

# Recycling the Christian past

## The heritagization of Christianity and national identity in the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>

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Across Northern Europe, Christianity is on the decline. Churches, especially in the Protestant and Catholic mainstream, are losing members on a massive scale. In the Netherlands, currently just 49% of the population claims to be part of a religious group (of which 24% are Catholic, 15% Protestant, 5% Muslim, 6% other).<sup>2</sup> In public debates, this decreasing affiliation with Christianity is often taken as an index of increasing personal freedom and a successful liberation from the straitjackets imposed by religion. This stance is mobilized not only by Dutch people looking back to the Christian past, but also vis-à-vis religious others – especially Muslims (Veer). The Netherlands have a plural religious environment, which includes Christians (many with a migration background and embracing Pentecostalism), Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Winti-worshippers, as well as all sorts of non-affiliated spiritual seekers. The achieved freedom *from* religion cherished by those who left Christianity behind often stands in tension with the legal freedom *of* religion guaranteed by the constitution.<sup>3</sup> This tension indicates a clash between a “culturalist secularism”, according to which religion in general and Islam in particular should withdraw from the public domain, and a “constitutional secularism” that protects the rights of Dutch Christians, Muslims, and members of other faiths (Tamimi Arab; Verkaaik and Tamimi Arab) to live their religion, albeit within the frame set by law. For, of course, in a democratic and open society a secular constitution does not intend the abolishment of religion, but its regulation and protection by the state within a legal frame.

Much research on religious plurality in European societies focuses on how the arrival of relatively recent newcomers in the religious field is regulated and debated, identifying the specific regimes for ordering how a religion is present in a particular society (and how not). The fact that the accommodation of religious newcomers implies frequent frictions – especially, but not only with regard to, Islam – indicates that the established modes of regulating, protecting, and “tolerating” religion on the part of the secular state and in society are challenged.<sup>4</sup> As noted, secularism may be profiled in a “culturalist” manner that ventures a dismissal of religion as backward and seeks to ban it from the public domain, or may be taken in legal, “constitutional” terms. These positions are negotiated in the

political arena, where decisions are taken with regard to the space granted to the public manifestation of various religious groups.

In public debates, (urban) policy making, and scholarly research, much attention is paid to material items and related practices and ideas associated with the presence of Muslims. However, the heightened attention paid to issues regarding the regulation of the public presence of Islam – regarding the construction of mosques, the sounding of the *azan*, the wearing of niqab, halal slaughter, and the like – in mainstream public debates should not make us overlook the massive presence of the material culture of Christianity that bears such a strong historical imprint on public spaces. The decline of Christianity as a lived religion has remarkable material implications, with churches being closed at rapid speed, and objects from Christian material culture being set afloat, ending up, via second-hand shops and flea markets, as fancy items in restaurants and shops or as creative materials in the sphere of art (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

In this process Christianity is being refashioned as cultural – or even religious – heritage and thus as a valuable resource to be remembered. This also plays out in frequent references to Judeo-Christian tradition as the cradle of Dutch – and European – culture, that is often recurred to in nativist formulations of identity and citizenship.

The guiding proposition of this chapter is that a focus on the material dimension of de-churching and the debates ensued by it offers a productive empirical and conceptual entry point into the transforming dynamics of religion in the public domain and its perceived malaise. Spotlighting various ways of dealing with the material remains of de-churching against the horizon of the broader plural religious environment is helpful to grasp current dynamics. I approach these remains as religious media that once were part of authorized mediation practices through which Christians link up with and render present the divine. Following the trajectory of these religious media into non-Christian, secular settings and modes of use offers insight into the ways in which these media are eventually reframed as art or cultural heritage and may even be made to mediate a shared past that is taken as the roots of a Dutch national or European identity.

Sketching the main concerns of a material approach to religion as a practice of mediation, in the first part I address the materialization of the sacred in things, spaces, and bodies. While the second part focuses on Christian material media such as abandoned buildings and (sacred) objects (including images), some of which are becoming reframed as cultural heritage, the third part turns to the exhibition *Verspijkerd & Verzaagd* (*Spiked and Sawn*) which showcased the re-use of devotional images in the frame of art (Noordbrabants Museum 18 February–5 June 2017). Fourth, by way of conclusion, I discuss how insights gained into the social dynamics of religious plurality from the angle of recycled Christian materials and the “heritagization” of Christianity relate to the “culturalization” of citizenship (Tonkens and Duyvendak). The central point I want to make is that, by turning attention to the material dimension of de-churching, the process of secularization appears as tangible and concrete.



Figure 4.1 Crosses (photo by Jojada Verrips)

### **Material media of Christianity**

Emphasizing the materiality of religion may seem obvious, but it is not. The modern understanding of religion that arose in the 19th century in the midst of debates about (scientific and dialectical) materialism, and the theories and methods employed, bore the legacy of idealism and were inflected with a mentalist bias that befitted a bourgeois Protestant post-enlightenment religiosity and its anti-Catholic polemics. Religion was understood as the domain of meaning making par excellence, and its material and corporeal dimensions were held to be secondary



Figure 4.2 Crucifix at Van Dijk & Co, Amsterdam (photo by Jojada Verrips)

and thus were largely neglected. This legacy is the target of the material turn in the study of religion that started to develop since the early 21st century (Bräunlein; Houtman and Meyer; Morgan, *Religion and Material Culture*; Vásquez). It is intended as a provocative corrective of the relative neglect of religious material culture and corporeality in favor of belief:

A materialized study of religion begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion,

but rather inextricable from it [. . .]. Religion is not a pure realm of ideas or beliefs that are translated into material signs. The material study of religion avoids reifications that identify ideas or dogmas or individual people as the irreducible core of religion. Instead, a religion is inseparable from a matrix or network of components that consist of people, divine beings or forces, institutions, things, places.

