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# The Revival of Religion in Dutch Journalism

## A Case Study in a Multireligious Society<sup>1</sup>

In the debate on the revival of religion during the last decade of the twentieth century in the Netherlands, the meaning of religion transformed to meet the personal needs and preferences of the individual (the micro-level), held a prominent place. Traditional religion, originating from institutions like churches and recognizable through institutions (the meso-level), received less attention. At this moment, the stress is moving towards the macro-level: towards the social functions of religions, for example in view of the integration process of migrants in Dutch society. That is why it is not anymore primarily about whether Christian thought of Roman Catholics and Protestants has its place in secularized Dutch society and whether it will continue to leave its mark on Dutch culture and mentality. Theologians, ecclesiastical historians and sociologists of religion have investigated, since the sixties of the previous century, the period of depillarization, the structural changes and mental processes that are relevant to Christian churches and Christians.

Since the last few years, however, journalists, government officials and politicians are expected to take religious developments and their various forms into account. It is no longer exclusively or mainly about the meaning of Judaeo-Christian religions, but also about the role of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism in our multireligious society. Religion being high on the political agenda is particularly linked to the rise of fundamentalist Islam. In theocratic thinking, the God of the theocrats is the head of state and public administration. Diametrically opposed to that are the atheists: they prefer banning any religious influence on public life. Between both extremes, a middle course, adapted to current developments, needs to be found in many European countries, among which, without a doubt, the Netherlands. And that is exactly what the larger part of the

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current debate on religion is about in books, newsmagazines and newspapers. (Borgman et al., 2006; De Rijk, 2006; Top et al., 2006)

In this contribution, the new phase in thinking about religion as a divisive element and as a stabilizing factor is mapped out. A compilation of studies published by the end of 2006, significantly entitled “*Geloven in het publieke domein*” (“Believing in the public domain”), forms a temporary end point. This book came about on the initiative of the Scientific Council for Government Policy: the “*Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid*” (WRR), which has been an influential counselling body of the government since 1972. Immediately after its publication, the debate on the meaning of religion, spirituality and meaning making (“*Sinngebung*”) to social cohesion and social engagement was opened. The central point was whether the government can choose to realize certain policy goals by means of a certain religious philosophy (“*Weltanschauung*”) without harming the separation of Church and State. The formation, in February 2007, of the fourth, this time moderate left-wing, cabinet led by Jan Peter Balkenende guarantees the continuation of the public debate on religion, civil religion and several ethical issues. The WRR is expected to make policy propositions to the government in the course of 2007.

### **Choice for the Netherlands as an example in Europe**

The following question is the “*Leitmotiv*” throughout this contribution: Where does the fascination with religion in the Netherlands come from? This way it may become clear that there is no monocausal explanation for it. A process, a kind of recognizable undercurrent, should be borne in mind rather than a particular event. Whatever the case may be, the Netherlands woke up from the dream of being a successful example of a multicultural society. “The murders, in 2002 and 2004 respectively, of the taboo-trampling politician Pim Fortuyn and the Islam-bashing movie director Theo van Gogh have left the Dutch bereft of certainties,” the “*International Herald Tribune*” wrote. (Cohen, 2005:1) Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somalian-born member of Parliament, wrote the script for van Gogh’s 11-minute movie “*Submission*” (2004), an account of the sexual humiliations of a young Muslim woman and her resultant religious doubts. Surrounded by her armed security detail and living in a secret residence, she criticized Islam’s failure to adapt, until she left the Netherlands in 2006. These shocking events of the last years have caused a nightmare that still keeps the Netherlands in its grip. The image, cherished by the media, of the Netherlands as a successful multicultural society turned out to be

founded on a myth. What nobody believed to be possible was politically approved: within a couple of years, the asylum policy showed exceptionally harsh characteristics. The fourth Balkenende cabinet indeed has the intention to find a more humane solution for certain groups of asylum seekers, but how this intention will be turned into actions remains to be seen. After the Fortuyn murder, journalists asked themselves whether they had not taken up a politically correct position too easily. Hadn't they moved too much towards the dominant political range of thought and failed in asking critical questions to civil servants, political advisers and politicians, thus sounded the ethical issue.

The question in this contribution is whether we can conclude that opinion journalism in the Netherlands is raising a broad range of topics in the field of faith and religion and refers for this not uncommonly to atheism. And if this is the case, is that attention to be valued as unbiased, broadly familiarizing and showing knowledge of religious and ecclesiastical matters? In short: Does the reporting and the opinion forming in the field of churches and religions meet the quality standards that apply to the rest of the editorial content, taking the "common" media logic into account? The following national quality newspapers have been examined: "NRC Handelsblad" (liberal, free-thinking), "de Volkskrant" (Catholic until 1965, progressive-leftist nowadays) and "Trouw" (Protestant-Christian until 1974, more generally Christian nowadays). The months December 2006 to February 2007 were chosen, sometimes with an example from the earlier months of 2006. As can be expected on the basis of the editorial and the reading public, the content of the three selected newspapers indicates subtle differences as to the news selection process and the tenor of editorials, columns and articles on the opinion pages.

