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The Dutch War on Easter

Secular Passion for Religious Culture & National Rituals

Ernst van den Hemel

Abstract

Through a discussion of seemingly ‘hyped-up’ controversies concerning Easter eggs, Palm Sunday celebrations, and phrases such as ‘merry Christmas’, this article analyzes the way in which celebrations of and rituals related to religious holidays have become the subject of political contestations in the Netherlands. This article highlights how nominally secular politicians increasingly come to the defense of the religious dimension of Dutch national identity. Focusing on the discourse concerning religion by the two largest parties in the Netherlands, liberal party VVD and populist right-wing PVV, this article outlines the contours of new interactions between religion, secularity, ritual and politics.

Keywords

Nationalism, populism, Easter, culturalization of citizenship, secularity

1 Introduction

It is somewhat of a ritual itself: periodically, numbers about the decline of church attendance in Dutch society are released, further affirming the narrative of Dutch society which is rapidly experiencing a decline of organized religion. The latest figures, published by the Dutch national bureau of statistics at the end of 2016, state that presently a mere 50% of the Dutch population is willing to call itself religious and only about one in six people in Dutch society attend religious service with any regularity.¹ This report was the latest installment of a series of publications which are received with summaries in the press like: “God is disappearing from the Netherlands.”² With this narrative of continuous decline in mind, it is surprising how much religion is present in contemporary Dutch political discourse. During the recent parliamentary elections of 2017 the ‘norms and values’ of Dutch national identity were

1) Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, “Enquête beroepsbevolking 2016,” published December 22, 2016, accessed June 1, 2017, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2016/51/helft-nederlanders-is-kerkelijk-of-religieus>.

2) Compare: the press release with which KRO-NCRV presented the conclusions of their 2016 survey “God in Nederland: God verdwijnt uit Nederland,” (“God is disappearing from the Netherlands,”) published March 13, 2016, accessed June 1, 2017, <https://www.kro.nl/katholiek/nieuws/god-verdwijnt-uit-nederland>.

frequently debated, and references to religion played an important part in these debates. The Netherlands might be rapidly secularizing, but when we take into account the frequency with which ‘Judeo-Christian roots’, Christian symbols and traditions are mentioned, religion seems to abound in political discourse about national identity.

As we will see, according to critics these sort of statements are paradoxical and nonsensical. For instance, often nominally secular and liberal politicians present themselves as protectors of Christian culture and symbols. What is more, all sorts of secular values are presented as part of ‘Judeo-Christian’ values. The interest in ‘actual’ religion seems to be shallow.³ Although this kind of discourse has often been denounced as empty opportunism that has nothing to do with ‘real’ religion, I argue that we here see the outlines of nationalist discourse that combines secular and religious dimensions in new and influential manners.⁴ Secular political discourse increasingly embraces religion, making it an object of policy and intervention in the process. This article presents a case study that illustrates and, hopefully, deepens our understanding of this phenomenon. A focus on debates concerning rituals can help in furthering understanding of the role of religion in contemporary Dutch nationalist discourse. In controversies concerning Easter eggs and phrases such as ‘merry Christmas’, we see nominally secular politicians arguing for policy intervention and political action for regulating religious-cultural identity. This leads us to an understanding of why ritual practices and their material preconditions are effective objects for drawing the line between cultural selves and cultural others.

In order to do so, I will first perform a close-reading of discourse surrounding controversies concerning Easter and Christmas, to show how nominally secular politicians from the two currently largest political parties in the Netherlands – the conservative yet nominally ‘liberal’ VVD⁵ and the populist conservative PVV⁶ – stress protection of Christian dimensions of Dutch culture. This discourse is then situated in the recent history of both parties. Subsequently, I will zoom in on the role of ritual and performance in PVV and VVD discourse on religion. Finally, I will argue that such political emphasis on the protection of Easter eggs and the phrase ‘merry Christmas’ can best be approached by understanding how both religious and secular dimensions have been taken up in what Duyvendak has called the ‘culturalization of citizenship’. I will conclude by sketching some of the implications of this analysis.

3) Compare: Ernst van den Hemel, “Christenen en Joden horen er in de ‘joods-christelijke cultuur’ van de PVV niet bij,” *Trouw*, March 9, 2017.

4) Compare: *ibid.*, “(Pro)claiming Tradition: The ‘Judeo-Christian’ Roots of Dutch Society and the Rise of Conservative Nationalism,” in *Postsecular Publics*, ed. R. Braidotti et. al. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 53-77.

5) The VVD is, traditionally, a liberal party in the European sense of the word. In contrast with the American use of the term, ‘liberal’ in this context means pro-free market and secular. In the recent decade or so, the VVD has increasingly aligned itself with a conservative turn in Dutch politics.

6) The ideology of the PVV contains elements of both the left and right wings of the political spectrum. The PVV, however, places these aspects in a conservative framework. See Merijn Oudenampsen and Jan-Willem Duyvendak, “Correspondentie Oudenampsen & Duyvendak,” *Krisis*, no. 1 (2014): 88-91.

2 The non-existing war on Easter⁷

It was framed by the ruling liberal party VVD as an outright attack on Dutch national identity. VVD leader Halbe Zijlstra stated it was an attack ‘on our way of life’.⁸ Current prime minister of the Netherlands and leader of the liberal party Mark Rutte called protecting Easter an integral part of his normative role as prime minister.⁹ And populist party PVV talked about the ‘fatwa on Easter’ as a blatant example of self-islamization.¹⁰ Conservative magazine *Elsevier* wrote an article with the title “Will celebrating Easter become the new resistance?”¹¹ What had happened?

Two events lie at the origin of these highfalutin statements. In spring 2016, the Dutch convenience store Hema¹² advertised ‘hiding eggs’ in their spring catalog. This was seen as scandalous for two reasons: firstly, in the eyes of Hema’s critics, the cover of the catalog should have used the word Easter instead of ‘spring’.¹³ The use of the word ‘spring’ was seen as kowtowing to political correctness and as bending a knee to Islam.¹⁴ Analogously, the fact that the eggs in question were called ‘hiding eggs’ (*verstoppeieren*) instead of the more common ‘Easter eggs’ (*paaseieren*) was seen as problematic. These things were perceived as telltale signs that Hema was self-censuring central elements of

7) I base myself in part on my earlier publication: Ernst van den Hemel, “Hoezo christelijke waarden? Postseculier nationalisme en uitdagingen voor beleid en overheid,” *Tijdschrift voor Religie, Recht en Beleid*, no. 2 (2017).