(Meyer et al., “Materializing Religion” 209)

Pursuing this line, one of the main concerns of the material turn is to approach religion as a mundane endeavor, emphasizing, in the footsteps of Feuerbach, that it is humans who *do* religion with their bodies, senses, and objects. The point is to take religion seriously as a social-cultural phenomenon that “matters” in the world through gathering people around a shared imaginary, which points beyond the here-and-now, and yet is present in the world by materializing through all sorts of material items which are perceived, sensed, acted with, and thought about. So, religion refers to human ideas and practices with regard to another, professed, non-empirical sphere, a “beyond”, which can only be rendered tangible through mediation, and thus requires sensing, experiencing bodies and material harbingers of transcendence.

Acknowledging the material and corporeal dimension of religion is not only important for the study of how people live and practice Islam, Christianity, and other religious traditions, but also for the study of de-churching. The bias towards belief informed not only modern understandings of religion but also of secularization. As a result, research on the decline of religion in modern societies in the framework of secularization is marked by a relative disinterest in the Christian material culture that became superfluous with, and yet remained present in the wake of, de-churching. By contrast, a material approach to Christianity as a declining religious tradition asks explicitly about this material culture. One important question is what happens to this material culture when it is no longer part and parcel of the “networks and components” of lived religion, but is rendered superfluous and set afloat in secular settings. To what extent does the former religious use of artifacts as buildings, objects and images still cling to their present use? To what extent have they been stripped of their initial role as mediators of the divine and mediate something else?

As noted, I understand religion as a practice of mediation between humans and a professed unseen, to which multiple material media (understood in a broad sense that includes buildings, objects, images, and so on) are intrinsic (Meyer *Mediation and the Genesis*; Meyer “Material Mediations”). Embedded in authorized practices of mediation, such artefacts may become profiled as portals that open up to a professed unseen and that convey a sense of divine presence and transcendence to their beholders and users. Of course, these artifacts do not do so by themselves, but in the frame of particular human-object entanglements that are foregrounded and lived within a religious tradition. While being physical (and often human-made) objects in the ordinary world, they are framed and experienced as extra-ordinary

and sacred.<sup>5</sup> Treated by believers with care and caution, and by obeying certain restrictions, they are all the more prone to be desecrated by outsiders involuntarily or through aggressive acts.

The buildings, objects, and images that become obsolete in the wake of de-churching come from Protestantism and Catholicism. In a theological sense, for Protestants buildings and objects are not considered as sacred and the important role attributed to sacred images and relics in Catholic religious life is looked at with suspicion. Divine presence is held to not thrive in such material forms. Nonetheless also in everyday Protestant practice, buildings and objects are experienced as special and are cared for (Kuyk; Pons-de Wit et al.; Smit 2009), and this implies that certain uses of formerly religious buildings and objects are considered inappropriate and unworthy. Catholicism espouses an explicit theology of mediation, according to which churches and certain objects and images are vested with sacrality through authorizing rites and performances, turning them into media that operate as harbingers of the divine (Butticci 2016). This sacrality appears to become so much engrained with such buildings and objects that it cannot easily be shed off again. What happens when a religious medium such as a Catholic church is closed down and demolished, or gets another purpose, and the objects it contained are to move out? What happens when these objects lose their function as authorized religious media, and become what Irene Stengs calls “sacred waste” (Stengs), that is, objects that no longer have a religious use, and yet are difficult to be simply discarded into the secular realm?

## Repurposing Christian matters

According to a recent research by the Christian newspaper *Trouw* (25–06–2019),<sup>6</sup> one-fifth of all still existing church buildings in the Netherlands (about 1400 out of roughly 6900) are no longer in use as churches, serving as apartments, offices, restaurants, and for various cultural and commercial purposes. Of the 1200 churches built before 1800 (most of them listed), about 20% have been given new purposes, while 25% of the 4600 churches built between 1800 and 1970 were repurposed.<sup>7</sup> Of the 1,000 churches built since the 1970s, the time in which pronounced de-churching set in, a very small percentage (3%) has been repurposed. For the future, many more churches are expected to close down. *Trouw* refers to the much-discussed forecast by the Cardinal Van Eijk, that in 2028 only 15 of the 280 churches in the archdiocese of Utrecht will remain in use. The ecumenical CIO-K (Interkerkelijk contact in overheidszaken – Kerkgebouwen) also expects a significant reduction (between 30% and 80%) of churches in use for religious purposes. The closing down of churches has become a broadly debated matter of concern in Dutch society. Interestingly, this does not only worry the congregations and parishes that are no longer able to maintain their buildings due to membership decline. Also, people who do not regard themselves as Christians appreciate church buildings and have emotional bonds with them (Beekers, “De waarde”). They do not like these churches to be closed, let alone be destroyed.



The closing down of churches due to declining church membership and lack of funds for maintenance raises many questions about the possibility to retain at least some of them as cultural heritage. These questions are addressed by several organizations and initiatives on the provincial, national, and European level that deal with Christianity as cultural heritage for the future.<sup>8</sup> As part of a general investment of 325 million € in the maintenance of cultural heritage in 2018, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science allocates funds to the restoration of monumental churches and reserves 13 million € to support cities and churches to develop a vision for the future of church buildings.<sup>9</sup> Asked whether the support for maintenance of church buildings would not rather be a concern for a Christian party, Minister van Engelshoven (OCW, and herself a member of the liberal party D66) stated:

Churches play a huge role with regard to heritage in relation to the recognizability of the landscape. When you go for a walk, and I do so very much, you often walk from church to church. It's a matter of combining investment in art and culture and in heritage. If you know where you come from in our time, and you have this firmly under your feet, as a society you are able to cope better with innovation.