The hypothesis is that, whenever an analysis of content concentrates on religious, ecclesiastical and ethical issues, differences between the three titles come to light with great certainty. The same goes for domestic policy. We can assume that in the field of sports or financial and business journalism, the heterogeneous elements come to the fore less prominently. As far as the selected journals are concerned, attention has been paid to similarities as well as differences in the selection of news, background information and opinion formation. The concepts of gatekeeping, agenda setting, media logic, framing and media hype has been used for the theoretical framework of the content analysis. In the fourth quarter of 2006, "Trouw" had a circulation of 111.775 copies, "de Volkskrant" of 287.168 and "NRC Handelsblad" of 244.131. "Trouw" and "de Volkskrant" being morning newspapers and "NRC Handelsblad" an afternoon newspaper is irrelevant in this case. "Trouw" is the only paper of the three analyzed dailies that is published in tabloid format, so a full-page article in this

paper gets a different meaning. The results of three months of selective and critical reading are completed with examples and comments for each point of view. Examination into the content of the three journals is preceded by a number of paragraphs in which the cultural and social context of what happens in the triangle of journalism, churches and religions is investigated closer. The interaction between churches and their messages on the one hand and the cultural content offered by the mass media on the other hand isn't new (De Vries & Weber, 2001).

A characteristic example for countries like the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and Switzerland is the "pillarization" ("Versäulung") these countries have known in the final quarter of the nineteenth and half of the twentieth century, or longer. At that time, there was a kind of osmosis, a fusion of journalism and the church-dominated culture to which personal lifestyle was made subordinate as well. Depillarization on the one hand led to the revival of a Catholicism freed from constraint and obedience, which in the sixties culminated in the second Vatican Council (1962-1965). (Goddijn et al., 1999; Hemels, 1999a) On the other hand, a large degree of indifference towards religion manifested itself simultaneously, even though this attitude was substantiated by cultural relativism or praised as tolerance. From this historical point of view, a new period began in the years before and after 2000, in which journalism faces religions, churches and various forms of spirituality in an unbiased manner. This leads to an open discussion of the meaning of religion in the public domain. This way religion and spirituality go beyond the micro-level of individualistic experience and perception, because these social phenomena are represented and discussed in the mass media at the macro-level of society. For religious denominations and other organizations active in the field of philosophy of life and meaning making at the meso-level, this development offers again a chance to enter into conversation with each other on the same level and with the government on the macro-level.

Moreover in such a new situation, the free-thinkers (more and more referred to as the "secularists"), sceptic and even averse towards the experience of religion outside of the strictly personal private life, have all chances to ventilate their ideas and views - for example as a counter-weight against a cultural-religious revival. The supporters of the strictest separation of Church and State and of keeping religion from the public domain are to be found in these political parties: "Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie" (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy) (VVD, liberal-conservative and liberal-free-thinking), "D66" (a small party of progressive democrats) and "GroenLinks" (GreenLeft, the leftist liberal environment party). Unclear is the position of the "Socialistische

Partij" (Socialist Party, SP), which gained a large electoral profit during the latest elections for the Dutch Parliament, the "Tweede Kamer", in autumn 2006, but stayed away from the coalition government, formed in February 2007.

### **Journalists as gatekeepers of church leaders**

The internet opens up new perspectives for communication among believers and between believers and the outside world - without the intervention of journalists. This is a point scored for a country like the Netherlands and increasingly for other European countries, too. Depillarization in the Netherlands combined with the process of concentration of the press announced the beginning of the end of the social-democratic, communist and confessional (Catholic and Christian) daily newspapers. (Hemels, 1999b; *idem* 2005)

The Catholic Broadcasting Corporation KRO has been able to maintain its position in the public broadcasting service, even if this is partly due to the protection offered over the years to non-commercial broadcasting corporations by legislation in the field of public broadcasting. Of all broadcasting corporations of public broadcasting service depending on its number of members, the "Vereniging Katholieke Radio Omroep" (KRO Society) has the largest amount of supporters except one, with nearly half a million members for the moment. Only the "Vereniging Evangelische Omroep" (EO Society, Evangelical Broadcasting Corporation) has a few members more. Statutory and as regards programmes, the KRO has a close association with Catholic tradition and Catholic heritage. Both in the Netherlands and Belgium, religious denominations and spiritual movements also have limited access to the public broadcasting service.

Because the Netherlands do not have church taxes, religious denominations are completely dependent on the voluntary financial contributions of those who consider themselves a church member and are willing to make donations. As a consequence, churches are only capable of organizing modest activities in the sphere of communication management, issue management, public relations, lobbying and journalism. The available budgets lead to a very limited number of employed communication professionals being connected to churches, certainly when their number is compared to those of the business world, the government at various levels and non-governmental organizations in the social field. This situation leads to churches and religious movements being strongly dependent of the benevolence of the mass media's professionals. Because these journalists' and producers' independence has to be respected, church leaders mostly just have access to the mass media if the gatekeepers want it.

