Is citizenship secular?
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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2015

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):

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1. RELIGION AND GOOD CITIZENSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY DUTCH SOCIETY

1.1 Wondering about Dutch Society

In September 2014, the Dutch public service television initiated a socio-cultural experiment called *Typically Dutch* (http://www.typischnederlands.vara.nl). The experiment aimed at investigating what was typically Dutch by putting eight people from different socio-cultural and religious backgrounds in a house together so they could jointly explore how they differed from each other and what made them all Dutch. The experiment took place in The Hague, one of the few Dutch cities where the majority of the population is of non-Dutch descent and one of the most segregated cities in the Netherlands (http://www.denhaag.nl/cijfers; Kullberg, Vervoort, and Dagevos 2009, 52–55). The programme began with the claim that segregation had led to a decrease of tolerance between different groups in society, but that all people shared one thing: the fact that they were Dutch. The programme’s aim was to find out what this ‘Dutchness’ entailed. Due to the great diversity in ethnic, religious and cultural groups, the programme makers claimed that the traditional picture of cheese and wooden shoes as defining elements of the Dutch needed to be readjusted. The fact that the programme was a trending topic on Twitter in the Netherlands during the entire season, demonstrates the power the programme had in touching upon real and actual issues in Dutch society.

Like the television experiment, this book is underpinned by a curiosity about contemporary Dutch society. However, this book goes beyond simply addressing similarities and differences between citizens and asking what is typically Dutch. This book investigates the notion of citizenship itself. What should one do and how should one behave in order to be a good citizen? Do all citizens have to embrace a common culture and specific values or virtues? Or are citizens free to live according to their own values, as long as they abide by the law? Given the cultural and religious diversity in contemporary society, these questions address the underlying themes of the television experiment. The experiences of diversity that we may witness in such experiments invite us not only to question notions of culture, but citizenship as well:

Existing notions of citizenship and national identity are challenged and sometimes changed by the experience of immigration and the resulting ethnic, racial, cultural and religious diversification of the population … immigration tends to create pressures and opportunities for a redefinition and reinvention of the conceptions of citizenship and national identity of the receiving nation-states. (Koopmans et al. 2005, 6)
Both the television programme and this book ask the question whether a diverse society requires acceptance of diversity in values, habits and traditions or rather agreement on certain rules or norms. A key difference between the two lies in the underlying assumptions. The programme sought a definition of what it meant to be Dutch and thereby focused on aspects of national identity. This corresponded to trends in Dutch society and politics, where integration debates have acquired a somewhat assimilationist tone, through the escalating emphasis on Dutch culture and Dutch identity (Entzinger 2006; Vasta 2007). Migrants are increasingly expected to have knowledge of Dutch society, to adapt to Dutch culture and to embrace Dutch values. The focus on sharing a common culture has, in the past years, led to the same question that the television show also wanted to answer: what is typical Dutchness? Although I think it is an interesting and important question to ask, the narrow focus on national identity runs the risk of excluding those who do not fully embrace (all aspects of) this identity. Additionally, it becomes difficult to determine what exactly constitutes this identity; what aspects belong to it and who makes these decisions?

The first few minutes of the television programme immediately clearly identify the film makers’ stance. The programme starts with a test about different aspects of the Netherlands. There are questions about historical facts (who was the first Dutch politician that was assassinated?), practical issues (where do you register a company?), politics (who forms the government?), Dutch regions (Zeelanders are known for their …?) and Dutch peculiarities or cultural customs (you are invited by a typical Dutch family at 8pm. Will you then join them for dinner?). Diverse participants in four different neighbourhoods in The Hague took the test. Remarkably, — in all four groups — the majority of participants ‘failed’ the test, including many ‘native’ Dutch people. Whether the test itself is problematic or the participants’ lack of knowledge, the issue remains. The emphasis on national identity (Dutchness) in a pluralistic society like the Netherlands runs the risk of becoming an ideal that hardly anyone can live up to.

My study tries to overcome this problem of short-sightedness by focusing on the broader notion of citizenship. I argue that the notion of citizenship does not have to be restricted to the one-dimensional view of national identity that we saw (and saw fail) in the television experiment. Indeed, the concept is far more complex than that. It is thus the purpose of this book to investigate the multi-faceted nature of citizenship. As one of its central themes, I examine the multi-dimensionality of the concept beyond the simple dichotomy of cultural and national identities. To what extent must a good citizen embrace a certain cultural identity and to what extent might citizenship embrace other, as yet unidentified aspects? By focusing on the broader notion of citizenship, we can provide more promising answers to the pressing question of diversity in contemporary society. In doing so, I arrive at one of the most delicate issues in this debate, an issue often repeatedly associated with questions surrounding diversity. Religion.

