of speech. Frits Bolkestein, who was a leading conservative Dutch politician at the end of the last century and manifested himself as a guardian of secular values, has provided a telling illustration of this sentiment. In an interview he gave some years ago he deplored the disappearance of Christianity as the 'connective tissue' (*bezielend verband*) of Europe, and he expressed his worry that secular phenomena, such as the Constitution, fall short of providing such a meaningful connection.<sup>3</sup>

The identitarian appeals to Christianity are situated within increasingly prevalent sentiments of nativist – essentially 'white' – nostalgia in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe. As Jan Willem Duyvendak (2011, 2) has pointed out, many of those who seek to reaffirm national identity 'dig deeper and deeper into the national past, fuelling nostalgia for a time when populations were – supposedly – still homogeneous'. Olivier Roy argues in this context that references to Christian culture enable the promotion of 'an idealised and ahistorical notion of a harmonious community life that existed before the elite and bad "others" began to endanger the prosperity, rights and wellbeing of the good people' (2016, 197). This nostalgia for a lost home has coincided with what Dutch scholars have termed the 'culturalisation of citizenship', a process in which values, morals, emotions, symbols and tradition, including religion, have come to play an important role in defining what it takes to be a citizen (Duyvendak 2011, 92; cf. Schinkel 2008; Geschiere 2009, 24–25). In the Dutch context, this means that in order to be seen as a 'good' citizen, migrants and their descendants have to demonstrate that they adhere – not just rationally but also emotionally – to the 'progressive moral consensus' of the majority population (Duyvendak 2011, 87–94).

In the process, liberal achievements have come to be depicted as inherent, 'natural', features of Dutch culture rather than 'products of an ongoing contingent, historical, progressive social struggle' (Mepschen 2018, 21). Merijn Oudenampsen argues that what emerges here is a 'post-progressive politics' that incorporates progressive values such as individualism, gay rights and secularism, which are presented as

‘ingrained in Dutch tradition’ and combines these with conservative stances on issues such as law and order, development aid and immigration (Oudenampsen 2018, 176). In short, progressive values become ‘naturalized’ as if they were inherent to Dutch culture, and mobilised in a conservative political register oriented towards cultural protectionism and opposed to cultural pluralism.

It is against the backdrop of these processes of nativist nostalgia, culturalisation of citizenship, and naturalization of culture, that ‘Christian tradition’ has increasingly been embraced as an alleged foundation of Dutch identity, perceived to be under threat from Muslims and multiculturalists (Van den Hemel 2014). This has contributed to a primordialist take on religion that, even if it may continue to frame contemporary observant Christians as ‘backward’, presents Christianity as inherent to Dutch ‘native’ – or ‘autochthonous’ – identity and Islam as essentially ‘other’. In this context, identitarian Christianity represents a shift, albeit a gradual and partial one, in dominant discourses on religion in the Netherlands from a liberal-secularist narrative that construes religious communities – be they Christian, Muslim or other – as lagging behind in a purportedly universal process of secularisation, to a more reactionary nativist narrative that stresses the perceived incompatibility between Islam and Western – secular and post-Christian – culture (Beekers 2021, 12–14). In this context, the culturalisation of Christianity dovetails with what has been described as the racialisation of Islam, through which a heterogeneous set of people are, because of their physical and cultural characteristics, perceived as members of an essentialised group that is attributed with supposed inherent traits (Meer 2013; Garner and Selod 2015; De Koning 2016). In short, what makes narratives of Christian culture particularly effective in identitarian politics is the double work they perform in ‘othering’ Muslims on the one hand and grounding ‘native’ identity in a presumed homogeneous past on the other.

The differences between discourses on Christian and Islamic heritage in Europe are telling in this regard. Charles Hirschkind (2016), for instance, has shown that scholarly and popular discourses in Spain tend to resolutely relegate the Islamic heritage of Al-Andalus to the past. While many in Spain now acknowledge the significance of the Muslim period for the country’s history, they simultaneously maintain that it is almost entirely irrelevant to their lives as Spaniards today (2016, 215-9). Here, the Islamic past can only enter the registers of nostalgia, myth and romanticism. Hirschkind argues that these registers ‘police the [region’s] temporal walls, ensuring that no foreign (i.e. Middle-

Eastern) elements cross the border where they might make a claim on the present social, political, and religious order' (215), just as 'the fences set up on the borders hold back the influx of North Africans seeking to enter Spain' (218).