Antonio Marujo, journalist of Portuguese magazine “Público”, who won the John Templeton Award for religion journalism for the second time in 2006, held it against the church leaders that they still see the media as extensions of the pulpit or think that they should see it that way. The “Religion Writer of the Year 2006” added, according to a report in the “de Verdieping” section of the October 27, 2006, issue of “Trouw”, that the church leaders didn’t know much about journalistic independence either. The “Religion Writer of the Year 2006” award is presented by the Conference of European Churches to journalists who carefully, impartially and ecumenically write about religion in secular media. It would adorn this Conference if it started an investigation in the member countries of the European Union into the truthfulness of the diagnosis its prize winner of 2006 made. When Pieter van der Ven of “Trouw” received the same award in 2000, he wished the media and the churches a “mature” relationship. There is still work to be done – also in the Netherlands – from two angles: how is the perception of churches and religions in the mass media (Uden, 2004) and vice versa: how do churches and the theologies of various religions think about the mass media (De Feijter, 2007). A second recommendation to the Conference concerns a critical evaluation of the newsworthiness (“Nachrichtenwert”) of churches. In 2006, German magazine “Communicatio Socialis” devoted a special issue to the newsworthiness of the Catholic church. For other countries, too, one would like to have more insight into this topic, before making statements about it. (Klenk et al., 2006)

Under the influence of depillarization (“Entsäulung”), such a characteristic process to a number of European countries during the second part of the twentieth century, the willingness among journalists to defend their “own” churches rightly or wrongly against criticism of outsiders or to spare them negative coverage has strongly decreased, if not completely disappeared. (Hemels, 1999b) Churches cannot claim a unique position anymore under the influence of the process of secularization and neither expect leniency whenever church officials are blamed for something. On the contrary: there is a risk of journalists cherishing hard feelings against the religion which they were brought up with in their parental homes. Moreover, journalists who are not familiar with Christianity may be ignorant or prejudiced about Christian churches and church leaders. For Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism, the same may of course apply, although ignorance will play a greater role in this case, as long as editorial staffs do not have multireligious compositions. The same reservation should be made as long as insufficient attention is paid to religions in general or as long as the Judaeo-Christian tradition exclusively comes up for discussion during the training of journalists-to-be. With an eye to multicultural

journalism, pleadings to adapt the trainings have been made for ages. (Shahid, 2005; *idem*, 2006) These pleadings can be repeated for multi-religious journalism.

### **A torrent of magazines about meaning making**

The decline of involvement with religious denominations, which is proven by a decreasing number of churchgoers, does not mean that all Dutchmen have become less religious: for half of them, religion and giving sense to things still play a part. The secularization thesis connected with the disappearing of religion is being brought up for discussion more and more frequently. However, the transcendent is not exclusively part and parcel of the traditional churches anymore: the media play a role as well. (Hemels, 2003) Religious-philosophically and religious-psychologically seen, the Scientific Council for Government Policy “Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid” (WRR) distinguished a new group in the field of religion and meaning making: the “not-organized spirituals”. To the first new-age-like grouping, which has its place outside of the church, meditation, reiki, alternative medicine, particular forms of magic, yoga or wellness play a role. Faith in reincarnation, acting on instinct, orientation to harmony and love: these and other characteristics determine the attitude and lifestyle of the spiritually conscious. They make up for – just like the Christians – a quarter of the Dutch population. The WRR puts the rise of the new group of “spirituals” in the context of the lifestyle society and the diminishing involvement of the younger generation with churches. At the same time, young people’s sensitivity to religious ideas is said to increase. (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2006)

Increasing interest in a particular type of spiritual magazine also indicates a need for meaning. “Happinez”, developed in 2003 by magazine maker Inez van Oord (Veltman, 2006), is published six times a year and meanwhile has a circulation of 155.000 copies in 2007. “Bres”, that started in 1971, is a Gnostic-esoteric orientated magazine and has a circulation of 9.000 copies. Monthly “Onkruid” has been around since 1978 as a “practical magazine about spirituality, greenery and social commitment”. It has a circulation of 30.000 copies. “Koorddanser”, which has a circulation of 11.000 copies, is recommended as a monthly for personal growth and spirituality. “Ode”, established in 1995, is a “social newsmagazine about people and ideas that change the world”. Spirituality is only one of the topics of this magazine, which is published on a monthly basis in Dutch, English and Portuguese. At the end of 2006, the Dutch variant had a circulation of 30.000 copies. The international

variant in English, which appears in the United States since 2003, has a circulation of 75.000 copies. This is only a selection of the flourishing Dutch market of spiritual and meaning making magazines for a general readership. (Van Delft & Kwant, 2006: 202-203)

## Do religious outsiders make up a high-risk group?

The “booming business” of so many magazines in the field of spirituality and opinion magazines with attention for meaning making shows a connection with developments in Dutch society in the religious and religious-philosophical sphere. The Scientific Council for Government Policy WRR counts the Muslims and other non-Christian believers, the Christians and the not-organized spirituals as religious groupings which are “embedded” in Dutch society. About a fifth of the Dutch population are counted as “spiritual seekers”. They are occasional churchgoers who don’t take the Bible literally and pray now and then, but also cling to “para-cultural phenomena”, like faith healing and fortune telling. Among them, there is a large belief in miracles and heaven. According to the Social and Cultural Office of Plans (“Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau”, SCP) a third of the Dutch people thinks miracles are possible and a quarter trusts in the existence of heaven. According to 37 per cent of the Dutch, death is not the end. Convincing atheists are by far a minority in the Netherlands (17 per cent), while 52 per cent of the population thinks a God does exist. (Becker & De Hart, 2006)

Furthermore, the WRR distinguishes non-religious humanists and non-religious moderate humanists. Of these people, only a small part is a member of the League of Humanists (“Humanistisch Verbond”), which counts about 10.000 members. Living with humanist ideals, their attitude to life implies involvement with people elsewhere in the world. They show community spirit and empathy, be it that the moderate humanist Dutch-men score less than average for each of the three mentioned values. The non-religious humanists who show more than average involvement with people elsewhere in the world, community spirit and empathy, constitute a smaller group of humanists.