(NRC 12–03–2018, translation BM)<sup>10</sup>

These initiatives partake in the articulation of a new heritage regime, through which Christianity is recast as cultural heritage that matters for broader society (see also Astor et al.). This has implications for the proverbial separation of state and church, that de facto never fully materialized, but is an important trope in public debates, especially in stances favoring culturalist secularism. May the state at all interfere in and support – and if so under what conditions – the maintenance of defunct churches? Addressing the collaboration of state and churches in the preservation of religious heritage in the OCW report *Bouwstenen voor een kerkenvisie* (2019), the theologian (and mayor of Woudrichem) Frank Petter<sup>11</sup> aptly points out that the secularization thesis failed to acknowledge the public importance of church buildings. He argues that the decline of Christian belief and institutions does not imply a decline of value bestowed on these buildings as religious heritage. So, interestingly, the use of heritage as a secular frame for bestowing value on (certain) churches restates the importance of Christianity outside of the religious sphere and legitimates sustained collaboration of church and state in their upkeep. Religious media that pointed towards the presence of God are now recast as secular media that convey a sense of a shared Christian past.

While cleavages between various strands of Christianity – between Protestants and Catholics, and within Protestantism – shaped the religious domain in the Netherlands, yielding the pillarization of society (roughly between 1880–1970) along religious convictions and world-views, the re-framing of Christian material

culture – and even Christianity as a whole – as heritage transcends these differences in favor of an appreciation of churches as monumental witnesses of the nation's once Christian past.<sup>12</sup> In this vein, the Museum Catharijneconvent (Utrecht) has launched the project Dutch Museum Churches (containing fourteen monumental churches and two synagogues). Showcased as national milestones and tourist attractions, these iconic buildings and their “hidden treasures” are profiled as a spectacular cultural-historical phenomenon expected to appeal to a broad, de-churched audience.<sup>13</sup>

The revaluation of Christian buildings and objects as religious heritage implies their desacralization and secularization. This is a highly intriguing process through which the material manifestations of Christianity become a valuable resource material for (re)imaging national identity and the Dutch past. The fact that these manifestations are often referred to as *religious* heritage does not imply that they retain a religious function; instead the qualifier “religious” indicates that Christianity itself is subject to heritagization and culturalization. Such a process may appear as relatively smooth and easy from a distance – and it is intriguing to see how many non- and post-Christians are prepared to embrace it – but for the former Christian users of these buildings and objects, the process may be quite painful and complex, as they may be found to have become “matter out of place” (Douglas) in new secular settings.

In his ethnographic research on the repurposing of churches Daan Beekers studied the closing and transformation of three Catholic churches: the St Ignatiuskerk (Rozengracht, Amsterdam) that was transformed into the Fatih mosque in the 1980s, the Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van Altijddurende Bijstand kerk alias Chassékerk (Baarsjes, Amsterdam) that became a dance studio, hotel, and grand café (1998–2017), and the Jacobuskerk (Zuilen, Utrecht) that was sold to an evangelical church (2018) (Beekers, “The Matter of Home”). The transformation of the St Ignatiuskerk into a mosque involved a swapping of the interior space, in that the initial spatial axis from the main entrance to the altar at the rear had to be reverted, so as to make it possible to pray (and place the qibla) in the direction of Mecca. As for this reconfiguration, the main entrance had to be closed and the space under the portal was rented out to shops; the mosque became virtually invisible to passers-by (Beekers, “Rode burcht”; Beekers and Tamimi Arab, “Dreams of an Iconic Mosque”). Following the dismantling of the church interior of the Chassé church in detail, Beekers (“The Matter of Home”) noticed that the diocese of Haarlem-Amsterdam, under whose authority this church fell, required that items such as a mosaic showing John the Baptist and Mary, or the signs of crosses on containers for holy water, were no longer visible. The mosaic was covered with plaster, while the signs of the cross were redesigned beyond recognition. Clearly, unmovable artifacts that indexed a Catholic sacred were not to be unleashed into the new secularized space. This betrays a concern on the part of Catholic authorities to prevent the display of religious objects in a potentially inappropriate, worldly setting after the formal deconsecration of a church building



by decree and rite. With the increasing closing of churches, a protocol was developed that stipulates how the movable and immovable church objects are to be handled (Cuperus). In the case of the Jacobuskerk, objects were removed and classified according to this protocol, and eventually a heavy tabernacle, that was initially to be sent to Sri Lanka but proved impossible to be moved, was destroyed so as to prevent potential sacrilegious use (Cuperus 40–41). These examples show that, certainly with regard to Catholicism, the material implications of de-churching, which involve the deconsecration of churches and their interiors, generate anxieties about the proper use and abuse of once devotional objects especially among believers.<sup>14</sup>

While the closing down of churches occurs in a structured and controlled manner in line with detailed protocols (albeit, for obvious reasons, more elaborate with regard to Catholic churches than to churches in the Protestant spectrum),<sup>15</sup> the cleaning up of the houses of deceased parents and grandparents puts in circulation images of Jesus, Mary, and Saints in all sorts of venues. Second-hand stores and flea-markets feature a – to some extent surreal – display of images of Jesus and Mary (Figures 4.3 and 4.4).

Placed in the strange company of other, mundane objects, these images and figures appear to me as excellent examples of “matter out of place”. They invite us to trace “the Afterlife and continued effects of past patterns of interpretation, image forms and codes as they are discussed in current image practices and debates around them” (Weigel, “Blasphemy and Infamy” 25). Before being offered as second-hand goods, they were part of a devotional practice common in Dutch Catholicism (Margry, *Sakrale materielle Kultur*; Margry, “Societal Change”). They are now leftovers from *het rijke roomsche leven* (the rich Roman-Catholic life) that was gradually abandoned, not only because people were leaving the church, but also due to transformations of Catholic devotional practices in the aftermath of Vaticanum II and subsequent aesthetic shifts in the 1960s (Palm; De Wal).