8) Thijs Niemantsverdriet en Annemarie Kas, “Ik ga niet wachten op Europa,” *NRC*, March 19, 2016.

9) Tijs van den Brink, “Van wat voor land wil Rutte premier worden?” *Dit is de Dag*, Evangelische Omroep, Hilversum, February 22, 2017, accessed June 1, 2017, <https://www.nporadio1.nl/dit-is-de-dag/onderwerpen/396913-van-welk-land-wil-rutte-premier-worden>.

10) René Dercksen (@renedercksen), “Nu ook een fatwa van de @hema op Pasen? Verstoppeieren? Echt? Die H stond vroeger voor Hollandse, nu voor halal,” Twitter, February 26, 2016, <https://twitter.com/renedercksen/status/703283351411679232>.

11) Syp Wynia, “Wordt Pasen vieren de volgende verzetsdaad?” *Elsevier*, March 30, 2017.

12) Hema has become an icon of Dutch popular culture. See for instance the way in which Hema was used as a symbol of Dutch national identity in ‘Hema The Musical’, and the way in which Dutch art organization Mediamatic provocatively combined ‘typically Dutch’ convenience store Hema with reflections on Islam in the art project ‘El Hema’.

13) Compare: VNL politician who tweeted the cover of the catalogue stating that Easter is abolished by Hema’s ‘cultural relativism’: Joram van Klaveren (@JoramvKlaveren), “Christmas trees are banned from schools, Black Pete is no longer allowed and now the Hema is abolishing Easter. Cultural relativism...” (“Kerstbomen worden geweerd op scholen, Zwarte Piet mag niet meer en nu schaft de Hema Pasen af. Cultuurrelativisme...”), Twitter, March 16, 2016, https://twitter.com/JoramvKlaveren/status/709097340477579266?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2Fbinnenland.eenvandaag.nl%2Ftv-items%2F73369%2Fnieuwstrend_staet_het_paasfeest_ouder_druk_.

14) Compare: Right-wing journalist Joost Niemoller’s analysis in which Hema is called ‘El Hema’: “El Hema net zo dom als El PVDA,” March 15, 2016, <http://joostniemoller.nl/2016/03/el-hema-net-zo-dom-als-pvda-muslims-leven-multicultiland/>.

Dutch national identity. Liberal politician Halbe Zijlstra stated that Hema put the country on a ‘slippery slope’ and that the convenience store was sacrificing core tenets of national identity.¹⁵ PVV politicians, describing Hema’s actions as ‘cultural suicide’ and ‘self-islamization’, demanded debates in parliament and answers from government.

A couple of things stand out in this controversy. Firstly, the controversy is ‘hyped up’. After all, compared to the dramatic terminology, renaming small chocolate eggs seems a relatively trivial affair. This impression is reinforced when one looks at the statement Hema released. A spokesperson stated that the ‘hiding eggs’ in question were simply called so because they were not a replacement of, but rather a variation on the classical Easter eggs. Hema explained that ‘hiding eggs’ consisted of a number of chocolate eggs with a single golden egg hidden among them, the idea being that kids could hunt for the special golden egg. The spokesperson pointed out that regular Easter eggs were still advertised as such in the folder.¹⁶ No less than 22 products in the same folder and 109 products on the website contained the word ‘Easter’. Finally, Hema pointed out, the ‘hiding eggs’ were not a recent invention, they have been advertised in their catalog for over ten years.¹⁷ Concerning the title of the catalog, Hema stated that the ‘spring catalog’ was simply called so for the reason that they wanted to use it for a longer period than just the Easter season. It seems, in short, that there was no real change in the way in which Easter was advertised by Hema.

The second thing that stands out in this controversy is the fact that, almost exclusively, it were secular and/or liberal politicians who proclaimed their outrage in the public sphere. In what seems to be a contradiction of both core tenets of secularity as well as the adherence to free-market ideology of liberalism, secular politicians claimed that Hema should respect Christian traditions. In contrast, reactions from confessional corners were remarkably mild. In the words of the (outspokenly Christian) Tijds van den Brink, a journalist who works for the Evangelical Broadcasting Corporation (*Evangelische Omroep, EO*), who questioned prime minister Rutte about his concerns for the Easter eggs: “Oh stop it, mister Rutte (...) Easter eggs?! There is nothing Christian about Easter eggs!”¹⁸

Around the same time, a second controversy concerning Easter took place. National newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad* reported on April 12, 2017 that due to pressure from Islamic pupils and parents of pupils, Protestant and Catholic schools in The Hague changed the way Easter was celebrated.¹⁹ In

15) See interview with Halbe Zijlstra: “VVD: Hema is completely lost,” (“VVD: Hema is de weg kwijt”), *Powned*, March 15, 2016, <https://www.powned.tv/artikel/video-hema-is-de-weg-kwijt>.

16) Hema’s reaction is given in full in: Simone van Zwielen, “Geen paaseieren, maar ‘verstoppeieren’ bij Hema,” *Algemeen Dagblad*, February 28, 2016.

17) Joris Zwetsloot, “Maakt Hema met verstop-eitjes knieval voor islam? ‘We verkopen ze al tien jaar,’” *Volkskrant*, February 29, 2016.

18) *Dit is de Dag*, February 22, 2017. Translation by the author, transcripts of the Dutch texts in this article can be obtained via ernst.van.den.hemel2@meertens.knaw.nl.

19) Zoë Toet and Julia Broos, “Christelijke scholen zwakken paasviering af,” *Algemeen Dagblad*, March 12, 2017, <http://www.ad.nl/binnenland/christelijke-scholen-zwakken-paasviering-af~a4721fd5/>.

particular, it was reported, the schools changed the *palmpasenstok*, a staff that is carried by children during Easter celebrations, which is traditionally decorated with a rooster made of bread and a cross on top. The schools had purportedly ‘broken off’ the cross of these staffs after pressure from Islamic parents and pupils. This apparent accommodation to Islamic sensibilities and hostility to Dutch tradition led to a storm of outcry. The PVV filed a motion wanting to investigate the way in which Easter was celebrated in The Hague so that the Christian character of Easter could be protected.²⁰ In national parliament, both the PVV²¹ and the VVD²² demanded answers from both the Secretary of Education as well as the Secretary of Social Affairs.