Profiled as problematic by the WRR is the newly discovered group of “non-religious non-humanists”, that is neither religious nor humanist. They don’t confess to a faith and they are not to compare with humanists with regard to their values. They obtain low scores for values connected with the attitude to life. This comes forward through the fact that they aren’t prepared to empathize with other people. Furthermore, they hardly get involved with their neighbourhood, they don’t show involvement with

people from other continents, they hardly get in contact with anyone and they only have a small inclination to perform. Commercial television channels are their window to the world. One out of five Dutchmen belongs to this group of "outsiders". This fact was given lots of attention in the Dutch media at the end of 2006 and at the beginning of 2007. (Dros, 2006a) According to the WRR, the government should make an effort to put this large group of malcontents on the track of meaning giving, in order to develop a better "citizenship style" for themselves.

The WRR publication was right up the alley of the editorial staffs of "Trouw", "de Volkskrant" and "NRC Handelsblad": they eagerly published about the government's attitude towards the role of churches and religion in society. "Trouw" proved to be the most sensitive to particular ideas in the WRR studies, as was to be expected on the basis of its editorial starting points. However, it also generously offered space for readers' letters and opinion contributions that were critical of government support to initiatives with an eye to religious revival. "NRC Handelsblad" remained loyal to its free-thinking-liberal character by giving critical comments on the WRR analysis. Supporters of a strict or an even stricter separation of Church and State could enlarge upon their point of view on the opinion pages. One of its own editors, Marc Chavannes, sounded a warning siren on the basis of his many years' experience with "religiously justified 'we-are-right'-politics" in the United States. Anyone in the Netherlands who suggests that without public religiosity there is the threat of a moral vacuum should firmly pinch their arm. "It's fashionably playing with fire to ask for space in the public domain for vaguely defined religiosity," wrote Chavannes (2007). "De Volkskrant", which in recent years has chosen a more independent position in relation to the social-democratic Labour Party "Partij van de Arbeid" (PvdA), pursued a balanced middle course. Whoever finds their bearings through the paper or electronic edition of these titles gets a good and varied image of the forming of an opinion towards a topic that has excessively dominated the discussion in the media.

It remains to be seen whether the WRR will clear the road in expected policy recommendations for a "religion without God", a civil religion, next to existing religions. The idea that religion can also function as a social binder is indeed not new, but had fallen into oblivion, until the mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen, drew attention to it again in 2004 and 2006. He sees the solution more in building bridges than barriers and argues, like Tony Blair and George W. Bush, that a perversion of Islam, not Islam itself, threatens the West. But nobody, even in laid-back Amsterdam, is now indifferent to immigration and Islam as a European religion. (Cohen, 2005: 1) However, understanding the Christian, the Islamic or an other

religion and its rituals in general and liturgy in particular demands a learning process. New developments with regard to non-institutional religious practices are arising. Apparently, there is a market for mourning rituals that are offered without involvement of the churches and detached from any religion, providing that the one who gives the service is paid. As a matter of fact, the religious and spiritual culture nowadays is a very dynamic one.

### Processes of news selection and media logic

For news items and opinions in the sphere of church and religion one could ask the following classic sub questions of Harold D. Lasswell: "Who says what? Through which medium and to whom (with which target group in view)?" If one adds "where?", "when?" and "why?" to Lasswell's formula, one can start looking for an answer to the final sub question of Lasswell "with what effect?" (McQuail, 2005: 63, 69, 97 and 458). Journalism should be placed in the context of time and place and journalists can be questioned about their motives to publish a news item, a comment or an interview. If it concerns a church event or office holder and a religious subject, one may assume the editors expect some interest from their readers in church and religious matters. Because of the process of depillarization, the question of the identity and editorial formula of the medium in which similar topics are published, is important too: newspapers, journals, opinion weeklies and (other) magazines changed front during the last decades.

Looking back on a development of a few decades, one can conclude that we are dealing with a process of homogenization: readers are prepared to take note of more universally selected items and opinions in the same newspaper, or they just don't read what doesn't fascinate them. At the same time, most of the papers serve their subscribers and other readers who now distinguish themselves through differences in political and religious-philosophical or religious-psychological views, less than during the period of pillarization. Both the editorial content and the readership shows the inclination of becoming an amalgam. Yet there are boundaries to the process of homogenization: newspapers, for example, published under different names could become interchangeable because of that.