In the course of writing this book, I have read numerous articles about the role of religion in society. Some of the issues include the proposed ban on ritual slaughter and court procedures against the Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij
SGP, a conservative Christian, theocratic party), which for a long time excluded women from their party ballot list. Geert Wilders’ suggestion to make citizens with a second nationality of an Islamic country sign an anti-Shari’ah contract or conscientious objections on the part of civil servants who are not willing to marry gay couples also fall under this topic. All these very public debates reflect a tendency to polarise (social thoughts about) the role of religion in Dutch society. As such, an awareness (or even acknowledgement) of religion’s positive contribution to modern society stands in sharp contrast to this critical view, where religion is seen as a threat to integration and democracy.

The polarisation in debates over the role of religion was also visible in the first two episodes of the above-mentioned television programme. One of the main issues in the debates between the participants concerned Islam. There is no knowing whether this was foreseen or even deliberately planned by the researchers who selected the participants. At any rate, it was remarkable to see how many of the conversations came down to the public role and expression of Islam in Dutch society. Ranging from the wearing of headscarves to drinking alcohol and from the acceptance of homosexuality to praying in public spaces, tensions arose in the television programme over the right to claim respect for one’s religious identity. As the experiment so aptly demonstrated, friction often occurs within a diverse community, where not everyone embraces the same (religious) values.

1.2 Research Aim, Goals, and Audience

We have seen that the existing diversity in Dutch society has led to polarised debates about national identity, citizenship and religion. Up till now, relatively little research has gone into studying the relation between these concepts. Little is known about how the debates over these issues mutually influence each other. This book is intended as an interdisciplinary mixed-methods contribution to the understanding of the relation between religion and citizenship. I set myself three research goals that will enable me to fulfil this central aim:

- To analyse the complex and multidimensional concept of citizenship;
- To clarify how thinking about citizenship influences thinking about the public role of religion; and
- To investigate how religious belief influences thinking about citizenship and religion.

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1 The experiment was supervised by Karen van Oudenhoven-Van der Zee, professor of social psychology, and Jan Rath, professor of sociology. They selected the eight participants who took the test. It is explained in the first episode that these people were selected to form a diverse group. The eight participants differed in social status, gender, age, ethnicity and religion.
In order to do so, I investigate the relation between religion and citizenship from three different levels: political philosophy, Dutch integration policy and Dutch citizens. This means that I will integrate (purely) theoretical and empirical positions in order to gain a nuanced and broad view of how the notion of citizenship can be handled. We will see that different perspectives come with different implications for the acceptance of religion.

Although I focus on the Netherlands in this study, this does not imply that the results are only valuable for the Dutch context. The Netherlands is an excellent example of a society, where issues surrounding religion, national identity and citizenship are currently topics of political and public debate. In this respect, the Netherlands can be seen as illustrative for contemporary (West) European societies. The audience that I intend to reach is therefore neither limited to the Netherlands nor the Dutch academia. Political scientists, philosophers and social scientists with an interest in themes around citizenship, diversity and religion might gain new insights from the interdisciplinary approach of the present study. More importantly, the societal and political debates that I discuss in this book are fundamental and topical issues for both the Netherlands and beyond. As such, this book is also valuable for politicians and interested citizens who engage in these ongoing debates.

In the next chapters, I present the theoretical and methodological foundation of this study. As a short digression, I would like to stress that this book is the result of a scientific journey and not a political one. I do not aim to show the reader what I, as a politically engaged citizen, think about citizenship or how I judge different approaches to the notion. I do not want to exclude certain forms of religions, but neither do I want to take for granted that all religions and all religious expressions are to be accepted unconditionally in the public domain. When I started this project, I tried to be as open-minded as possible. I use the term ‘open-minded’ and not ‘neutral’, because I am aware that neutrality is practically impossible. I am conscious of the fact that I am situated; I am a Dutch woman, born in the province of Groningen but raised in a different part of the country, in Twente. I am the youngest daughter of a middle-class, non-religious family, whose fascination for politics, religion and society started during a tumultuous time in Dutch politics and society. I am a woman for whom the world and people around me have always held a wonder and fascination, which led to my decision to study psychology and philosophy. I currently live in Assen with my husband and our two daughters.

It is impossible to measure how influential these personal characteristics are shaping my thoughts, let alone how influential they are in shaping other people’s thoughts. This was particularly evident with the participants of my empirical studies. I recall several instances where the respondents expected to meet a male interviewer, even to the extent that I had to convince one of them that it was really me with whom he had the appointment. Additionally, most interviewees expected me to have a Christian background. Some of the non-Christian respondents ‘translated’ elements of their religion into Christian terms in order for me to understand them. Likewise, a Christian woman refused to explain her transition in church community to me after she found out that I was
not religious, because, according to her, I would not be able to understand the
nuances. Be that as it may, I have tried to be as open-minded as possible
Towards the different persons and interpretations that I encountered. In doing so,
I hope this study provides a thought-provoking contribution to the existing
debates on diversity, integration and the role of religion within contemporary
Western society.