The controversy resembles the one concerning the Easter eggs discussed above. This controversy also has a ‘fictive’ or ‘hyped’ dimension. The schools themselves denied that any change in the way they celebrate Easter took place. Furthermore, a spokesperson argued, in these neighborhoods, certain flexibility in religious matters has been standing practice for a long time.²³ Secondly, again it were the nominally secular parties VVD and PVV which led the charge to safeguard national identity by protecting references to religion in traditions and holidays. In contrast, the confessional parties did not support the proposals and interventions. Neither the Christian Democrats, the reformed-protestant confessional party Christian Union nor the Orthodox Protestant SGP supported the outcry in parliament. Representatives of these confessional political parties questioned why secular parties were so concerned with Easter. The reaction of Christian Union politician Gert-Jan Segers was illustrative: “If all those people concerned about Easter would simply start going to church each week, Easter would surely remain Easter. It’s up to us, people.”²⁴

Is this merely an example of an overly excitable political climate? Fake news? An often-heard riposte is that these sort of controversies are caused by nothing more than populist opportunism. This answer, however, hardly satisfies. For even if it were merely populist opportunism, why is it opportune to claim religious traditions? Why does a liberal prime minister – whose party prides itself for its secularity and its embrace of the free market – find it a core task of his function to tell a warehouse

20) Minutes of The Hague city council meeting, April 13, 2017, accessed June 1, 2017, <https://denhaag.raadsinformatie.nl/vergadering/322282/Raad%2013-04-2017>.

21) Geert Wilders tweeted his parliamentary questions in full on April 12, 2017: Geert Wilders (@geertwilderspvv), “Dutch schools adapt Eastern (sic) celebrations: no Christian cross anymore not to offend muslims. Unacceptable! Parliamentary questions,” Twitter, April 12, 2017, <https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/852085198506385408>.

22) Hanneke Keultjes, “VVD eist opheldering over aanpassen paasviering,” *Algemeen Dagblad*, April 12, 2017.

23) Freek Schraivesande, “Van ‘knieval voor islam’ bij Paasfeest ‘is geen sprake,’” *NRC*, April 12, 2017.

24) Gert Jan Segers (@gertjansegers), “Als iedereen die dit erg vindt voortaan wekelijks naar de kerk gaat, dan zal Pasen echt gewoon Pasen blijven. It’s up to us, mensen..” Twitter, April 11, 2017, <https://twitter.com/gertjansegers/status/852047052682829825>.

to change the way they sell their products? Why do populists like the PVV who champion gay rights²⁵ and atheism²⁶ elevate fidelity to religious culture as a central concern of their political agenda?²⁷ In what follows I will argue that it is a common phenomenon in the contemporary Dutch political climate to refer to religion when discussing embattled national identity. It furthermore shows how these debates are predicated upon cultural practices and material objects such as crosses on staffs and little chocolate eggs. In short, the debate on Easter is not an isolated incident of opportunism, but part of a broader development concerning religion and secularity in the Netherlands.

3 Holidays as rituals of community

It is well-known in the study of nationalism and folk culture that holidays and rituals surrounding annually recurring festivities play a role in constituting and maintaining national communities. It is also well-known that the calendar of secular societies is deeply influenced by the religious past. From Palm Sunday to Christmas, the Dutch societal calendar continues to follow the rhythm of a religion many of its inhabitants no longer actively take part in.²⁸ Under the headers of folk-religiosity and ‘inculturation’, the way in which religious traditions are lived amongst lay populations became a well-developed field in ethnographic research.²⁹ In the 21st century, under the influence of escalating debates regarding migration and integration, relations between secularity and religious heritage are shaken up. This also has its implications for the roles religious holidays and rituals play. Referring to an incident in 2004, when there was popular outcry about a proposal of a Dutch labor union to exchange Pentecost for the Islamic holiday *Eid al-Fitr*, the Sugar Feast, Irene Stengs describes how, in this tense political climate, people frequently refer to the emotional identification at stake in the religious dimensions of holidays and traditions. This identification with a cultural self, and concomitant disassociation with religious-cultural others, is at work even when general populations no longer have operational knowledge about what the traditions related to this belief stand for:

25) See for instance: “Het einde van Amsterdam als tolerante stad voor homo’s,” accessed October 13, 2017, www.pvv.nl.

26) See: Geert Wilders, “Open Letter to his Holiness Pope Francis,” *Gates of Vienna*, December 6, 2013, accessed June 1, 2017, <http://gatesofvienna.net/2013/12/open-letter-to-his-holiness-pope-francis/>.

27) For a mapping of PVV’s references to religion on Twitter, see: Ernst van den Hemel, “Christenen en Joden horen er in de ‘joods-christelijke cultuur’ van de PVV niet bij,” *Trouw*, March 9, 2017.

28) Compare: Gerard Rooijackers, “Vieren en markeren. Feest en ritueel,” in *Volkscultuur: een inleiding in de Nederlandse ethnologie*, ed. Ton Dekker et. al. (Nijmegen: SUN, 2010), 173-231.

29) Jeremy Boissevain, *Revitalizing European Rituals* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Fear of ‘increased islamization’ is an issue, but it is predominantly the loss of a Christian holiday which generates resistance. In predominantly secular Dutch society – where a large part of Dutch people do not know the meaning behind the celebration of Pentecost – such a change is experienced as a devaluation of Christian values and traditions on which Dutch society is supposedly based.³⁰

This article contributes to this update of ethnological concern with the role of ritual in secular societies, by focusing on how holidays and rituals become controversial in times of crises concerning secularism and multiculturalism give rise to new forms of nationalist discourse.³¹ Both in the public domain as well as in political discourse, religious holidays and traditions are frequently invoked in order to sound the alarm about the loss of national and cultural identity of the Netherlands. This has very real consequences. Politicians increase regulation of religious holidays and formulate policy that intervenes in religious-cultural matters of Dutch society, and amongst the Dutch population it furthers an emotional political climate with potentially violent results.

Let us zoom in on some examples. In December 2016, a modest Dutch version took place of what in the United States is called ‘the war on Christmas’. Dutch national broadcasting agency NPO released their jingle in which they used the phrase ‘celebrate December together’ (*December vier je samen*), instead of ‘celebrate Christmas together’ (*Kerst vier je samen*).³² This led to an outcry that Dutch Christian culture was being done away with.³³ In response, prime minister Mark Rutte stated the following in an interview:

Rutte: For me, in the Netherlands we celebrate Christmas. That’s how I... We have Black Pete.³⁴
We have Christmas. There are some traditions that I am deeply attached to and that’s why I speak

30) Irene Stengs, *Nieuw in Nederland: feesten en rituelen in verandering* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 13. Translation by the author.