The Catholic images and figures that are now floating in secular environments belong to the category of devotional images that emerged in the 13th century and were characterized by a new affective quality (Weigel, *Grammatologie* 412). Images and sculptures of Mary and the suffering Christ invited beholders to feel empathy and operated as religious media through which the nearby-ness and presence of the divine could be felt. As art historian Klaus Krüger explains, such images were liminal objects that mark and transcend a boundary between the here-and-now in which the image is situated as a physical picture and a beyond to which the depiction points. The 16th-century Calvinist *beeldenstorm* in the aftermath of the Reformation attacked such images and sculptures and cleansed many churches and houses of their presence and replaced them by a strong focus on the word and privileged the medium of the book. However, with the counterreformation and the baroque, images of Mary and Jesus made a big return in Catholic devotional practice, culminating in the devotion of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary (Morgan *The Sacred Heart of Jesus*).



Figure 4.3 Jesus with tropical helmet and type-writer, Van Dijk & Co, Amsterdam (photo by Jojada Verrips)

As pointed out by David Morgan, believers' engagement with such images may well be captured by the notion of visual piety. Developed since the late Middle Ages, visual piety was

that cultural operation whereby images were transformed into something revelatory. The act of identifying one's sensations with those of a depiction relied on the body as an organ of knowing, the visceral bridge between self



Figure 4.4 Pieta, Van Dijk & Co, Amsterdam (photo by Jojada Verrips)

and other. Empathy was the visceral instrument of such knowledge. The knowledge the devout sought was the body's knowledge, expressed in the language of enfleshed sensations. The body of the believer became a powerful organ of religious knowing in late medieval visual piety.

*(Visual Piety 66)*

And, as Morgan also asserts, “empathy remained the principal emotional framework in the devotional lives of many Christians in Europe and North America from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century” (*Visual Piety* 66). As his book shows, repercussions of this stance can be found in forms of visual piety up to our time. Much more could be said about the role of images in (Dutch) Catholic devotional practices, but my point here is to highlight their current appearance in secular settings as “matter out of place.” As “sacred waste”, they are now objects severed from the earlier “network of components” in which they functioned. Their capacity to mediate between the here-and-now and a beyond and to induce empathy is curtailed as they are put adrift and appear in new environments, in which their mediatory role is subverted and yet, as we will see, still haunting their appearance. What are they made to mediate in the secular frames of art and heritage?

### Recycling devotional images

To understand the array of responses these discarded images evoke, I want to turn to the exhibition *Verspijkerd and verzaagd* held in the Noordbrabants Museum ‘s-Hertogenbosch in the spring of 2017. This exhibition was devoted to the “recycling” of devotional images in the sphere of art after they were deemed to be of no use anymore in Catholic churches and homes.<sup>16</sup> The museum director Charles de Mooij stated poignantly:

The exhibition is not a parade of derision and blasphemy; on the contrary, it shows on the basis of reused devotional images how our view of Christianity changed over the past 50 years. Many Dutch will still know and recognize the original devotional images, and even though the time is ripe for this exhibition, we are aware that such an overview may still evoke divergent emotions. At the same time, it appears that our Christian heritage here is retained in other ways than we are usually inclined to think.

(Voorwoord 7, translation BM)<sup>17</sup>

This is an intriguing statement for it hints at the already mentioned process of churches closing down and their dismantling, which sets free an excess of objects. “The time is ripe for this exhibition”, because in the wake of the steady process of de-churching Christian material culture is secularized, and in the case of Catholicism, even officially deconsecrated (and potentially desecrated through illicit use). Once secularization is no longer mistaken as a mere process of decline in church membership and attendance, discarded Christian material culture becomes an intriguing focus for research. Objects of Catholic provenance, in particular, may still evoke memories of their devotional use, and trigger a sense of them still containing a “sacred residue” (Beekers, “Sacred Residue” and “De waarde”).

The shift of once sacred objects into the sphere of art is not necessarily smooth. Msg de Korte, bishop of Den Bosch, points out in an interview with Wout Herfkens and Joost de Wal the exhibition catalogue:

If you believe that God came to us in Jesus, such an image [as displayed in the exhibition, BM] can easily be interpreted as blasphemous by believers. But Christians will not quickly throw bombs. No, you need not be afraid that the museum will be attacked.

(Verspijkerd en verzaagd 31, translation BM)<sup>18</sup>

He explains that both theology and art are entitled to create salubrious confusion, but there is also non-salubrious confusion – this is what can be called “blasphemy, albeit from the perspective of the believers” (30). According to the Bishop, those who know less about theology and art may be more inclined to charge an artwork as blasphemous than those who know about the difference between art and religion. His statement fits in with an overall trend on the part of Catholic and Protestant churches to embrace art and to reposition themselves in the current highly secular context of Northern Europe (Oliphant). His explicit acknowledgement that some art works may be perceived as blasphemous and that people might feel offended is a significant statement made, I think, against the backdrop of all recent commotion regarding representations of the prophet Muhammad in cartoons and other images taken to be offensive and subsequent violence (Kruse et al.). The exhibition offers visitors the opportunity to take an enlightened position, so as to mark their difference from religious fundamentalists: the capacity to tolerate offensive art as a litmus test for secular, tolerant citizenship.

The exhibition has two parts. One features artist Jacques Frenken, who made art works from Catholic materials abandoned and discarded in the mid-sixties, when many Catholic churches were emptied of sculptures made from cheap plaster in the aftermath of Vaticanum II and all sorts of images of Mary, Jesus, and the saints were up for grabs. At that time the process of de-churching started to gain momentum, but the main reason for discarding such images was an aesthetic innovation geared to get rid of cheap plaster images. Frenken split the statues with a chain saw and put them together in new ways, which appeared as scandalous to many (Figure 4.5).<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, he engaged with de-churching in a very material manner, working with its tangible stuff:

My children will understand later the times we live in now because of my works. How we fought for something new when we had to do away with our old values. How we, with empty hands, didn't know how to do any better than to dig out the old and re-present it in another, clearer and more flagrant form.