### **Responses from the side of confessional Christian politics**

More often than not, Christian leaders and institutions in Europe express scepticism about political appeals to Christianity-as-culture (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016). While some might welcome the renewed political interest in their religion and a number of conservative Christian organisations themselves promote notions of Christian national identity (see e.g. Balkenhol and Van den Hemel 2019), many Christian actors are wary of what they see as a political instrumentalisation of their religion. As the debate with Thierry Baudet that I started with demonstrates, these Christians take issue with a culturalised interpretation of their religion that glosses over central Christian beliefs, doctrines and ethics. In their perspective, this approach to Christianity misses the point, because it barely engages with what confessional Christians understand to be the essential tenets and moral teachings of their religion. In the words of Gert-Jan Segers, a prominent Christian public figure and presently leader of the aforementioned Protestant Christian party (ChristenUnie): this kind of politics boils down to 'a Christian culture without Christians'.<sup>4</sup>

Although some conservative confessional politicians do occasionally flirt with notions of Christianity as a 'native' Dutch *Leitkultur* (Van den Hemel 2020b), many criticise the identitarian uses of Christianity for being xenophobic and exclusionary, for ignoring Christian beliefs and values, or for falling short of supporting Christian moral politics. Thus, when both far right populist and more mainstream conservative Dutch politicians came out in defence of allegedly Christian symbols such as Easter eggs and phrases such as 'Merry Christmas' (in response to, among other issues, a retail shop that was accused of re-naming 'Easter eggs' as 'hide-and-seek eggs' – which was seen as an attempt at accommodating Muslim sensibilities), none of the confessional Christian political parties supported these appeals to protect Christian symbols. They rather expressed scepticism about these newfound concerns with Easter among secular politicians, who otherwise show little interest in maintaining Christian practices or promoting Christian moral issues (Van den Hemel 2017).

An exchange in 2015 between Geert Wilders and Kees van der Staaij, leader of the Orthodox Protestant political party, the Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP), illustrates some of the main points of contention between identitarian and confessional Christian politics. The SGP represents strictly-orthodox Christian communities and its social, moral and cultural standpoints are more conservative than those of the ChristenUnie – as evidenced by the former’s restrictive views on women’s emancipation, gay rights and freedom of public expression of non-Christian religions, Islam in particular.<sup>5</sup> Yet, while the SGP defends Christian privileges and expresses reservations about the public presence of Islam, its approach to Christianity differs crucially from that of far right populist parties such as Wilders’s PVV. When, in a parliamentary debate, Wilders spoke about the need to defend Christian values, SGP’s Van der Staaij asked him to name some of these values. The following exchange occurred (cf. Van den Hemel 2020a, 217–19):

Wilders: One of these Christian values is that we stand up for our own people. ... Standing up for our own people means that we – every Christian should take a leading role in this respect – have to prevent that our country Islamises. What is more Christian than that? ...

Van der Staaij: I’m afraid that standing up for Christian values will ring very hollow if we no longer know ourselves what these Christian values represent. ... Isn’t one important point when it comes to Christian values – when you see in how many places in the world things are going wrong – that every human being, whoever they are, is our fellow human being and not vermin?

Wilders: They are certainly no vermin. But I keep repeating: ... Your party, your people and the Christian values in the Netherlands will be the first victims if Islam gets its way.

Van der Staaij: You don’t have to convince the SGP of the importance of Christian values. Yet what I actually see in Europe and the Netherlands today is that lots of people in this culture oppose the Christian past. From the PVV, too, I didn’t find support when typical Christian issues were at stake, such as the protection of life or safeguarding the day of rest. [If it came to the PVV] civil servants with conscientious objections [against conducting same-sex wedding ceremonies] had to be sent out of the country. How do you mean Christian values?<sup>6</sup>

What is striking here is not only that confessional politicians such as Van der Staaij object to the appropriation of Christian culture by right-wing populists, but also that these populists, in their turn, criticise confessional politicians and organisation for not doing enough to defend that Christian culture. For Wilders and likeminded political actors, safeguarding Christian identity essentially means abating the growth and influence of Islam in society. Along these lines, Wilders has criticised not only Christian parties but also churches in the Netherlands for being too ‘soft’ on Islam (Van Kessel 2016, 70). Pim Fortuyn, a pioneer of populist politics in the Netherlands, already expressed dissatisfaction with churches in Dutch society in the 1990s. In his book *De verweesde samenleving* [Orphaned Society], he argued that churches could have a key part in the recovery of norms and values in Dutch society, which for Fortuyn were based on the ‘Jewish-Christian humanist culture’ and the central place of the father figure in that culture. Yet, he had little faith in the churches of his day, which he regarded as either too modernist or too conservative. These churches, Fortuyn held, were unwilling either to embrace their role in terms of fatherhood, or to renew it (1995, 86, 160).