31) Most infamously, the debate on *Zwarte Piet* and *Sinterklaas* celebrations has led to considerable societal upheaval. As the focus in this article is on religion, and the debate on the blackface figure ‘Black Pete’ is mostly focused on race, I will not enter into discussion. However, it is of interest that again holidays and the material rituals involved in them are the site of such emotions. Compare: Gloria Wekker, “‘...For even though I am Black as Soot, My Intentions are Good’: the case of *Zwarte Piet* / Black Pete,” in *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 139-168.

32) Wietse Pottjewijd, “Verwarring in de media: schrapte de NPO het woord Kerst?” *Volkscrant*, December 31, 2016.

33) Compare: “Premier Rutte: ‘In Nederland vieren we Kerst,’” *Volkscrant*, December 23, 2016, and “Als Kerstmis geen Kerstmis meer mag zijn,” *Telegraaf*, December 22, 2016.

34) ‘Black Pete’ is a blackface character who plays a role as Saint Nicholas’ servant/slave during the annual ‘*Sinterklaas*’ celebrations in the Netherlands. Drawing controversy for its racist stereotypization and connections to slavery, the figure has become the subject of an intense discussion concerning tradition, racism and national identity. See: Wekker, “For Even Though I Am Black as Soot, My Intentions Are Good,” 139-168.

out about them. I don't mean that I can tell other people what to do like a dictator. But I think it is important that I, in my normative role as prime minister...

Van de Brink: But to say 'merry Christmas' or 'happy holidays', surely that is not part of your normative role? Rutte: Yes, yes it is. Because there are a lot of people that are uncomfortable with the following fact. And that is that we have seen a lot of people arrive in the Netherlands who have a different cultural background, and that is because we are a civilized country that shelters refugees (...) but it is of importance that we are a country in which the most people say 'merry Christmas' to each other.³⁵

The role of emotion stands out. Rutte expresses 'deep attachment' to certain traditions, and references feelings of discomfort amongst the Dutch population. Emotions are the basis for the normative action that Rutte has in mind. Rutte seamlessly moves between the anxiety people might feel concerning refugees and integration to a discussion whether or not a broadcasting corporation should use the phrase 'merry Christmas'. Safeguarding the exact phrase 'merry Christmas' is seen as a symbolic measure to reassure an anxious electorate that the Netherlands will remain, culturally, unchanged.

So if we return to the question outlined above – why do nominally secular politicians meddle with rituals related to national holidays? – a first answer would run as follows: politicians refer to national holidays as a symbol of national identity. Safeguarding the rituals involved in these holidays aims to reassure people that are concerned about potential changes in Dutch national identity. The controversies concerning these holidays show how a national rhythm functions as a marker of cultural stability in changing times. This, however, raises important follow-up questions. What is the relation between religion and secular national identity? And, why this focus on the material and ritual dimensions of these holidays? These two questions are the subject of the next two paragraphs of this article. In order to properly understand the religious dimension of national anxiety, we need to take a step back and investigate the role of religion in the rise of nationalist discourse in the Netherlands.

4 Religion in the turn to the right in the Netherlands: Fortuyn and Wilders

In this paragraph I want to highlight that in the Dutch 'turn to the right'³⁶ reflections on religion play an important role.³⁷ Practically all major players share not only a dislike for 'Islam' but also an appreciation for 'Judeo-Christian' elements in native Dutch secular culture. In what follows, I want to shortly

35) *Dit is de Dag*, February 22, 2017. Translation by the author.

36) Compare: Rogier van Reekum, "Raising the Question: Articulating the Dutch Identity Crisis through Public Debate," *Nations and Nationalism* 22, no. 3 (2016): 561-580.

37) I have covered this in more detail in: Ernst van den Hemel, "(Pro)claiming Tradition: The 'Judeo-Christian' Roots of Dutch Society and the Rise of Conservative Nationalism," in *Postsecular Publics*, ed. R. Braidotti et. al. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 53-77.

describe this mechanism in order to better understand the role of religion in the secular embraces of Easter as outlined above.

Pim Fortuyn (1948-2002) is predominantly known as a flamboyant avant-garde critic of Islam and defender of the secular West's accomplishments. His remarks about Islamic culture being backward led to widespread upheaval, but are now seen as prefiguring and inspiring a great variety of populist movements in Western Europe. His assassination in 2002 by a left-wing animal rights' activist only further cemented his status as a martyr of new nationalist discourse.³⁸ In short, he is seen as the avant-garde of Dutch and Western European populism. His popularity has been attributed to him providing an outlet for frustration between highly-educated elites and lower educated voters,³⁹ and for the tensions between secular Dutch culture and the religious culture of migrants.⁴⁰ I want to highlight a dimension that is rarely mentioned in the study of Fortuyn: religion figures prominently in the work and public *persona* of Pim Fortuyn. This includes his self-styling as a messiah-like figure and the saint-like veneration which took place after his death.⁴¹ But also in his political ideas religion figures prominently. The title of what is one of his most important works is telling: *The Orphaned Society. A Religious-Sociological Treatise (De verweesde samenleving. Een religieus-sociologisch traktaat)*.⁴² In this book, Fortuyn states the secularization of Dutch society left the Dutch much like orphans without a father or a mother (hence the title). As a result, Fortuyn states, the Netherlands needs to look for new forms of foundation after secularization.⁴³ In chapters titled "The Judeo-Christian humanist culture: our culture!" and "Fossilized churches and slumbering religious sensibilities," Fortuyn would elaborate on the impact secularization has had on Dutch society. According to Fortuyn, one of the most important challenges for our time is the reinvention of the role of the church: "The challenge is to innovate the instrument and to make it suit our times."⁴⁴ A recurring argument is that cultural pride can play the binding role that organized religion once played. Both secularists and confessional Dutchmen and women should be proud of our 'Judeo-Christian humanist culture'. Here is an important sketch of how Fortuyn speaks of culture:

38) Compare: Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

39) Compare: Ruth Wodak, et. al., *Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 195.

40) Compare: Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance* (London: Penguin, 2006); Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*.

41) Compare: Peter Jan Margry, "The Murder of Pim Fortuyn and Collective Emotions. Hype, Hysteria and Holiness in the Netherlands?" *Etnofoor*, 16 (2003): 106-131.

42) Pim Fortuyn, *De verweesde samenleving. Een religieus-sociologisch traktaat* (Uithoorn: Karakter Uitgevers, 2002).