For church-religious news coverage and opinion formation, the "rules" of media logic apply, next to habits in news selection, be it in another way than for e.g. political communication. The process of media logic promotes the origin of a public playing field in which in this case church

leaders, journalists and civilians (unconsciously) encourage each other to react to incidents. This way, public opinion is nourished, which in its turn influences the political process. Starting from the media logic, the concepts of gatekeeping and agenda setting should be taken into account. If all of the media go along in the hunt of a media hype for news on a particular matter, one can wonder whether the gatekeeping mechanism sufficiently works. Then there will still be talk of framing, so we gave attention to this phenomenon as well.

The ability to explain and understand particular working methods in journalism haven't developed equally well in all circles. Ecclesiastical office holders, despite the foundation of information services since the second Vatican Council, still have the inclination to protect the field of attention of church and religion they were entrusted with as forbidden territory for journalists, especially when there's trouble. A difference with the position of other protagonists, like many captains of industry and perhaps even all politicians, is that most church leaders aren't easily tempted to court the journalists, the public and the social elite. The continuous process of news selection and the way chosen subjects are presented render a more or less notable importance to events, issues, problems and people in the news. The fact that famous persons have a greater chance to make the news is also a consequence of the criteria that play a role in news selection. Politicians, television personalities and show business VIPs are more eager to come and to stay in the news than bishops and other prelates.

### **A look inside three national quality newspapers**

Remarkably enough, no interviews with church leaders were published in the examined newspapers at the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007. The text of a speech that Cardinal Simonis (2006) held at a book presentation was published in "Trouw". In its January 2, 2007, edition, "de Volkskrant" published an interview with Roman Catholic priest Sjaak de Boer from an internationally oriented parish in The Hague in the seventh episode of the series "De pastor en zijn kudde" ("The Pastor and his herd"). The accompanying photograph displays the priest in ceremonial vestments. They are of a purple colour, so the picture must be taken during Advent. The caption could have explained the reason for the colour purple, but that may be a bit too much to ask of a journalist in the year 2007 (Kester, 2007). The book, put together by editors of "Trouw" (Drayer & Van der Ven, 2006), which was the cause of Cardinal Simonis' plea, was discussed elaborately in "de Volkskrant" by a non-religious

person, “secularist” Paul Cliteur (2007). On December 23 and 30, 2006, “de Volkskrant” spent full-page articles on the current debate on the position of religion and meaning in the public domain, written by Zondervrop (2006), Zeeman (2006) and Tromp (2007) respectively.

Gerrit de Kruijf (2006), professor of Christian ethics on behalf of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands at the University of Leiden, published a contribution to the debate on meaning in the December 22, 2006, edition of “Trouw”: the government, as a representative of the people shouldn’t be seeking its refuge in meaning as a moralist or meaning giving worker. De Kruijf also rejected the thought of civil religion, which is gaining influence in the circles of the christian political party “Christen-Democratisch Appèl” (“Christian-Democratic Appeal”, CDA). It has to do with “a vague religious emotional framework around rituals and symbols”, beloved among Americans, but not acceptable to believers as a common denominator and unattractive to those who aren’t religious or humanist.

Interesting is De Kruijf’s comment in connection with the concept of “meaning making”. It would supposedly suggest emptiness, while Judeao-Christian tradition, on the basis of its faith in the Creation Narrative, posits that life does have a meaning and that believers are always looking for the ever so often hidden meaning of life. Detached from this faith, meaning would count as a construction that is judged on the effect: does it give security or solace and – in the approach of the government – does it keep people in line? On the pretext of “Religion is back on the political stage”, the International School for Humanities and Social Sciences of my own University of Amsterdam, in collaboration with the “US-Europe Public Forum”, organized a series of seven lectures and debates on several aspects of the “Faith and the State” theme ([www.ishss.uva.nl](http://www.ishss.uva.nl) and [www.transatlantictalk.com](http://www.transatlantictalk.com)), in autumn 2006. In this series, the development in the field of religion and politics in the United States was confronted with the challenge Europe is facing at the moment because of the rise of Islam.

Anyway, “Trouw” frequently gives attention to ethical issues and doesn’t shun the more difficult articles. On February 23, 2007, the newspaper published an interview with German ethicist Rainer Erlingen (referred to as the “doctor of ethics” and the “German pope of conscience”) in the “de Verdieping” section. (Koekoek, 2007) On February 28, 2007, “Trouw” started publishing a new series on moral questions, entitled “Moreel instinct” (“Moral instinct”). Perhaps the new opinion magazine “Opinio” will succeed to compete with “Trouw” in the field of journalism on ethics, but for now it remains the newspaper that bridges the gap between ethicists and readers in the most expert yet comprehensible

manner. Because "Opinio"'s editor in chief, Jaffe Vink, edited the "Letter & Geest" ("Letter and Soul") section for years, "Trouw"'s editor in chief dedicated appreciative words to the editor, who hadn't left without any trouble, on September 2, 2006. He wrote namely: "Averse from many journalistic conventions, he published essays on philosophy, religion and culture. He attracted new, self-willed authors to the newspaper and consequently contributed to the breaking of its slightly timid and obedient image. He gave colour, sharpness and depth to the stuffy concept of 'philosophy of life'." (Van Exter, 2006) "Trouw"'s editorial staff decided to orient the content of the section towards the contribution of philosophy of life to the current debate.