### **The turn to heritage Christianity**

Calls to reevaluate the significance of Christianity for Dutch culture are not limited to populist politics. In recent years, public intellectuals, writers and opinion makers have increasingly turned their attention to Christian tradition, arguing for the need to preserve the memory of the religious past, safeguard knowledge of Christianity or revive values based on the religion.<sup>7</sup> This reflects a broader development in public narratives in the Netherlands – and elsewhere in Europe – in which Christianity is increasingly reframed as heritage and, in many cases, (re-)appropriated as national culture (Joppke 2013; Astor, Burchardt, and Griera 2017; Meyer 2019). Scholars writing on this phenomenon have pointed to moves towards privileging Christianity, as opposed to other religious traditions, through legislation at the national or European level, and the ways in which Christian institutions have actively propagated these processes (Oliphant 2012; Joppke 2013; Astor, Burchardt, and Griera 2017). By contrast to this apparent symbiosis between states, judiciaries and Christian actors, it has struck me that in the Netherlands the most vocal proponents of Christian heritage tend to be self-identified secular, or non-religious, people who often explicitly distance themselves from Christian beliefs and institutions.<sup>8</sup>

An evocative example of this stance on Christianity is provided by the Dutch novelist Nicolaas Matsier (pen name of Tjit Reinsma). Born in 1945, Matsier grew up in a Protestant family. While he abandoned faith during his teens and now describes himself as an atheist, he nonetheless harbours a strong interest in Christianity. He published books on both the Old and the New Testament and he translated *The Book of Genesis* by the American cartoonist Robert Crumb. In an extensive interview with a leading Dutch newspaper he remarked that he ‘has become deeply convinced of the value of Christianity as cultural factor number one in our civilization and in our thought. ... Christianity runs through our veins. When it comes to human rights, we are talking about a development that sprang directly from Christianity.’<sup>9</sup> When the interviewer asked him whether he was sure that had abandoned faith, Matsier answered:

I find many forms of faith primitive. I’m absolutely unsympathetic to pure orthodoxy. Those people take texts literally that shouldn’t be taken literally. Those people don’t understand what it means to read. But I can find it intensely sad that the Christian culture has gone to shreds and that people don’t know anything any longer, that the magnificent, iconic buildings of any medieval village or city have in some sense become meaningless, that people no longer understand that, when they are lost, it suffices to walk up to a church to know where you are. Literally. Because a church is oriented. So you know the choir is placed on the east and the entrance to the church on the west. I find it really sad that those churches are empty. Of course I know I don’t go to church and I won’t easily do so in the future. But at the same time there are lots of things that we are throwing away. That’s what I have come to think. We throw away the cultural continuity with a tradition that is, by itself, not necessarily foolish or criminal.<sup>10</sup>

Matsier’s narrative on Christianity is marked by a strong sense of loss, not of his childhood faith, but of a Christian culture with its particular modes of knowledge, architecture and know-how. His sense of a lost Christian past is an – at least partly – idealised one. For instance, the architectural principle of orientation is far from universally applied to churches in the Netherlands (indeed, if you are really lost, it is a safer bet to orient yourself on the nearest mosque).

While Matsier does not share the stark anti-Muslim rhetoric of the populist politicians discussed above, his and their views of the significance of Christian culture overlap when it comes to the strict separation between faith and culture, the nostalgia for

a lost past and the perceived importance of Christianity for national and civilisational identity.<sup>11</sup> With regard to this last point, Matsier decries the ‘carelessness’ with which the Dutch have treated their national history, arguing that ‘cultural and historical heritage’ are crucial for ‘our identity’. Different from those political actors blaming Islam, Matsier seems to identify secularisation and excessive libertarianism as the main culprits of the Dutch disregard of their cultural and religious traditions. That said, he does contrast the ‘egalitarian’ spirit of Christianity with Islam and points to the ‘culture shock’ caused by the immigration of people ‘who hail from the Bible Belts of Morocco and East-Turkey’.<sup>12</sup> It is of course ironic that Matsier on the one hand describes Christianity as constitutive of Dutch culture while on the other hand treating the Islamic ‘Bible Belts’ (in itself a problematic equation between perceived traditional Muslim cultures and orthodox Christianity) as inevitably clashing with Dutch culture. This seems illustrative of the contrast often made in narratives about religious heritage between a Christian based secular culture and Islam.