43) *Ibid.*, 225.

44) *Ibid.*, 224.

Problems concerning integration and mutual acceptance are centered on the relation between the dominant Judeo-Christian humanistic culture on the one hand and Islamic culture on the other. I consciously speak in the broad terminology of culture rather than of religion. One can leave a religion, as we can see happening massively in our country, a culture however, one cannot leave behind.⁴⁵

For Fortuyn, religion and culture are simultaneously distinct and intrinsically linked. First of all, in calling Islam ‘backwards’, Fortuyn explicitly refers to culture and not to religion, because of the nativist connotations he attaches to the word culture. According to Fortuyn, one cannot leave culture behind. But note also how culture is in turn intrinsically connected to religion. Both antagonists – ‘Islamic culture’ as well as ‘Judeo-Christian culture’ – in this clash of civilizations are framed in religious terms. Secondly, this understanding fuses religious and secular dimensions of culture. In the West, secularity is part of Judeo-Christian humanist culture: leaving religion is part of Judeo-Christian culture. Whereas Islam is characterized as inherently non-secular and incapable of secular principles like the separation of Church and State, secular principles are part and parcel of Dutch Judeo-Christian culture. This is an important element in Fortuyn’s reflections on religion: all sorts of secular values are interpreted as fruits of a religious-cultural identity. Fortuyn, himself flamboyantly gay, presents atheism, gay rights and feminism as important signs of the superiority of Judeo-Christian culture over and against Islamic culture.⁴⁶ Secularism for Fortuyn is not a neutral regulation of religion by a secular state, but part of a religious-cultural identification which needs to be kept alive with faith.

So, instead of mindless populist opportunism, religion plays an integral and influential part in his vision on culture. For Fortuyn, religion is not merely of importance because of a religious past which has shaped the agenda of secular Dutch society. Religion is very much present in secular society. Referring to religion for Fortuyn is a way to reflect on the spiritual foundations needed to keep secular Dutch society alive.

5 PVV and Judeo-Christian tradition

The PVV’s fascination with religion is only slowly becoming a topic of research.⁴⁷ Even though there is no scarcity of attention for the PVV, both in national and international approaches, this dimension

45) Ibid., 83. Translation by the author.

46) Paul, Mepschen, Jan Willem Duyvendak and Evelien Tonkens, “Sexual Politics, Orientalism and Multicultural Citizenship in the Netherlands,” *Sociology* 44, no. 5 (2010): 962-979.

47) Compare: Ernst van den Hemel, “(Pro)claiming Tradition: The ‘Judeo-Christian’ Roots of Dutch Society and the Rise of Conservative Nationalism,” in *Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere: Postsecular Publics*, ed. R. Braidotti et. al. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 53-77.

remains somewhat overlooked.⁴⁸ This is hardly surprising, for the PVV has some surprising and seemingly contradictory standpoints on religion. As we have seen with Fortuyn, for whom gay rights and feminism are hallmarks of ‘Judeo-Christianity’, the PVV also makes claims that seem to run counter to a traditional understanding of religion and/or confessional politics. For instance, in a 2013 letter to pope Francis, Geert Wilders wrote that atheism ‘owes its freedom and democracy’ to Judeo-Christian civilization.⁴⁹ At another moment in time, Wilders’ party participated in the outlawing of ritual slaughter (and thereby confounded the Jewish community of the Netherlands who saw the ‘Judeo-Christian’ culture being instrumentalized in the outlawing of an important element of Judaism).⁵⁰ This has led some commentators to state that the religious dimension of the PVV should not be taken seriously.⁵¹ Take for instance the following exchange that took place in parliament in 2015. The PVV was questioned by confessional politicians about its use of Christian values:

Wilders: (...) you can forget about our Christian values. The Netherlands is being flooded with all sorts of Muslims that have no connection at all with our values.

Buma: Christian values are about having respect for the other (...). I have difficulty with how you continually use the word ‘Christian values’ as if you have any knowledge at all about this, because the only thing that you do is point to others and point out how evil they are, and, I’m sorry but that has nothing to do with Christian values.

Wilders: Madame chairman, what takes place here is cultural suicide. And, mister Buma, whose party, according to its name CDA, should be Christian, takes the lead in this cultural suicide. CDA used to stand for Christians, but now it means ‘Christians Serve (*Dienen*) Allah’.⁵²

The confrontation here is between Sybrand van Haersma Buma, leader of the Christian Democrats (CDA), and Wilders. Buma confronts Wilders by stating that his combative stance has ‘nothing to do with Christian values’. Wilders in return emphasizes cultural identity rather than individual confessional values. Their failure to address these cultural issues, Wilders states, ensures that the CDA has given up on Christianity altogether. In short, religion is simply not defined in the same way by both politicians.

48) Compare: Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, Roy Olivier, eds., *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (London: Hurst & Company, 2016) for a notable exception.

49) Geert Wilders, “Open Letter to his Holiness Pope Francis.”

50) Compare: Markha Valenta, “Pluralist Democracy or Scientistic Monocracy? Debating Ritual Slaughter,” *Erasmus Law Review* 5, no. 1 (2012). E. Nathan and A. Topolski, *Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition? A European Perspective* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016).

51) For instance, Stijn van Kessel concludes his article on the PVV by stating that the PVV has little support from the churches, and, the Netherlands being a highly secularized country, stands little to gain from invoking religion. See S. van Kessel, “The Role of Religion in Dutch Populism,” in *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion*, ed. Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, Roy Olivier (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 77.

52) Dutch Parliamentary Yearly General Considerations of the year 2016, accessed October 12, 2017, <https://debatgemist.tweedekamer.nl/debatten/algemene-politieke-beschouwingen-10>,. Translation by the author.

The exchange in parliament continues, with more confessional politicians joining the discussion. A representative of Orthodox Protestant party SGP states:

Van der Staaij: I thought the debate improved when we were discussing Christian values. For once, I would like to hear some positive phrases from mister Wilders. Could he name some of those Christian values that he is so proud of and that we should protect in this country?