"NRC Handelsblad" doesn't have a special "ecclesiastical and spiritual life" editor, but from time to time, editors publish extensive background articles of secondary topicality. For example, when it became clear at the beginning of 2007 that the orthodox Christian Union ("ChristenUnie") would be part of the fourth cabinet of Jan Peter Balkenende, the religious supporters of this party were expertly revealed in a near-full-page article. Apparently, Catholic politicians and voters as well feel attracted to this "party for all Christians", which calls itself "oecumenical". The "ChristenUnie" is best supported among evangelical Christians. The party leaders say they want to speak up for all the weak in society, like asylum seekers and people who are getting an allowance. The party was formed in 2000 through the merger of the Reformed Political Union ("Gereformeerde Politiek Verbond", GPV) and the Reformational Political Federation ("Reformatorisch Politieke Federatie", RPF). The GPV was, since its foundation in 1948, a party that solely consisted of members from the orthodox Reformed denomination. Reformed Churches with the addition "freed" are an orthodox Reformed denomination, which came into existence in 1944 through a secession of the denomination Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, which came into existence in 1892. Even in the period of depillarization, the small orthodox Reformed denomination still behaved like a true pillar, with its own journal ("Nederlands Dagblad"), its own schools and its own political party. The party was straightforward in its foundations, but moderate in political practice.

The RPF came into being in 1975 as a protest party against the free culture of the seventies. It attracted orthodox Reformed people, GPV-sympathizers who didn't belong to the orthodox Reformed people, Baptists and a small group of evangelical Christians. The RPF-members no longer felt at home in old existing Protestant parties, of which two - the "Christelijk-Historische Unie" ("Christian-Historical Union", CHU) and the "Anti-Revolutionaire Partij" ("Anti-Revolutionary Party", ARP) - were involved in a merging process with the "Catholic People Party"

(“Katholieke Volkspartij”, KVP) into the “Christen-Democratisch Appèl” (“Christian-Democratic Appeal”, CDA), which indeed came about in 1980. The RPF developed from the same tendency towards repillarization in orthodox Christian circles like the “Reformatorisch Dagblad” (established in 1972) and the “Evangelical Broadcasting Corporation” (“Vereeniging Evangelische Omroep”, EO). Established in 1967 the EO gained access to the public broadcasting system three years later. In the meantime, of all broadcasting corporations of the public broadcasting service, the EO has the largest number of members (half a million at the moment). Even to highly educated Dutch newspaper readers, the situation on the premises of the churches and religious movements, especially on those of the Protestant denominations, is so complicated that background information is imperative. (Valk, 2007) Particularly the editorial staff of “NRC Handelsblad” is aware of that.

## Gatekeeping in relation to agenda setting

What receives extra attention in the media is on top of the agenda of public discussions (readers of print media, users of news websites, television viewers and radio listeners). Whether and to what extent the concept of agenda setting, which is strongly affiliated to the political domain, applies to church-religious themes also depends on the extent to which people still feel involved, positively or negatively, with church and religion. Because of a decreasing political involvement, a high score on the media agenda neither guarantees a high place on the priority list of subjects that people like to discuss with each other. To distinguish the process of agenda setting from other influencing mechanisms from the media, McQuail (2005: 497, 512-513 and 548) concludes that this concept exclusively relates to what people talk, think and form an opinion about, so not to the direction towards which an opinion, attitude or behaviour develops. At the same time, journalists go along with interest in particular topics that can be supposed or is already perceivable in certain circles, so an interaction arises between the public agenda and the agenda of the media.

If research shows that church and religion are of no importance to the public of the media anymore, this could lead to a spiral of silence among journalists concerning news coverage and opinion formation on church and religion related issues. Hypothetically speaking, the media exercise an influence on the degree of involvement with church and religion in society by credibly giving less or more attention to it, or no attention at all. If the media attention for churches and religions fits in with personal

experiences, the public's values and attitude, then we are dealing with a reinforcement of the effect that goes out from the media. The concept of "gatekeeper", introduced by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), was applied to the news selection of a newspaper by David Manning White in 1950.

Of course, the image of a "lockkeeper" appeals to Dutch people, but communication scientists have eagerly made use of it as well to clarify the process of gatekeeping inside and outside the newsrooms. The result is that gatekeeping is being used as a metaphor to describe various selection processes at the meso-level in the mass media. From there, the step towards the macro-level of the power of the media is easily taken. Then, one can indicate the extent to which mass media more or less generously pay attention to the votes, opinions, views and strivings that are present in society and give access to the public sphere to e.g. dissidents, minorities etc. (McQuail, 2005: 139, 261, 308-311, 527 and 556). In times of pillarization, just to name one example, bishops easily had access to Catholic newspapers, weeklies and journals. They had their verbatim pastoral epistles published in them and didn't have to worry about any critical comment. If there would have been any, the censor, appointed by the local bishop, could have tackled the editor in chief and publisher about it.