### **Repurposed churches, diversity and Islam**

15 The fate of church buildings, touched upon by Matsier, is one of the foremost issues in debates about religious heritage in the Netherlands. This is not surprising given the staggering pace of church closures and church conversions in this country. Since the 1970s, more than a thousand church buildings have been repurposed and hundreds of others have been demolished.<sup>13</sup> These processes of material transformation provoke fervent and often emotionally charged public debates, in which local residents, politicians, church leaders, heritage activists and others express distinct ideas about what should happen with these buildings (Beekers 2017; 2018; Meyer 2019). It seems no exaggeration to say that recent years have seen the emergence of something of a religious heritage industry in the Netherlands (Beekers 2017, 164) and elsewhere in the ‘Western’ world (Badone 2015; Astor, Burchardt, and Griera 2017; Coleman 2019; Burchardt 2020, chap. 5).<sup>14</sup>

These concerns with religious material heritage also find their way into policy. The current Dutch government, a coalition of neoliberal secular and confessional Christian parties, has announced that it will spend an extra €325 million for the preservation of monuments, stating: ‘We want to protect, and make accessible, monuments, works of art and archives .... Special attention for monumental churches, also when they are

abandoned, is needed. There will be investments in maintenance and re-use.<sup>15</sup> The Secretary of Culture, Ingrid van Engelshoven (representing the liberal secular party D66), explained in a newspaper interview: 'In the field of heritage, churches play an enormous role when it comes to the recognisability of the landscape. If you know in these times where you are coming from, if you have that firmly under your feet, you can also cope with more transformation [*vernieuwing*] as a society.'<sup>16</sup> Here, again, we find the notion that an awareness of one's religious past is especially important with regard to ongoing social changes. The Secretary does not say what changes she is referring to, but in the light of the political debates preceding the instalment of her government many would interpret these words as pointing to increasing cultural diversity.

The connection between Christian heritage and religious diversity is particularly apparent when church buildings are converted into mosques. In the Netherlands, it has been estimated that there are around 25 mosques housed in former church buildings.<sup>17</sup> The (potential) repurposing of churches as mosques is an often contentious issue that, in line with changing public opinions regarding Islam, has become increasingly uncommon since the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> Since then, the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands has ruled out the reuse of their church buildings by 'non-Christian religions or world-views', which include, most notably, Islam (Nederlandse Bisschoppenconferentie 2008, par. 8). A policy document of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands states that 'given contemporary developments in Dutch society' the reuse of church buildings by non-Christian groups is not desirable (with the exception for Jewish communities). It points out: 'If interreligious dialogue reaches the conclusion that the world religions are equal, then the use of churches by other religions than Christianity can be more readily considered.' At the same time, the report states that reuse by any of the world religions is still preferable over 'profane' forms of repurposing (Protestantse Kerk in Nederland 2009, 34). Despite this latter standpoint, reuse of Protestant churches for secular purposes has been much more common than reuse as mosques or temples.

During my ethnographic research on abandoned and repurposed church buildings in Amsterdam and Utrecht,<sup>19</sup> I have learned that the stances of 'ordinary' Dutch Catholics and Protestants on reusing churches as mosques are more diversified than those of the church authorities. While some find this kind of reuse unsuitable or even painful, others have no objections, often pointing out that they prefer churches to be preserved as 'houses of God' over repurposing them as, for example, shops or bars. Many Muslims I

have spoken with share this latter position. They often find it difficult to understand why church boards would prefer secular over religious reuse. However, some disagree: in an interview with a progressive magazine, Yassin Elforkani, at the time spokesperson of a leading umbrella organization for Dutch mosques (CMO), remarked that he considers converting a church into a mosque ‘a provocation’. He said: ‘I also don’t want my mosque to become a church. I understand these people’s feelings’ (Van der Linde 2013).

In the wider debates on the closing down and repurposing of church buildings (for other uses than mosques), the issues of religious diversity and Islam tend to be present, albeit often subtly or implicitly. In conversations I have had during my fieldwork around particular repurposed Christian sites in Amsterdam and Utrecht, the topic of Islam came up quite regularly. Some of my interlocutors drew a broad contrast between, on the one hand, the closing down of churches and the wider decline of institutionalized Christianity and, on the other, the growing public presence of Islam and the risen number of mosques. Further, in local debates on the reuse of urban churches I have noticed that the option of converting the building into a mosque – whether or not this is a likely course of events – always tends to be mentioned sooner or later. Different from the widespread transformations of church buildings into apartments or social centres, potential repurposing into a mosque – just like repurposing into, say, a night club or a trampoline park – sparks people’s imagination. Thus, Islam, even when it does not play a prominent role in debates about the redevelopment of a church building, tends to be inevitably part of these deliberations as a background referent, a kind of implicit – or shadow – presence.<sup>20</sup>