Wilders: One of these values is that we should protect our own people (*volk*). That is what we should be doing. And one of those values... [hilarity ensues, EvdH] It is telling that everybody laughs when you say protect your own people. Every Christian in the Netherlands should be willing to stand up for its own people. (...) We should be watchful against islamisation of our country. What is more Christian than to ensure that the Netherlands keeps these Christian values? If we don't, the first victims of the Islam will be the Christians. (...) you can share these Christian values even if you are not Christian yourself. That is possible. Millions of people do that in the Netherlands. But that doesn't mean that if we want to keep those values, and that we want to prevent people from violently imposing their will on others, that we have to stop Islam. And it surprises me that the SGP fraction does not see that.⁵³

These exchanges show the big difference between how confessional politicians define religious values and how the PVV defines them. Whereas confessional politicians like Kees van der Staaij would refer to more classical *loci* of Christian democratic or orthodox protestant political discourse (family-affairs, abortion, euthanasia), when Wilders speaks of Christian values, he remains rather vague and he seems to indicate autochthonous Dutch culture in its entirety. What is often criticized as a weakness – Wilders' rhetoric on Christian values remains vague – should in fact be seen as one of its core characteristics. It is precisely secular, neutral tolerance of Dutch society which is framed as culturally speaking Christian. This strategy enables anyone who identifies as natively Dutch to identify with the good side of an essentializing moral religious-cultural framework. Note how in the exchanges above religious tolerance itself is seen as a core characteristic of the Dutch people which is under threat. What is at stake in PVV's use of religion is not the defense of religious over secular values. Instead secular values are conflated with religious values. If a definition of Christianity and secularity is used in which these are two separate domains, Wilders' discourse is contradictory. However, when we take into consideration that within the PVV's discourse, secularity itself is presented as Christian, the image is considerably more complex.

The PVV advocates policy to regulate religion in defense of the cultural foundations of secular Dutch society. It is my contention that the discourse is not only more coherent than is often thought, but it is also more widely shared and practiced. For instance, with this preliminary understanding of the PVV in mind, it becomes apparent that the ruling liberal party VVD shows a lot of similarities in the way it has turned toward religion.

53) Ibid.

6 The secular–liberal VVD and religion

It might be surprising to have the Dutch liberals come to the defense of Dutch ‘Christian culture’. Are liberals not supposed to be staunch adherents of the separation of Church and State? Before we zoom in on two of the liberal leaders’ statements on religion, let us first sketch the background of the VVD’s discourse on religion. The party is known as being focused on the separation of church and state and on excluding religious sensibilities from its religious discourse.⁵⁴ The liberal party has a remarkable position in the historiography of the Dutch religious political landscape. Classically, the pillars of Dutch society consisted of protestant, catholic and socialist groups in society. Liberalism is usually not seen as having had its own pillar.⁵⁵ This has contributed to a significant lacuna in research on the history of liberalism and the liberal party of the Netherlands.⁵⁶ Particularly, the complicated relationship between liberalism and religion in the Netherlands has not been studied extensively. As one of the few scholars working on the history of the VVD has written: “A practitioner of the history of ideas who chooses to work on the VVD is like a mountaineer that wants to exercise his hobby in South-Holland”, the Dutch province of South Holland being known, much like the rest of the Netherlands, as exceptionally flat.⁵⁷

The result of this is that the history of the VVD with regards to religion is relatively uncharted territory in Dutch political historiography. For even though Dutch liberalism prides itself for its secular nature, historically speaking, things were not so simple. A number of the roots of the current liberal party lie in liberal protestant culture, in which protestant Christianity and liberal values were not antithetical.⁵⁸ Indeed until 1980, the ‘statement of principles’ (*beginselverklaring*) van de VVD contained a reference to religion as the root of Dutch national culture.⁵⁹ In 1980, this was scrapped and a period of more explicit secularity replaced a period in which the relations between Dutch liberalism and religion were considerably more complex and in which it was not uncommon to see a statement that equated liberal values with Christian values. This period of stronger secularity ended officially, at least as far as the statement of principles is concerned, in 2008, when the relatively new leader of the liberals, Mark

54) Compare: Paul Lucardie’s overview of Dutch political landscape: Paul Lucardie, *Nederland stromenland: een geschiedenis van de politieke stromingen* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2007), 8.

55) *Ibid.*, 33.

56) In a recently published history of the Dutch liberal party, the editors state: “For a long time, Kleio has paid little attention to liberals” (“Kleio heeft lange tijd weinig oog gehad voor de liberalen”). In: Patrick van Schie & Gerrit Voerman, *Zestig jaar VVD* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2008), 9.

57) “Een wetenschapsbeoefenaar met belangstelling voor ideeëngeschiedenis die de VVD als studieobject kiest, doet denken aan een bergbeklimmer die zijn hobby wil uitoefenen in Zuid-Holland.” Gerry van der List, quoted in R. Hartmans, “De coup van Pieter Oud,” *Historisch Nieuwsblad* 7 (2010).

58) Compare: The discussion of one of the precursors of the VVD, the ‘Vrijzinnig Democratische Bond’, in: Meine Henk Klijnsma, *Om de democratie* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2005).

59) The scientific journal of the VVD published a special issue devoted to the new statement of principles. See *Liberaal Reveil*, no. 3 (2008).

Rutte, took the lead in changing the statement. The statement of principles now contains the following paragraph:

Dutch society originates in the Judeo-Christian tradition, humanism and the Enlightenment. These civilizational foundations, combined with the Dutch language, national history and the constitution, form the basis of our national identity. Liberals choose the principle of the separation of church and state.⁶⁰

Note the seamless connection between the Judeo-Christian tradition and the principle of the separation of church and state. Partly, this has been attributed to the different personalities of recent liberal leaders. Whereas previous leaders like Hans Dijkstal have affirmed explicit secular principles, Mark Rutte speaks frequently and openly about his personal religion. References to religious-cultural identity became part and parcel of liberal discourse in the tumultuous struggle with populism in the Netherlands. Much like the discourse of Fortuyn and the PVV, the VVD increasingly presents secularity and religious-cultural traditions as not opposed but as mutually constitutive. Let us zoom in on two interviews to provide some illustrations to our analysis.