The factors that play a role in gatekeeping have been described quite accurately. Except organizational types of factors and types connected to intrinsic genres, social-cultural factors are important as well. If in a particular society the interest in e.g. religions and churches is minimal, the mass media shouldn't be expected to give much attention to that. Events and issues that don't fit into the cultural frame of reference of the intended receivers and have hardly if any consequence for them will be less frequently selected by the gatekeepers and be brought up less elaborately in their mass media. With regard to the "lockkeepers" themselves, the question can be asked whether sufficient knowledge of different religions and denominations is still at hand among journalists. During the period of pillarization, every journalist knew his own pillar; if it had a philosophical-religious character, affinity with the church/religion in question was self-evident. The oecumenicity hadn't made that much progress to always be able to speak of sufficient understanding of and insight into other religions and denominations. Moreover, self-censorship could lead to an uncritical attitude towards the shortcomings in the own religious community. But nowadays the editor for church affairs and spiritual life disappeared from most editorial staffs and a variety of news on churches and religions became divided among various editors: the rise of Islam, with struggling Sunnis and Shias in e.g. Iraq, the visibility of

various other non-Christian religions in Dutch society, the appearance of representatives of Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox and other Christians, the attention for new age and spirituality and the complicated fusion process of Protestant-Christian churches, merging in 2004 into “Protestantse Kerk in Nederland”, the several smaller reformed and free reformed/orthodox churches that left outside of this mega merger, etcetera.

More than before gatekeepers are, influenced by the interest among the public in human touch stories and “VIPs”, not only keen on the “big” news concerning churches and religions anymore. The Pope, cardinals and bishops are not just religious authorities: as persons with familiar ups and downs, they are also interesting for the media. At the beginning of 2007, “de Volkskrant” devoted a two-column report to Cardinal Simons’ running a red light by bike on Christmas day, being hit by a car and on top of that having his wrist broken. According to his spokesperson, the cardinal privately expressed his regret on running the red light. Moreover, while glancing at his casted arm he supposedly told Queen Beatrix at the New Year’s reception of the Royal Family: “Your Majesty, before you stands a fallen bishop and a broken man.” (De Hoog, 2007) The decease of abbé Pierre, the monk of the homeless of Paris who was averse to personality cult, as “de Volkskrant”’s correspondent Obbema (2007) wrote, was extensively in the Dutch media, because his life in service of the poorest evoked that much sympathy. The mentioned correspondent was apparently also surprised at the popularity of French medium Yaguel Didier, who is holding the French elite spellbound. According to Obbema (2006), the French have an extraordinary interest in paranormal phenomena and therefore also in clairvoyants like Didier.

### **Framing as a journalistic presentation technique**

As regards agenda setting, attention is given to the extent to which a news item appears in the mass media, the interest the public shows in it and the connection between both factors. Framing on the other hand relates to subtle differences in the way in which a topic is presented in the news. (McQuail, 2005: 101, 373, 378-380, 464, 525, 511-512 and 555). Journalists can illuminate a subject in their own way by means of a frame by interpreting, evaluating and making recommendations. A distinction can be made between episodic and thematic frames. Episodic frames take the shape of case studies, aimed at a particular event or coverage of core news at the scene of the event. Thematic frames put public subjects in a more general or abstract context or have a character

of background information. An example of an episodic frame is an extensive article of Stéphane Alonso, “NRC Handelsblad”’s correspondent in Warsaw, about the situation of the Catholic Church in Poland as a result of the disclosures about collaboration of priests and (future) bishops with the communist secret service. (Alonso, 2007) A half-page report in “de Volkskrant”, accompanied by four photographs, on a *lieu de mémoire* of convent life in the Netherlands can be considered as an example of a thematic frame. (De Graaf, 2006) At the same time, both examples show that there is no clear boundary between episodic and thematic frames.

To penetrate to the meaning of framing, one should ask oneself the question how the mass media report on a particular subject and what its effect is on the public’s knowledge, attitude and behaviour. The choice of a certain angle in journalism leads to framing. This way, journalists put their readership on track of a particular interpretation of the news. Problems are defined in a particular way, their causes come up for discussion and improvement propositions are made. The use of certain characteristic words or sayings, the choice of certain images, the giving of examples that are typical for a certain situation or the treated phenomenon and the reference to certain sources also belong to the means to realize framing. News items that can follow one another are put in a certain frame and provided with a contextual coherence.

By straying too far from the pure facts or by insufficiently giving them justice, a report of an event may show a bias. By bias one means: the deviation from the event as perceived from the real event. (McQuail, 2005: 329–330, 349, 358–359, 378–380 and 548). An accurate, neutral, balanced and unbiased description of an event may be liable to suffer through one-sided reporting. Another side effect of framing could be that the editorial staff of a newspaper or magazine systematically ignores certain angles of its reporting in its editorials, so that opinion forming is pushed in one direction, while other options are thinkable and plausible as well. By allowing guest authors to contribute their different opinions to the opinion pages, a diversified opinion climate can be stimulated in such a situation. In this way, the public debate can be served by print media journalism.