### **Repurposed churches, Christian communities and religion critique**

During my fieldwork on the reuse of churches in Amsterdam and Utrecht I have found that antagonism toward Christian communities and organisations was often expressed more explicitly than anxieties about Islam. It was common to see those who advocate the preservation of church buildings criticising church authorities and Christian communities for hindering their conservation efforts. In these narratives, Christian tradition is not only set apart from Christianity-as-culture but also perceived to jeopardise it. In the remainder of this paper I will demonstrate this by briefly discussing the reuse of the Saint Willibrord Church in Utrecht. While this is an exceptional case because the building was bought, rather than sold, by a Catholic institution, the

accompanying local debates offer a sharply focused lens on the more widespread tensions between ‘heritage religion’ (Burchardt 2020) on the one hand and religious communities and institutions on the other.

In the spring of 2017 a controversy erupted in Utrecht around the sale of the Roman Catholic Saint Willibrord Church in the city centre. Unusually, the prospective new owner wasn’t an entrepreneur impatient to convert the church into a trendy hotel, lofts or wine-bar, but a conservative Catholic fraternity that wanted to refashion it as a place of religious worship. In recent years, the church had been run by a cultural association that rented it out for concerts, theatre plays and civil weddings, while it continued to be in use by a Catholic congregation.<sup>21</sup> In 2014, following a theatre-play in which a funeral Mass was emulated, the management of the congregation felt compelled to mark the church as desecrated.<sup>22</sup> Now, the prospective buyer, a conservative Catholic fraternity called Pius X, argued that the church should return to being a sacred place and be put to its proper use: that of a Catholic church.

The cultural association running the church, consisting of around ninety volunteers who organised cultural activities and guided tours, strongly disapproved of the sale. As reported by several media at the time, the spokespersons of these volunteers argued that the fraternity was going to profit from the substantial renovation of the church building, which was partly paid by public funds. They were also concerned that the building would become inaccessible for a broader public after the sale. The volunteers moreover disliked the fact that the fraternity would cancel non-religious activities in the church and they worried that the LGBTQ+ people among them would no longer be welcome as tour-guides. In their eyes, the sale heralded the end of the building as a place of cultural creativity and cultural attraction. A local broadcaster, which described the fraternity’s plans for the church as ‘rigorous’, quoted a spokesperson of the cultural association who said that the church will ‘move back in time for about twenty years, perhaps even longer’.<sup>23</sup> These arguments garnered support from prominent authors and artists from Utrecht as well as sympathy from most local political parties.<sup>24</sup>

The position articulated by these volunteers was characteristically secular. They pitted values such as cultural expressivity, sexual freedom and tolerance against a religious perspective that is placed back in time. As several scholars have shown, the emphasis on the threat that conservative religion is seen to pose to sexual liberty and tolerance of LGBTQ+ people, and the idea that religion threatens to take us back to an

earlier and more intolerant past, is distinctive for contemporary secularist discourses (for the Netherlands, see Van der Veer 2006; Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010; Derks 2018; Knibbe 2018). It is striking that what was at stake in this explicitly secular position here was a Christian site that was built – and now reused – for religious worship. Possibly, the fact that this site had become used as a public place of cultural activity but was now reclaimed by a conservative religious community made the change all the more difficult to swallow for many of those involved.

This sentiment was also apparent in a debate in the Utrecht city council about the sale of the church (which was effected in the end). This debate, one of several in the course of 2017, was initiated by a representative of the social-democratic party who was critical of the transaction. He said: ‘We all agree that this is a beautiful church with great monumental value. Even stubborn Protestants and anti-church people like me think so.’ He characterized Pius X as an ‘extremely conservative’ group that has made anti-Semitic and homophobic statements in the past. Most representatives of other political parties shared his discomfort with Pius X but emphasised they could do little to prevent the sale. The alderman pointed out that this was also a question of the separation of church and state. And in the end, he said, the most important concern for the city council was to safeguard the monument and to keep it accessible for a broad public. A representative of the Green Party expressed a position that was widely shared across the political spectrum: ‘It is important that people can still feel: this is my monument.’