(Frenken 1967, quoted on a panel in the exhibition)



Figure 4.5 *Spijkermadonna-I* (1967) by Jacques Frenken ('s-Hertogenbosch in 1929)

I understand his art making as an act of iconoclasm that does not simply smash and destroy, but seeks to re-organize existing materials into a new iconicity in the sphere of (pop) art. While Frenken's art yielded many protests in the 1960s – it was dismissed as blasphemy and he as “anti-Christ” – there was no court case.

The second part of the exhibition is contemporary, showing that the recycling of images goes on and on, making use of the devotional objects put in circulation more recently.<sup>20</sup> The transformation of devotional images into artworks requires



acts of cutting up and image breaking in the process of art making. The recycling of discarded religious images into art does not efface their history, but encapsulates it in what Sigrid Weigel calls a “dialectics of secularization” (“Blasphemy and Infamy”). She uses this notion in relation to caricatures (such as the Muhammad cartoons) charged with being blasphemous by certain (Muslim) beholders:

Whereas (seemingly) secular means [...] are for example used in a caricature that attacks the abuse of religion for the purpose of terrorism, their rhetoric and image practices respond in some way to the supernatural meaning ascribed to their target within the criticized ideology. Thus they inherit their effects partly from the imaginistic economy of pre-semiotic or pre-modern symbolic orders, namely from cult images that are perceived as more than just representations of what they depict, but rather embodiments of transcendent or sublime ideas.

(“Blasphemy and Infamy” 1)

So in order to render the reuse of a devotional image in the secular frame of art meaningful, it is necessary to affirm the past capacity of the image to act as a religious medium and render present what it depicts. Weigel’s notion of the dialectic of secularization helps us understand how artworks that recycle a devotional image owe their appeal to both remembering *and* surpassing its religious nature of mediating divine presence through a presumed likeness cherished by previous beholders.

Of course, experiences and opinions about the exhibition differed widely. I take the visitors’ book as a resource that reveals a broad set of responses to the dialectic of secularization at play here, which may index positions taken with regard to the religious past across Dutch society.<sup>21</sup> Many visitors appreciate the exhibition – *leuk* (nice) – or are indifferent. Others see the items displayed as sacrilege (“heiligschennis”), thereby expressing a disgust which is, I think, grounded in a fundamental cleavage between what they see on display and their embodied attitude towards and use of such images in devotional settings (Verrips). The art works employ images of Jesus and Mary but resituate them outside of a familiar Catholic frame. For certain beholders, these molested images mobilize a dear, embodied memory of Catholic piety which is scandalized. Memory is triggered, but by the same token stained: a perceived dissonance arises between what is sacred for the beholders and the desacralizing, transgressive manner in which it is treated by the artists.<sup>22</sup>

The visitors’ book also contains references to pious family members – fathers and grandmothers who are no longer alive – who are imagined to have found these artworks unbearable. Someone also jokingly writes: “Now I know what to do with my (grand)mother’s stuff”. Next to responses from, I presume, visitors with a Catholic family background or Catholic believers, one also finds typical Protestant responses. For instance, someone stated that, in the face of these art works, which may easily be experienced as sacrilegious, it becomes obvious why

God does not want to be represented via images. Clearly, repercussions of how Protestantism and Catholicism organized and still organize sensational profiles and stances to images are still at work, having an afterlife just as the once sacred images and figures.

Importantly, some visitors ask whether such sacrilegious art would be possible to make and exhibit with regard to Muhammed and think that “Islam” or Muslims could learn something from this exhibition. Is there here a potential to better understand the sentiments behind protests by Muslims against the so-called Muhammad caricatures? Or is the message rather that Muslims should tolerate the reframing of what is sacred to them as secular art, just as Dutch Catholics – and for that matter, Christians in general – are expected to do? The comments along this line hark back to Bishop de Korte’s statement that even Christians who find the exhibition blasphemous would not throw bombs (as presumably “fundamentalist” Muslims might do in his view); given its prominence on the blurb of the catalogue, this statement provides a central frame of the exhibition. The exhibition and the discourse evoked by it speak to broader concerns about the representation of Islam in the public sphere that are, in turn, linked to Catholic – and perhaps also Protestant – sensitivities and past and present charges of blasphemy from Christians standpoints. Enduring the exhibition may be taken as a test for one’s civic capacity to tolerate potentially blasphemous dealings with religious images in a non-religious domain, even if one feels hurt. So, these recycled images from a Catholic past are situated in a field in which, on the one hand, their value and sacrality is defended by believers and post-believers against the danger of being squandered, while, on the other hand, the acceptance that artists are free to blaspheme is emphasized as a distinctive characteristic of Western society.

This occurs in a setting in which Christianity is increasingly subject to heritagization, which implies that taking Christianity as cultural heritage is not a question of being a believer but of recognizing it as a cherished resource that is preserved in the secular frames of art and heritage and serves to mediate a Dutch and even European identity. One artwork shown in *Verspijkerd en Verzaagd* was also exhibited as part of the art project *Stations of the Cross* (2019), which included various locations, including churches and museums. This was *De Laatste Dagen* (The final days) by Jan Tregot,<sup>23</sup> which was shown in the museum Ons Lieve Heer op Zolder (Amsterdam) (Figure 4.6).

It is described as follows: “The final days by Jan Tregot is one of the most gruesome Depositions ever made, featuring a discarded *corpus Christi* from an abandoned Catholic church. In the sculpture, the artist refers to scenes of religiously motivated violence in today’s media”. The artist wrote the following accompanying text:

Has the decline of the Church in Dutch society blinded us to the reality that despite all the changes we still live in a Christian culture? Can we still count on that culture to fulfill today’s need for spirituality or are we more afraid of the strain that religious tensions will place on our society?



