

the life of this community somehow isolated from secular influence. And yet by assuming the language of the secular state, its culture and politics, Syrian Christians in the Netherlands are also changing their understanding (and practice) of religion as several examples in the text point out. This process works both ways as the state also learns how to read their differentiation from the “real” others (Muslim immigrants), which makes this distinction more real and brings Syrian Christians closer to mainstream (Christian) culture.

The article shows convincingly how their identity claims represent a strategic (re)positioning at various levels (UN HCR, the Netherlands, local municipalities), each institutional actor perceiving religion through its own secular lens. It reminds of the Bible Society in the United Kingdom (Engelke 2009) and their attempts to reach out by using the language and tools of secular culture. This strategic secularism allows Syrian Christians in the Netherlands to juggle with different genealogies and historical narratives and present themselves as Aramaean, Assyrian, or Syrian to different audiences while remaining true to a shared liturgical heritage and language. These categories, however, are the outcome of different secularization processes in other parts of the world where Syrian Christians were subjected to colonial modernity, modern state formation, and nationalist projects, etc. (see also Armbruster 2013). How much of this recent legacy has shaped their political consciousness and informs their modes of action and self-representation in the diaspora? I would distinguish these localized processes from the apologetic histories they provide today to position themselves in a highly fragmented, diasporic space.

Similarly, Syrian Christians in India have a long tradition of apologetic histories that allowed them to create spiritual lineages and political alliances throughout centuries and rewrite their history many times (Varghese 2004). This helped them maintain a privileged minority position and survive waves of colonization and modernization, but the values and practices of this community have also changed significantly. Their constant repositioning was not just rhetorical but affected ritual and faith. The liturgical tradition accommodated Hindu, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant influences and even shifted from the East to West Syriac rite for half of the community, but they all remained *Suriyānikkal*. History, theology, and orthopraxy came to play an important role in the politics of differentiation, both intra- and intercommunal, but the most important factor for the salience of their Syriac identity was its connection to their caste (*jati*). This informed their kinship structures, social position, and intercaste alliances and became a dividing line from other Christians and even converts to their own churches. Arguably, this also made ritual so central to the community and made them seek the patriarchs in the Middle East to maintain and recreate the chain of spiritual authority that was the foundation and legitimacy of their rite. It is also manifest in their preservation of Syriac as part of the liturgical aesthetics—a language that shifted, however, through time from Eastern Syriac to

Garshuni Malayalam, Western Syriac, and modern Malayalam and sees today a liturgical revival in a highly fragmented, competitive context (Naumescu 2019). This is not to discount the importance of ritual (I have argued in a similar fashion that ritual is central to the formation of an Orthodox Christian subjectivity and moral community in India) but to remind that Christianity is not “inherent” in itself, and ritual is constitutive as much as transformative, an instrument of change. Wherever they go, Syrian Christians carry their rites with them, but the Indian community, highly mobile and globalized, does not share the history of persecution and marginality of those from the Middle East. The latter live with a memory of violence and displacement, which, together with the concrete threats to their disappearance, make the duty to remember stronger than ever. For them, ritual remains not only the means to commemorate and sustain a moral community but also a way to weave hope into their future.

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Religion, Refugees, and the Fragility of Family Life

Sarah Bakker Kellogg’s proposed concept of perforated kinship rings true for many communities in diaspora. It is not surprising that religion, conceived as an intrinsic aspect of family and community, can help resist the weakening of these jeopardized ties. Not only decades after migration, but also already during flight trajectories—recently in significant numbers from Syria and Eritrea to the Netherlands—religion can serve to protect family structures, which are, nevertheless, subject to changes (cf. Mavelli and Wilson 2016). Although social scientific consensus can be reached on the contingent nature of such transnational transformations by showing that a separation of religion and kinship need not be an irrevocable outcome in contemporary societies, the religion-kinship nexus is vulnerable. About the Dutch Syriac Orthodox, who hail from Syria, Iraq, Turkey, or other regions in the Middle East, Bakker Kellogg writes: “What they fear losing, above all else, is the sense that Christianity is an inherent rather than optional piece of who they are.” This fear for the possibility of choice, and thus for deviance, is justified, if one would indeed hope to salvage the ways of living practiced in the imagined old times prior to migration.

To explain the situation of the Dutch Syriac Orthodox, Bakker Kellogg distinguishes the concept of perforation—“poking a series of tiny holes into something, like a piece of paper, so that the pieces hold together but become easier to pull apart”—from the idea of secularization. Yet, the differences are not substantial if we include nuanced interpretations of secularization as a

demythologized force to be reckoned with, that is, a nonteleological, multidimensional, process of powerful entrapment. The increasingly available experience of religion as a matter of choice, as one option among others in a secularized society, remains thus inescapable: even if choice is a mere perceived threat rather than a *fait accompli*, perforation, if not total secular rupture, has occurred. This idea of optional religion as erosion of traditional faith is today frequently attributed to Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007), but it was already central to the early work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in the 1960s (e.g., Berger 1990 [1967]:133, 152; Luckmann 1967 [1963]:99–100). Notwithstanding Berger's recanting of the "belief" in secularization as a necessary process of modernity, a comparison with his final thoughts on the matter (2014) shows continuities that are relevant to Bakker Kellogg's research, in particular his understanding of religious pluralism as bringing about greater possibilities of choice in modern, urban settings.