Here we see how a church building is claimed as a public site, a monument that should be freely accessible. A religious community, in this case the Pius X fraternity, is seen to threaten this open and public character of the site. While this case is rather exceptional in the current Dutch context in that a church building is brought back to its religious purpose, the disagreement between those who approach church buildings above all as houses of worship and those who approach them as monumental heritage sites is much more common. Often, this disagreement comes to the fore when local residents and heritage associations set out to preserve abandoned church buildings through projects of renovation and run up against the Christian owners of these sites who set particular conditions for their transformation, express concerns about their potential ‘unworthy’ reuse or at times even favour demolition over repurposing of the buildings (Beekers 2017). Similar conflicts arise around the multiple use of – usually Protestant – church buildings, for instance when members of a congregations have to contend with,

and negotiate, the use of their worship space for artistic expositions that are open to members of the general public (Kuyk 2018).

The transformation of the Chassé Church in Amsterdam, which I have followed during my fieldwork, further illustrates such contention regarding the fate of church buildings. While the diocese of Haarlem-Amsterdam originally wanted to demolish the building and sell the land (it held that the building could not be profitably reused and it needed the funds for the restoration of the remaining central parish church), neighbourhood residents spoke out strongly in favour of preserving and repurposing the site. Eventually, the demolition plans were cancelled and the building was converted into dance studios, a hotel and café (Beekers 2017). When I later interviewed the spokesperson of a local committee that had advocated the preservation of the building, he told me that he saw the building as an indispensable landmark of the neighbourhood. He also emphasized its historical relevance: ‘The building is also important from a cultural-historical perspective. It has a function as a memory of the past. ... The fact that churches have to close down is in itself not a bad thing. But it is a bad thing when you demolish these buildings, because when you do so you also demolish your history.’

20 These words reflect a view that is widely expressed in today’s debates around abandoned church buildings in the Netherlands, namely that these sites have a historical and cultural function that extends beyond their particular use for religious purposes (for comparable ideas in Scotland, see Cotter 2020, 169–71). From this perspective, church buildings – and the Christian religion to which they refer – have become important markers, not necessarily of a lived faith, but of history, culture and heritage. This argument is particularly used for religious spaces such as the Willibrord Church that are attributed with obvious monumental and aesthetic values, but it is also applied with respect to less unambiguously monumental church buildings. This view has implications for ideas about who has legitimacy to decide about the fate of church buildings (cf. Cotter 2020, 171). Indeed, the spokesperson of the local committee felt that the neighbours of the Chassé Church have more to say about the new use of the abandoned church than the former church-members, whom he described as the mere ‘historical owners’ of the church.

## Conclusion

The culturalisation of Christianity comes in many forms. Its two manifestations discussed in this paper differ in terms of their content, motivation and political implications. While the identitarian mobilisation of Christianity is characterised by anxieties about Islam and often fervent anti-Muslim politics, local debates about the reuse of church buildings are rather driven by concerns about the preservation and public availability of what is perceived as cultural heritage. Despite these differences, both of these renditions of culturalised Christianity are characterised by a logic of exclusion, expressed through an antagonism toward religious ‘others’. In identitarian Christian politics this is clearly articulated through negative sentiments, rejection and often outright xenophobia – or Islamophobia – in relation to Muslims. These result in a particularly harmful antagonism toward an already marginalised social group. In local contestations around Christian sites this logic of exclusion is more commonly expressed through a – more or less explicit – critique of Christian institutions and communities. While this form of exclusion tends to be more subtle and does not question people’s belonging in the same way as identitarian Christianity does, it can have a deeply felt impact on those involved.

21           The position of confessional and church-related actors on the relation between Christian culture and Islam is marked by a degree of ambivalence. On the one hand, many Christian public intellectuals and politicians explicitly reject appeals to Christian culture that are part of political strategies aimed at excluding Muslims, even if some others also flirt with this kind of identitarian Christian politics. On the other hand, both Catholic and Protestant church authorities in the Netherlands have become largely averse to the idea of selling their church buildings to Muslims, a position that tends to be motivated by general references to the state of ‘interreligious dialogue’ or ‘contemporary developments’ in society. Here, church authorities appear to reflect the current negative climate towards Islam. It is worth reiterating that ‘ordinary’ church members have divergent opinions about this issue.