Prominent VVD politician Halbe Zijlstra spoke about the ‘hiding eggs’ as follows:

When the Hema says farewell to Easter, and Easter is part of our society, it becomes a slippery slope (...) No Muslim will be pleased with this changing of the name for these eggs. You could say: this is no big deal. But, once you are on this slippery slope there is only one direction: downward. It means chipping away at what we as a nation stand for. Luckily Hema corrected this. But what if they would have persisted? What if Easter had become a ‘spring holiday’? Where does it stop? Before you know it Christmas is called ‘winter holiday’ (...). In the Netherlands we have been tolerant to intolerance for far too long. Easter and Pentecost belong to the Netherlands. That is my opinion, even as a non-religious person. If you are offended by Easter and Pentecost, doesn’t that make you intolerant? Easter belongs to the Netherlands, just like the equality between man and woman and between homosexuals and heterosexuals.⁶¹

Halbe Zijlstra states that there is a worrying trend in Dutch society to neglect its cultural identity. This is related to one of the national treasures: tolerance. According to Zijlstra, changing Easter to accommodate those who are themselves intolerant is part of a problematic tendency in the Netherlands in which tolerant Dutch society fails to stand up for itself. Easter becomes the line where tolerance for intolerant people should not be tolerated. Easter is a non-negotiable part of Dutch society, just like the equality between man and woman and between homosexuals and heterosexuals. This slippage

60) “Beginselverklaring vastgesteld door de 125e algemene vergadering op 15 november 2008 te Rotterdam,” published on the website of the VVD. Accessed June 1, 2017, <https://www.vvd.nl/content/uploads/2016/12/beginselverklaring.pdf>. Translation by the author.

61) Niemantsverdriet and Kas, “Ik ga niet wachten op Europa.” Translation by the author.

between religion, culture and tolerance, ensures that Easter and gay rights are on one side of the cultural divide, and Islamic intolerance is on the other.

Prime-minister Rutte further detailed his willingness to come to the defense of religious symbols in the interview with journalist Tijs van den Brink of the Evangelical Broadcasting Corporation that I cited earlier.

Van de Brink: Halbe Zijlstra even came to the defense of the Easter Eggs...

Rutte: Well, that is very good.

Van de Brink: Oh stop it mister Rutte. That is nothing more than flirting with Christian traditions.

Rutte: Surely, I don't have to explain to you, one of the main figures of the Evangelical Broadcasting Corporation...

Van de Brink: Sure. But Easter eggs are very unchristian. There is nothing Christian about them.

Rutte: No, but Easter. Surely I don't have to explain to you. We are going to enjoy the Saint Matthew Passion, the story of the suffering of Christ, and now I have to explain to you, one of the foremost Christian journalists in the country, the importance of these Christian symbols?!

Van de Brink: Easter eggs?! (...) It seems that the VVD is using Christianity to keep Islam at bay.

Rutte: No, that's not what we're doing at all. We have freedom of religion here. So, someone who is a pious Muslim, catholic or Hindu, they're worth the same. (...) But what I don't want is that people who live in this country and who feel at home with these traditions feel like they are old-fashioned or that they have insufficient respect for other people's faiths. And that's the feeling I get when we have these discussions about Christmas, and Black Pete and Easter.⁶²

Note how in this interview a number of the recurring arguments we have seen above are present. First of all there is a connection between religious-cultural traditions and feelings of anxiety related to migration. Secondly, there is a link between the secular dimensions of the Netherlands, including equality of religions, and religious-cultural identity: secular values are part of Dutch identity. Thirdly, as we have seen with Geert Wilders' exchanges with confessional politicians in parliament, Rutte's defense of Christian symbols is not necessarily appreciated by actual believers. Whereas journalists like Van den Brink or confessional politicians like Van der Staaij speak of religion in terms of faith and confessional identity, Wilders and increasingly Rutte, speak of religion in terms of a shared religious-cultural identity of which secularity is an important element.

We have now come to the second part of our answer. Above, we first discussed how feelings of national anxiety are connected to religious holidays and their traditions. Secondly, we highlighted how this particular use of religious culture and traditions fit in a development in the Netherlands in which religion and secularity are taken up in new forms by contemporary politicians. Now to complete our answer, we need a third ingredient: what makes rituals such suitable sites for these emotions? In order to understand this we need to focus on the culturalization of citizenship.

62) *Dit is de Dag*, February 22, 2017. Translation by the author.

7 Material and ritual performance: the practice of culturalization

In *Politics of Home* sociologist Jan-Willem Duyvendak describes the process that took place in the Netherlands in the 21st century as the ‘culturalization of citizenship’, a development which is described as follows:

(...) the ‘native’ culture is seen as under threat, leading to the normative project of defining and protecting ‘traditional’ cultural heritage (for instance, in the form of a ‘canon’ and teaching it to newcomers in citizenship courses). This process underscores the emotional aspects of citizenship, which has evolved from a status or practice into a deep sentiment.⁶³

According to Duyvendak, emancipatory ideals of the sixties changed status: from a progressive, rebellious project in the sixties, to that which accurately describes the accomplishments and nature of Dutch society. This makes, for instance, emancipation not so much something to strive for, but something that accurately describes the accomplishments of Dutch culture. These accomplishments subsequently become a source of national pride and something that needs to be defended against the threats posed by newcomers who do not share the cultural background of ‘superior’ Dutch culture. According to Duyvendak, this is largely a culturalization of secular citizenship: “As traditional values around family, marriage and sexuality lost ground, the Netherlands became less preoccupied with the Christian tradition – and vice versa.”⁶⁴

The culturalization of citizenship-thesis works well to explain how emotion and culture are invoked in contemporary nationalist discourse. Fortuyn for instance, is a classic example of the culturalization of citizenship when he states that leaving behind religion is part of Dutch innate cultural characteristics. It works less well to describe how religion plays a central role, both in the channeling of emotions as well in the descriptions of Judeo-Christian culture. I would argue, contra Duyvendak, that religion remains or re-becomes a category of importance, albeit it in new ways. As we have seen, the main protagonists of the Dutch turn to the right use monikers such as ‘Judeo-Christian’ to ‘root’ secular ideals in a religious-cultural framework. This ‘rootedness’ of secular values in a religious-cultural culture and past, contributes to the nativist dimension of these discourses. The frequent talk of roots, or tradition, is part of a conceptualization of culture that sees certain values as ‘innate’ to culture.⁶⁵

63) Jan-Willem Duyvendak, *Politics of Home* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 92-93.

64) *Ibid.*, 88.

65) During one of the debates running up to the 2017 election, Christian Democrat leader Buma stated something which is illustrative of this mythology when he sketched an example of a Judeo-Christian value: “Things that we have had for thousands of years, like equality between man and woman, we need to safeguard these things.” ‘Het Carré-debat’ RTL4, March 5, 2017, accessed October 13, 2017, <https://www.rtl.nl/video/5f65096b-512f-3a65-96d8-48f8b75830a8/>.

This role of religion in nationalist discourse, although it has disconnected itself from the life and organization of faith communities, has very real consequences for policy. As we have seen, politicians have expressed the willingness to regulate certain elements of religious-cultural identity (while maintaining secular indifference to others).