In line with Bakker Kellogg's informants, albeit without transcendental presuppositions, Berger argues that the "symbolic liaison between religion and the family is . . . of ancient lineage indeed, grounded in the very antiquity of kinship institutions as such" (1990 [1967]:133). But in what he calls modern society, the supermarket metaphor of "preference" as well as tangible exit options for religious dissenters guaranteed in liberal-democratic states, erodes kinship structures that could in the past be counted on more unreflectively. In the 1960s, Berger did literally speak of a "severe rupture" (1990 [1967]:134), an image that Bakker Kellogg finds distorting (although she does not engage with his thought). However, the logic of this rupture is not that all citizens will automatically lose their religion or be unable to maintain traditional kinship structures, but that succeeding in doing so will from now on be much more work—what was once part of the "background" must now justify itself also on the level of the "foreground," the sociological level in which "choice" is to be located (Berger 2014:6–7). This situation further escalates the phenomenon of religious pluralism itself, rather than resulting in a linear decline of all religions (that unlikely outcome is not wholly excluded, depending on context). In Berger's own words, "the *possibility* of change is introduced into the situation once and for all" (1990 [1967]:146). Certainly, Syriac Orthodox may still use locally contingent resources to maintain and form traditional religion-kinship structures to the best of their ability. Change is not sociologically necessary in any ultimate sense, but it is a possibility that no group can escape in a situation of modern, religious pluralism.

It is not hard to imagine that a young woman belonging to the Syriac Orthodox in quiet but diverse cities like Enschede and Hengelo decides to move to the exciting *Randstad*, the conurbation that is the political and economic heart of the country. As the saying goes, in Berger's German as well as in Dutch, *stadslucht maakt vrij* (city air makes free). There, in Amsterdam or Rotterdam, one cannot help but be influenced by an even greater variety of religious and nonreligious others, next to working opportunities, ethnicities, sexualities, and so on. The pluralistic

situation, however, does not always result in loss, since it can likewise energize some to take on the challenge of practicing desired or approved versions of their faith in a modern context. Notwithstanding positive pious energies, combined with the possibility of change, the believer is often confronted with a great anxiety, the feeling of not living up to one's creed (Beekers 2015; Beekers and Kloos 2018). Seen from this perspective, that of a constant threat of religious failure, the idea of perforation is related to Berger's notion that pluralism causes the weakening of religious "plausibility structures," affecting the beliefs and practices that are required for a group's maintenance of a shared world (1990 [1967]:45).

The idea of perforation thus also resembles Taylor's analysis of "mutual fragilization" (e.g., 2007:303–304, 532, 595). In the secular age, perforation of ethnoreligious ties affects not only one's own group but always also relations toward others. Harsh measures can therefore be vital to a minority group, for example, formal and informal excommunication, as in the case of one of Bakker Kellogg's informants who lamented the loss of a relative to an evangelical Protestant church: "her aunt might as well have died. No one spoke to or of her, and Elena had not seen her in years." Of course, such preservation strategies are nothing new under the sun. Yirmiyahu Yovel describes how Amsterdam's Jewish community excommunicated Spinoza in the seventeenth century not only because they found his ideas heretical but also because they were driven by a desire to reconstruct and stabilize a long persecuted ethnoreligious community in diaspora. To do so, families were required to live in religious enclaves in an otherwise cosmopolitan city of *burghers*, not unlike the orthodox Jews described by Berger in present-day Brooklyn (Berger 2014:10; Yovel 1992). But today, in contrast, it is much easier to take a subway to Manhattan or to hop on a life-changing epistemic ride on the "World Wild Web."

The infrastructure of modern religious pluralism thus makes it easier to view religious faith as optional and as distinct from ethnicity, as we see with young Muslims in the Netherlands who criticize their parents for not separating traditional culture from Islam. For now, we have read that the Syriac Orthodox Christians' desire to preserve "our village, our church, our sound" can partially resist majoritarian assumptions about how refugees, migrants, and their children should live as Dutch citizens. The unnuanced idea of a necessary and sharp break with the past, not only with religion or tradition but even with one's family, is then not an idea propounded by contemporary anthropological and sociological theorizations of the modern condition, but a peculiar way of thinking experienced as "normal" in society, especially by the Baby Boomer generation that initiated the sharp decline in religiosity in the Netherlands since the 1960s. Nevertheless, in spite of the resilience described by Bakker Kellogg, for fragile religious communities, the construction and management of a village is a task not to be underestimated. "The trouble is," as author Dina Nayeri writes in her novel *Refuge*, "that the best people, the vital ones, often chafe against the part they're assigned and the whole thing crumbles down" (2017:301).