At first glance it seems contradictory that those advocating the preservation of Christian (material) culture regularly clash with confessional or observant Christian actors. These conflicts, however, highlight the differences between what can be termed heritage Christianity and confessional Christianity.<sup>25</sup> Heritage Christianity entails a reconfigured engagement with Christian tradition – often by self-identified non-religious, secular or atheist actors – that focuses on religion as a source of cultural heritage, identity,

art, history and/or belonging. While confessional Christians and church communities may acknowledge and value these dimensions of Christianity, they often put a greater emphasis on religious creed, belief and rituals of worship. They generally value church buildings primarily as houses of God, or as religious community spaces, rather than cultural monuments or heritage sites. As cases like the Saint Willibrord Church and the Chassé Church demonstrate, these divergent values can – and often do – lead to conflicts of interest. This recurrent ‘stand-off’ between heritage and confessional Christian positions may be particularly manifest in a country like the Netherlands, which is characterised by a predominant secular culture, a strong post-1960s tradition of religion critique and the absence of a state church or an unequivocally dominant Christian denomination. Similar observations have been made elsewhere (for instance in Quebec; see Burchardt 2020, chap. 5), whereas at times more symbiotic relations between heritage discourses and church institutions have been identified in other places (see e.g. Oliphant 2015; Astor, Burchardt, and Griera 2017; Isnart and Cerezales 2020).

While the manifestations of identitarian Christianity and heritage Christianity discussed here differ in terms of who, how, and the extent to which they exclude, this paper has also exposed an important continuity across these two forms of culturalised religion: a longing for belonging and cultural closure with reference to a presumed collective past. What many actors across the spectrum of culturalised Christianity in the Netherlands share is a desire for rearticulating one’s sense of self – for recovering one’s roots and belonging in the face of processes of social transformation, cultural diversification and the decline of organised Christianity. Notions of Christian culture – and solid, material and iconic Christian sites (Knott, Krech, and Meyer 2016) – appear to provide a ‘heavy’ resource within such quests for cultural belonging, even for those who explicitly reject Christian beliefs and institutions or pursue a secular political agenda. Indeed, the relation between culturalised Christianity and secularism is a complex and ambiguous one. For one part, the embrace of Christianity-as-culture dovetails with a secular politics that abides by a rejection of religious practices and values. For another part, the renewed interest in Christianity appears to be motivated, at least for some, by a dissatisfaction with the wholesale denunciation of religion that has characterised much of post-1960s popular and political culture in the Netherlands. Those who express this position worry that by having moved away from the church, the Dutch have also taken leave of a major repository of meaning, identity and community. They strive toward a

continuity of religious tradition that does not necessarily entail a continuity of ritual practice (cf. Hervieu-Léger 2000).

The depth of feeling that characterises such attempts at retrieving a sense of belonging may help explain the fervent antagonism toward religious communities described in this paper. Confessional Christians, who often set other priorities than those emphasising cultural belonging, may be seen to jeopardise not only the preservation of heritage but also the reassertion of identity that is felt to underlie such preservation efforts. Muslims, on their part, have to bear the brunt of attempts at demarcating a Dutch or European self in terms of a Christian past that is positioned, either explicitly or implicitly, over and against an Islamic ‘other’. It remains to be seen to what extent more prominence can be acquired by alternative public engagements with Christian culture, ones that are inclusive rather than exclusive, empower minoritised religious communities rather than brand them as the enemy, and enable inviting rather than restrictive modes of belonging – even if, in the final instance, conflicting interests like those relating to the Saint Willibrord Church in Utrecht may never be entirely avoidable.

## Notes

*Acknowledgments: The research conducted for this paper was made possible by a postdoctoral appointment within the research project Religious Matters in an Entangled World at Utrecht University and a visiting fellowship at the Alwaleed Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World, University of Edinburgh. I am grateful for the helpful comments I received on earlier versions of this paper from Christopher Cotter, Morteza Hashemi, Birgit Meyer and the members of the Alwaleed Centre’s work in progress seminar: İdil Akıncı, Yahya Barry, Alexis Blouët, Elvire Corboz, Tom Lea and Giulia Liberatore.*

<sup>1</sup> De Tafel van Tijs [The Table of Tijs], EO, 14 February 2017. <https://portal.eo.nl/programmas/tv/de-tafel-van-tijs/gemist/2017/02/14-de-tafel-van-tijs/> (accessed on 3 December 2019). All translations from Dutch are mine.

<sup>2</sup> The composite term ‘Judeo-Christian’ is often used in narratives that posit the ‘Western’ religious tradition over and against that of Islam. This term has had a long and varied history, with its use to describe the cultural background of a secular present emerging only quite recently. The inclusion, for different reasons, of Judaism in this Western cultural framework has provoked critique, among other things for obscuring

long histories of prosecution of Jews in Europe (for a discussion of the term's genealogy, see Wallet 2012; Van den Hemel 2014).

<sup>3</sup> 'Bolkestein: moslims geen recht op eigen scholen', *Nederlands Dagblad*, 22 May, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Gert-Jan Segers, 'Straatvoetbal kip zonder kop', *Nederlands Dagblad*, 21 April 2009.