Figure 4.6 Jan Tregot *De Laatste Dagen*, 2016/2017, Arduin, plaster, maple wood, jatoba wood, stainless steel, leather, oil paint. 90.5 × 88 × 60 cm. Painted by Erik van de Beek. Foto Anton Houtappels

For the artist, the decline of the (Catholic) church, through which a work as this becomes available for artistic recreation, does not undo the rootedness of the Netherlands in Christianity. His statement that “we still live in a Christian culture” contrasts markedly with the voices criticizing the repressive character of Christianity and seeking to be liberated from it that got dominant in the sphere of arts and in wider society in the Netherlands in the aftermath of the 1960s. Echoing a current process of reframing Christianity as culture (see also Beekers, “The Matter of Home”), Tregot envelopes his art piece in the heritage frame. I do not know to what extent he wants to embrace the idea of a Christian culture. Whatever this may mean for him, the idea of Dutch and European culture as being rooted in Christianity or in a Judeo-Christian tradition, is often put forward in debates about Dutch cultural identity, in ways that exclude Muslims from cultural citizenship.

## Heritagization of Christianity, culturalization of citizenship, and national identity

A recent report (Beugelsdijk et al.) by the Dutch Social Cultureel Planbureau (SCP) that regularly publishes research about societal issues notes that a concern about national identity is on the rise against the horizon of globalization, Europeanization, and immigration.<sup>24</sup> The researchers found that 41% of their 5,000 respondents think that there is a Dutch identity, and 42% that it exists in some respects, while 6% insist that it does not exist. But what might Dutch identity mean? The report identifies two positions as ideal type profiles: one position emphasizes the role of symbols and traditions in making people belong to the Dutch nation and sees these symbols and traditions as a source of national pride; from this angle the state is expected to take responsibility to protect Dutch identity and traditions. The second position emphasizes civic freedom, such as the right to demonstrate and the freedom of religion, and expects the state to protect democracy, civic freedom, and the inclusiveness of the rule of law (Beugelsdijk et al. 16). In real life, many respondents are undecided and may adopt one or the other position depending on the issue at stake in (usually heavily polarized) public debates.

The first position resonates immediately with the notion of the “culturalization of citizenship” put forward by Eveline Tonkens and Jan Willem Duyvendak to spotlight the increasing recurrence to “a static and essentialized understanding of culture as well as an idea of citizenship that has culture at its core” (2). This implies that even when immigrants achieve legal rights and have successfully passed a citizenship exam, they may not be considered full citizens because they do not adhere to certain norms and values, practices and ideas associated with Dutchness (*Geschiere*). The culturalization of citizenship implies that cultural identity, rather than civil rights, features as prime marker of citizenship. It is important to stress also that the second position may lend itself to a culturalization of citizenship, for instance by identifying secular values about sexual freedom, female emancipation, gender diversity – or, as noted, the preparedness to tolerate offensive images – as prime markers of Dutch civic identity and employing these markers in (potentially intolerant) stances vis-à-vis persons with conservative attitudes grounded in religion (and especially Islam, see Kešić and Duyvendak; Mepschen et al.).

It is telling that according to the SCP report Christianity – as well as religion in general – is barely regarded as a resource for national cohesion (*verbondenheid*), whereas Islam is regarded as a potential threat for national identity. This stance is, obviously, most strongly articulated by parties at the right of the political spectrum, but shared more broadly across society (Hart 32). So while de-churching entails the waning influence of Christianity, making the Catholic church and Protestant churches less and less operate as “*volkskerken*” (e.g., churches which are distributed widely across the nation), Islam, though only pertaining to a small minority of 5% (or less),<sup>25</sup> is strongly present in the public domain. The debate

about and search for national identity, as well as all the recent research conducted thereon, arguably is a response to the insecurities and anxieties triggered – and profiled and exploited not only by right wing parties but more broadly across the whole political spectrum – by the presence of Muslims. But also the articulate voices of other (post)migrants from areas formerly colonized by the Dutch who call for more inclusive forms of citizenship, the rethinking of national canons of art and history, and the decolonization of Dutch culture contribute to a sense of malaise on the part of many native Dutch who find that “the Netherlands are not the Netherlands anymore”.

In this situation, heritage emerges as a new potential resource for a sense of national cohesion, and is supported accordingly by the current Dutch government (at the expense of subsidies for the arts) (Kulberg; Frijhof). But with increasing plurality, what is cherished as – and upgraded to – the status of national heritage (and what not) is subject to contestation; this plays out in protests against figures as Black Pete, as well as in calls to remember the dark sides of Dutch colonialism and transatlantic slave trade, and to include the heritage of minorities in a broadened national canon. I situate the reappraisal of the material remains of de-churching as religious heritage against this backdrop.<sup>26</sup> We are witnessing a process of the heritagization of Christianity through which it is recast as a root of national – and European – culture. Van Houwelingen states that “it seems that Christian culture and traditions are anchored more deeply in Dutch identity than the belief in the Christian doctrines” (19, translation BM)<sup>27</sup> – a phenomenon characterized as “cultuurchristendom” (e.g., Christianity not as religion, but as culture). In this secular form, it can be acknowledged by anyone irrespective of his or her belief in God and sympathy for Christianity as religion.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, this heritagization lends itself to slipping into exclusivist culturalizations of citizenship. Ernst van den Hemel has pointed out that current right-wing populist parties (including the PVV in the Netherlands run by Geert Wilders) “stress a culturalized notion of religion, in which one is born” (261). They do not advocate a straightforward culturalist secularism that rejects religion as a threat to freedom and liberal values (as pointed out in the introduction). Rather, they embrace a post-secular “culturalized notion of religious-secular citizenship” (Hemel 262) that emphasizes the Judeo-Christian roots of Dutch culture and society.