This is where an understanding of the role of rituals and material practices come into play. As indicated by the description of culturalization above, the role of emotions in culturalization is crucial. However, emotional adherence to cultural identity cannot be easily perceived or proven. As Duyvendak states, “because feelings as such cannot easily be perceived, certain actions become their symbolic stand-ins.”⁶⁶ According to Duyvendak, these symbolic stand-ins are associated with secular rituals such as the process of integration, *inburgering*, or the creation of a national canon. A case in point is the inclusion of imagery of homosexuality in the material immigrants are quizzed on. The imagery can be understood as a ritual passage: if one can withstand the provocation of presumed religious sensitivities, one is ready to be part of secular Dutch society. Although there is much to be said for such attention to secular ritual, I argue that secular embraces of religious ritual indicates an important and often neglected element of contemporary nationalist discourse. As outlined above, in the discourse of PVV and VVD religion functions as expression of a conservative notion of identity, as indicative of the ‘roots’ of Dutch national identity. Whereas the framework that makes sense of contemporary nationalism as a struggle between Dutch secularity and the religious immigrant sees secular rituals as a rite de passage facilitating transition from religious identity to secular Dutch identity, the framework that arises from my analysis problematizes this opposition. In the thoughts of politicians such as Wilders, secularity is not a worldview one can ‘convert’ to through a ritual of national belonging such as a naturalization ceremony. In the words of Pim Fortuyn that I cited above: “a culture (...) one cannot leave behind”.⁶⁷ References to religion like these are crucial to understand contemporary nativist political discourse. In this view, which is also present in the discourse of Rutte and Wilders, culture and religion are perceived as the ‘roots’ of majority culture. If one cuts the roots, does not cherish them, the plant will wither away and die. On the other hand, if culture cannot be left behind, integration is not really possible. This is why, in all the examples mentioned above, there is almost no reference to the inclusive capacity of these rituals, there is no attempt to state that immigrants can become part of this culture. Instead these rituals are referenced in order to appeal to the emotions of ‘native Dutch’ that belong to majority culture.

Easter eggs and phrases such as ‘merry Christmas’ do not need to be threatened in reality in order to be experienced as symptoms of embattled majority culture. Easter eggs, or the saying of merry Christmas are used as stand-ins for native culture. 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. What is more,

66) Jan-Willem Duyvendak, *Politics of Home*, 93.

67) Fortuyn, *De verweesde samenleving*, 83.

highlighting the threat, real or not, to rituals such as the saying of ‘merry Christmas’ expresses that which is difficult to prove: the fear of losing the feeling of being at home in a religious-cultural identity.

8 Conclusion

This article hopes to contribute to the understanding of the complex and intertwined roles of religion and secularity in the rise of nationalist discourse. If we stick to stories of increasing secularization, in which religion increasingly withdraws, and if we stick to definitions of religion and secularity as mutually exclusive domains, we cannot explain how religion is used to describe both cultural others and cultural selves. References to Christian identity play a role in debates on secular Dutch national identity, and markers are provided by Easter, *Sinterklaas* and Christmas. For example, liberal politicians like Halbe Zijlstra name gay rights and Easter in one breath, and prime minister Rutte’s free-market zeal does not prevent him from stating that a warehouse needs to be faithful to a religious symbol in the Netherlands. Populist party PVV insists that atheism and Christianity are part of an uninterrupted Judeo-Christian identity. In light of these transgressions of boundaries between religion and secular politics, we need alternative stories and questions about the roles of religious-cultural matters in the contemporary Dutch political arena. Practically, this means that lacunas need to be filled. The liberal party VVD, and Dutch liberalism’s relation to religion, needs considerably more scholarly attention than it has received thus far. The PVV, although the subject of many studies, needs to be seen not as a secular reaction to religious migrants but as a post-secular movement which is part of an influential re-evaluation of the role of religion within secular culture. Finally, this backdrop gives renewed relevance to the study of ritual in contemporary post-secular societies.

These conflations of secularity and religious-cultural identity have far-reaching repercussions. If one is born into culture and cannot leave it, is integration even possible? What is the difference between political discourse based in nativist religious-cultural frameworks and those based in race? The impact of nativism, race and religion form a triangle that needs to be disentangled more carefully.⁶⁸ And, what does the rise of this form of nationalism mean for faith communities? In this polarized climate, most attention has been paid to the way in which Islamic communities in the Netherlands are affected by the Dutch turn to the right. Understandably so. But what I have argued above is that religion also plays a role in the national identity these politicians seek to defend. We have seen that frequently confessional politicians find it awkward to see ‘their’ religion re-framed as the backbone of secular culture. How will confessional politicians react? Will they continue to criticize this discourse, or will they embrace it? The same goes for Jews and Christians in the Netherlands. As this discourse gains political influence, questions concerning the implications for ‘actual’ Christians and Jews increase in urgency. How will they relate to

68) Compare: Markus Balkenhol et. al. sketch such a research programme in: Markus Balkenhol et.al., “The Nativist Triangle: Sexuality, Race and Religion,” in *The Culturalization of Citizenship: Belonging & Polarization in a Globalizing World*, ed. J.W. Duyvendak et. al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 97-112.

this political landscape in which religion returns to the public domain in often barely recognizable forms? Will believers see Judeo-Christianity as a support of their interests or as a secular attack on religious life? Who speaks for what aspects of what kind of religion? Most likely, this will divide faith communities.

Finally, I want to stress the point that this discourse is not just reserved to the relatively civil political domain but can lead to real incendiary effects. This was clearly shown by the defendant in a recent criminal court case. Dutch political figure and anti-racism activist Sylvana Simons had received explicitly racist threats, including a crudely photo-shopped image of a lynching with the face of Simons. Simons filed complaints, which led to a court case accusing the defendants of racism, death threats and defamation of character. Asked about his motives, one of the defendants stated: “We are not allowed to do anything anymore. Christmas, *Sinterklaas*, the Easter Bunny... that makes me furious.”⁶⁹ The defendant named the debates concerning these holidays as directly related to an uncontrollable emotion that came over him and that led him to make the racist threats. There is a direct line from the controversies concerning Easter, *Sinterklaas* and Christmas, to a nativist cultural framework which is felt to be under threat, to very real discriminatory crimes such as those perpetrated against Sylvana Simons.

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69) “Excuses voor doodsb bedreiging,” *Telegraaf*, April 13, 2017.