<sup>5</sup> See the description of the SGP's standpoints on its website: <https://www.sgp.nl/standpunten/> (accessed on 17 August, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Algemene Politieke Beschouwingen naar aanleiding van de Miljoenennota voor het jaar 2016, the House of Representatives, 16 September 2015. <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/h-tk-20152016-2-7.html> (accessed on 16 June 2020). Translation mine.

<sup>7</sup> Next to largely positive narratives about Christian heritage, Dutch popular culture also exposes a recurrent concern with the perceived oppressive nature of – particularly strictly Calvinist – Christian culture. A recent example of this trend is Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's *De avond is ongemak*. The English translation of this book, *The Discomfort of Evening*, was awarded the International Booker Prize in 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Writing on Quebec, Marian Burchardt (2020, chap. 5) has identified a similar group of actors who strongly reject religious doctrines while embracing Christian culture or heritage. Morteza Hashemi similarly writes about 'tourist atheism', spearheaded by intellectuals such as Alain de Botton, in which religion (especially Christianity) is approached not in terms of faith but as a 'repository of cultural heritage' (Hashemi 2017, 40).

<sup>9</sup> 'Er wordt niets meer geweten; interview Nicolaas Matsier, schrijver', *De Volkskrant*, 11 April, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Some of those who talk about the importance of a culturalised Christianity do not only emphasise social identity but also point to the ways in which Christianity may fulfill contemporary spiritual needs. Here spirituality is often defined in a non-specific and not strictly Christian manner. An example of this is provided by the artist Jan Tregot (see Meyer 2019, 79–80).

<sup>12</sup> 'Er wordt niets meer geweten; interview Nicolaas Matsier, schrijver', *De Volkskrant*, 11 April, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> See Wesselink (2018) and research conducted by the Dutch daily newspaper *Trouw*: 'Een op de vijf Nederlandse kerken is geen kerk meer', *Trouw*, 25 June, 2019. <https://www.trouw.nl/gs-b033cc0f>.

<sup>14</sup> The notion of a religious heritage industry can be taken quite literally to the extent that Christian statues and other objects from defunct church buildings in the Netherlands have come to constitute 'an entire market of religious heritage' (Cuperus 2019). Similarly, the ongoing abandonment of church buildings and monasteries has seen the emergence of real estate agents such as Reliplan (see <https://www.reliplan.nl/>) specialised in marketing Christian buildings.

<sup>15</sup> *Vertrouwen in de toekomst: regeerakkoord 2017-2021. VVD, CDA, D66 en ChristenUnie*. 10 October 2017, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> 'Extra cultuurgeld naar talent, educatie en kerkgebouwen', *NRC*, 12 March, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> 'De kerk die een moskee werd: dat gebeurt nu niet meer', *Trouw*, 2 July, 2019. For an ethnographic case study of the conversion of a Roman Catholic church in Amsterdam into a mosque, see Beekers and Tamimi Arab (2016).

<sup>18</sup> 'De kerk die een moskee werd', *Trouw*; see also Van der Linde (2013).

<sup>19</sup> I conducted fieldwork on the abandonment and conversion of – especially Roman Catholic – church buildings in the Netherlands between 2014 and 2018, focusing on both religious and secular forms of repurposing in Amsterdam and on the process of closing down church buildings in Utrecht (see Beekers 2018).

<sup>20</sup> For similar analyses of the implicit, yet significant, place of Islam in debates about Christian heritage in Europe, see Oliphant (2015) and Meyer (2019).

<sup>21</sup> The Willibrord Church was quite exceptional in terms of its multiple use of the building. This kind of arrangement whereby church buildings are used for both religious services and non-religious activities is unusual for Roman Catholic churches in the Netherlands, due to the consecrated nature of these buildings. It is much more common for Protestant churches. Indeed, for Protestant congregations, multiple use often provides a model for financing the continuing use of their buildings (Kuyk 2017).

<sup>22</sup> ‘Rk-bestuur doet eigen kerk in de ban na “heiligschennis”’, *Trouw*, 18 May, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> RTV Utrecht, ‘Commotie rond verkoop Sint-Willibrordkerk’, 11 April, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Prominenten: verkoop Utrechtse kerk niet aan conservatieve broederschap’, *Trouw*, 17 May, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> The terms heritage Christianity and confessional Christianity refer to ideal-types. They are not mutually exclusive. My use of the term ‘heritage Christianity’ builds on Marian Burchardt’s (2020) concept of ‘heritage religion’.

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