The marked articulation of this post-secular nationalist stance that “hijacks religion” (Marzouki et al.) is certainly not the only way in which people engage with the reframing of Christianity as heritage. As the examples of the responses to *Verspijkerd* and *Verzaagd* show, people may feel disturbed about potentially offensive ways of dealing with elements of Christian heritage but at the same time take their capacity to endure this as a sign of tolerant citizenship that distinguishes them from intolerant (presumably Muslim) others. This is a form of culturalized citizenship that stresses civic virtues such as tolerance, which is to be mobilized – even with pain – with regard to offensive ways in which artists deal with Christian heritage. Yet others – active Christians – may feel irritated by the very idea of turning Christianity into a matter of the past that serves for little more

than being preserved as heritage and who, rather than bothering about the remains of de-churching, believe in God as a living source for responsible citizenship and care for the weak.

The – so far little researched – nexus of the heritagization of Christianity and the culturalization of citizenship entails many possible stances, and it is up to further research to spot how religion, culture, and citizenship are related in the Netherlands and elsewhere (see Meyer and van de Port). What I hope to have conveyed is that a focus on Christian material culture in general, and buildings and objects that become superfluous and end up on the garbage belt of secularization in particular, helps to achieve new insights into this nexus. As material media of the divine become sacred waste yet retain some sacred residue, they are recycled quite effectively to mediate secular narratives about culture, tradition, and national identity in the Netherlands.

## Notes

- 1 Grounded in anthropology and religious studies, so far my ethnographic work has focused on religion in Ghana, where Christianity is on the rise, and indigenous religious traditions are re-framed as heritage and folklore. This is my first work about Christianity in the Netherlands, where it is in serious decline and has become heritagized. Heartfelt thanks to Daan Beekers, Rosemarie Buikema, Irene Stengs, Pooyan Tamimi Arab, and Jojada Verrips for stimulating, encouraging, and learned comments on previous versions of this chapter. I also thank Simone Jobig for her logistic support. The research conducted for it took place in the framework of the “Religious Matters in an Entangled World” research program ([www.religiousmatters.nl](http://www.religiousmatters.nl)), which I could set up thanks to the Spinoza Prize from the Netherlands Organization of Scientific Research (NWO), the Academy Professor Prize of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), and the overall support of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University.
- 2 See: Report Centraal Bureau voor de statistiek (CBS), 22-10-2018: [www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2018/43/meer-dan-de-helft-nederlanders-niet-religieus](http://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2018/43/meer-dan-de-helft-nederlanders-niet-religieus)
- 3 See Articles 6 ([www.denederlandsegrondwet.nl/id/vkugbqvdswwv/artikel\\_6\\_vrijheid\\_van\\_godsdienst\\_en](http://www.denederlandsegrondwet.nl/id/vkugbqvdswwv/artikel_6_vrijheid_van_godsdienst_en)) and 23 ([www.denederlandsegrondwet.nl/id/vh8lnhrouwy3/artikel\\_23\\_grondwet](http://www.denederlandsegrondwet.nl/id/vh8lnhrouwy3/artikel_23_grondwet)) of the Dutch constitution.
- 4 In the period between roughly 1880 and 1970, religion – and by implication humanist and socialist world-views – were regulated through a model of pillarization that formed the basis for allocation of access to broadcasting media and the right to establish schools and universities for religious and world-view-based organizations. The fact that pillarization entailed marked cleavages between various religious-cultural groups was increasingly criticized since the 1950s. This system had more or less eroded at the time of the arrival of significant groups of Muslim migrants. While previously they might have been able to develop another pillar, the fact that they arrived at the time of de-churching implied that they faced increasing allergies against religion, as well as the celebration of new secular freedoms with regard to, especially, female emancipation and sexuality.
- 5 Elsewhere, I have elaborated the notion of “sensational form” to indicate the authorized modes in which practices of mediation take place and shape the ways in which believers relate to and experience particular religious objects (Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence* 26–28).



- 6 See: [www.trouw.nl/religie-filosofie/een-op-de-vijf-nederlandse-kerken-is-geen-kerk-meer-b033cc0f/?utm\\_source=link&utm\\_medium=app&utm\\_campaign=shared%20content&utm\\_content=free](http://www.trouw.nl/religie-filosofie/een-op-de-vijf-nederlandse-kerken-is-geen-kerk-meer-b033cc0f/?utm_source=link&utm_medium=app&utm_campaign=shared%20content&utm_content=free)
- 7 The article also states that about 2,000 churches built in the period 1800–1970 were destroyed. According to a report by the Rijksdienst voor Cultureel Erfgoed (2011), approximately 1340 churches closed down in the period between 1975 and 2011 (the year of the appearance of the report), of which about 340 churches were destroyed. Combining this with the figure of 2,000 destroyed churches given by *Trouw* would imply that the destruction of the bulk of 1660 churches falls in the period 1800–1975 and after 2011. See [www.cultureelerfgoed.nl/](http://www.cultureelerfgoed.nl/).
- 8 See for instance the following websites: [www.toekomstreligieuserfgoed.nl/](http://www.toekomstreligieuserfgoed.nl/); [www.frh-europe.org/about-frh/statement/](http://www.frh-europe.org/about-frh/statement/).
- 9 See the following websites: [www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2018/06/22/nieuw-leven-voor-erfgoed](http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2018/06/22/nieuw-leven-voor-erfgoed), [www.toekomstreligieuserfgoed.nl/sites/default/files/views\\_file-browser/bouwstenen\\_voor\\_een\\_kerkenvisie.pdf](http://www.toekomstreligieuserfgoed.nl/sites/default/files/views_file-browser/bouwstenen_voor_een_kerkenvisie.pdf)
- 10 Original:
 

Kerken spelen in het erfgoed een enorme rol als het gaat om de herkenbaarheid van het landschap. Als je wandelt, en dat doe ik veel, loop je vaak van kerk naar kerk. Het gaat om de combinatie van investeren in kunst en cultuur en in erfgoed. Als je in deze tijd weet waar je vandaan komt, als je dat stevig onder je voeten hebt, kun je als samenleving ook meer vernieuwing aan.

[www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2018/03/12/extra-geld-voor-cultuur-gaat-naar-talent-educatie-en-kerken-a1595337](http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2018/03/12/extra-geld-voor-cultuur-gaat-naar-talent-educatie-en-kerken-a1595337)
- 11 Reprinted as “bijlage 13: scheiding Kerk en staat, in *Bouwstenen voor een kerkenvisie*, OCW 2019”.
- 12 This fits into a broader understanding of cultural heritage as a binding force. Minister Engelshoven (OCW):
 

In een tijd waarin tegenstellingen lijken toe te nemen, is de verbindende kracht van erfgoed een niet te onderschatten waarde. Daarom vind ik het van belang dat zo veel mogelijk mensen, van jongs af aan, het erfgoed beleven en erbij betrokken zijn.

[www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2018/06/22/nieuw-leven-voor-erfgoed](http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2018/06/22/nieuw-leven-voor-erfgoed)
- 13 See: [www.grootstemuseum.nl/en/](http://www.grootstemuseum.nl/en/)
- 14 Interestingly, the current, controlled deconsecration of Catholic churches shares certain features with the Calvinist iconoclasm and cleansing of churches in the 16th century, in that objects may be destroyed. The main difference is that the current deconsecration occurs under the authority of the Catholic church, which seeks to prevent the possibility of a sacrilegious use of sacred objects in a secular setting. An instance of a “self-imposed iconoclasm” (as Beekers argues in the online exhibition *The Urban Sacred*: [www.urban-sacred.org/amsterdam-chasse/](http://www.urban-sacred.org/amsterdam-chasse/)).
- 15 See [www.cultureelerfgoed.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2011/01/01/een-toekomst-voor-kerken-een-handreiking-voor-het-herbestemmen-van-vrijkomende-kerkgebouwen](http://www.cultureelerfgoed.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2011/01/01/een-toekomst-voor-kerken-een-handreiking-voor-het-herbestemmen-van-vrijkomende-kerkgebouwen) for the stances of the stances of the Catholic Church (73) and Protestant Church Netherlands (75).
- 16 See the press release, including many images: [www.hetnoordbrabantsmuseum.nl/topmenu/pers/beeldmateriaal/2017/persdossier-verspijkerd-en-verzaagd/](http://www.hetnoordbrabantsmuseum.nl/topmenu/pers/beeldmateriaal/2017/persdossier-verspijkerd-en-verzaagd/)
- 17 Original:
 

De tentoonstelling is geen parade van spot en blasfemie, integendeel, maar laat aan de hand van de hergebruikte heiligenbeelden zien hoe onze kijk op het christendom

in de laatste halve eeuw is veranderd. Veel Nederlands zullen de oorspronkelijke heiligenbeelden nog kennen of herkennen, en hoewel onze tijd rijp is voor deze tentoonstelling, zijn we ons ervan bewust dat z'n overzicht nog altijd wisselende emoties kan oproepen. Tegelijkertijd heeft het er alle schijn van, dat ons christelijk erfgoed hier langs heel andere wegen behouden blijft dan we gewoonlijk geneigd zijn te denken.

18 Original:

Als je gelooft dat God in Jezus bij ons gekomen is, kan zo'n beeld gemakkelijk blasfemisch worden geïnterpreteerd. Al zullen christenen niet zo snel bommen werpen. Nee, je hoeft niet bang te zijn dat het museum wordt aangevallen.

- 19 This film by Gilles Frenken (2017) shows Jacques Frenken at work (between 1964 and 1969, the timespan in which he used devotional images for pop art) in his atelier: [www.gillesfrenken.nl/film/verspijkerd-en-verzaagd](http://www.gillesfrenken.nl/film/verspijkerd-en-verzaagd)
- 20 See also the work of Moniek Westerman with discarded devotional images: [www.trouw.nl/nieuws/nieuwe-kunst-maken-van-afgedankte-jezusbeelden~b9fc792e/](http://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/nieuwe-kunst-maken-van-afgedankte-jezusbeelden~b9fc792e/)
- 21 I am grateful to the Noordbrabants Museum for allowing me to make use of the visitors' book.
- 22 Similarly, deconsecrated church buildings also evoke painful memories for their previous users (Beekers, "De waarde"; Beekers, "The Matter of Home").
- 23 [www.jantregot.eu/en\\_GB/sculpturen/](http://www.jantregot.eu/en_GB/sculpturen/)
- 24 The report "Denkend aan Nederland" is based on a survey among 5,000 Dutch, as well as interviews and focus groups. For the full report see: [www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle\\_publicaties/Publicaties\\_2019/Denkend\\_aan\\_Nederland](http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2019/Denkend_aan_Nederland)
- 25 Less, because not all those designated as Muslims may de facto consider themselves as actively embracing Islam.
- 26 This process receives surprisingly little attention in the SCP report, and in Chapter 12 (on heritage) religious heritage is mentioned in passing only (Kulberg 6).
- 27 Original: "De christelijke cultuur en tradities lijken dus dieper in de Nederlandse identiteit verankerd te zijn dan het geloof in de christelijke leerstellingen".
- 28 This idea was outlined by Sybrand Buma, at the time leader of the CDA, in his HJ Schoo-lezing held on 1 Sept. 2017: [www.cda.nl/actueel/nieuws/sybrand-buma-houdt-hj-schoo-lezing-2017/](http://www.cda.nl/actueel/nieuws/sybrand-buma-houdt-hj-schoo-lezing-2017/).

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