In the long run, we can presume, framing influences the way in which the public thinks about certain issues and people. Still, one should consider that the way in which journalists frame their news in a professional manner doesn’t have to coincide with the way in which their readers/ audience handle the offered frames. Contributions of readers in newspapers and magazines already indicate that: the other side of an obedient audience is the obstinate audience. One and the same coverage in a particular journal could evoke contradictory reactions among the regular

readers. Exactly in a situation like the one in the Netherlands, characterized by a strong bond between readers and their magazine with a high percentage of subscribers, one should be intent on a conscious choice for a particular magazine with recognizable ideas, opinions, views and judgments which one mostly agrees with as a reader. Because the print media, under the influence of depolarization, deliberately chose to strengthen the variety of opinions within the same title, because different points of view are given a chance when a controversial topic arises. Readers and experts outside of the editorial staff are more and more frequently given the opportunity to express their opinions on a discussion page (open forum). In this way, the readership is not only confronted with different opinions, but also with different frames.

In the field of religious communication it makes a big difference whether an author chooses a religious philosophical and psychological religious point of departure and makes himself known as a Christian, a Muslim, a humanist or an atheist. That's why it is so important to indicate the social positions next to the names of the writers of contributions on the opinion pages. At this point, some more background information on people involved in the public debate would be desirable. One can count on it that editorial staffs are prepared for conflicts of interest concerning third party contributions and that they prefer carefulness when mentioning the ties of an author who contributes to a discussion on a social or religious burning issue. It's not unusual for politicians and captains of industry to have their speeches and opinion contributions written by their ghostwriters and internal or external communication advisors. When a journalist visits a Third World country at the invitation of an organization for development aid and writes a report about it, the reader would like to be well informed about that link.

Readers may have bad experiences with the representatives of a denomination. They may also feel excluded from the religious community, e.g. because they can't remarry before the church after a divorce. With the older generation there were - and sometimes still are - hard feelings towards the Catholic Church because of the sexual morality and the aversion to birth control. Not rarely have they transferred this anti-attitude to their children, so that they easily associate the Church of Rome with narrow-mindedness in the sexual sphere. Selective perception is the consequence and this can easily be capitalized on by means of framing. As regards the Catholic Church: having a hard time admitting mistakes and miscalculations are a factor, at least if one doesn't think in centuries. Thus, "NRC Handelsblad"'s columnist, Marjoleine de Vos, wrote in her capacity of temporary television reviewer to the occasion of the film "The Magdalene sisters" and the documentary "Sex in a cold climate" on the

second Flemish television channel “Canvas”: “But it remains disgusting that the Catholic Church never ever clearly makes a clean sweep, never says: that was very wrong, women and girls also have rights, priests and nuns who behave like that are on the wrong track.” (De Vos, 2007) She does however find that the film and the documentary might as well have been about women in a strict Islamic or strict Jewish environment.

### **Effects of ecclesiastical and religious communication**

On November 3, 2006, “NRC Handelsblad” gave attention to the typically Catholic celebration of “All Souls’ Day”, the remembrance day of the deceased, by among other things publishing a photograph on the front page of children lighting little oil lamps in an Amsterdam cemetery. The text explains that the editor, Karel Berkhout, went looking for artists who had figured out new symbols and rituals to remember the beloved deceased. “With the current secularization, the cemetery is increasingly becoming an open air church”, Berkhout lets one of the interviewees say. (Berkhout, 2006) People would like to know what effect such a newspaper article has on various types of catholics (traditional, progressive, disappointed and other groups), on readers averse to churches but interested in spirituality, collectively keeping alive the memory of the beloved deceased, new rituals etc, or on readers who don’t want to have anything to do with this “hoo-ha”. We still know very little about the effects of religious and spiritual communication, also via the mass media.

Surveying the formulation of a theory in the field of agenda setting, gatekeeping and framing, there are sufficient starting points to think about it. It is however not possible to make strong statements, because there are various kinds of effects: effects in the short or long run, effects on opinion forming, effects on attitude, emotions and behaviour, intended or unintended effects, effects to be valued positively, negatively or neutrally. It comes across as a cliché if one reiterates what is frequently claimed in literature, namely a lack of empirical research. This certainly holds true for ecclesiastical-religious communication however. But even in the sphere of political communication, to which so much more scholarly research has been devoted, there is no agreement on the effects of the three mentioned phenomena.

One can indicate however that more and more attention is asked for the context and the active input of readers, viewers and listeners, who themselves, too, give meaning to the mass medial messages they open their minds to. Critical questions about the role of the researcher are asked as well: is he perhaps ideologically biased or is he after particular

research results in advance? And the journalist: is he after manipulation of his readers, viewers or listeners in a direction he likes by means of framing? Of course this isn't a risk of the last decades, but a lapse of journalism that rarely was the target of criticism during the period of pillarization. Because a frame offers meaning and coherence to news, the procedure denoted to it is an essential part of the journalist's métier. It can be used for the better or the worse by the communicated metacommunicative message. Public discourse would experience a deterioration if journalists shied away from using it in a responsible manner.

Inconvenient for e.g. the Catholic Church is the way in which certain abuses are thematized and placed in a historic perspective. One can think of sexual abuse of minors by priests and bishops or collaboration of office holders with the secret service of communist states "behind the Iron Curtain" before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Whenever a new case comes up, coverage is placed in a wider frame and incidents of the (near) past are fallen back on. Just like when lists of earlier disasters are published in the papers after a plane crash, earlier affairs are summed up when a new case of abuse or espionage arises. The entire Catholic Church and its organization is put in a bad light because of what individuals do. Thematic framing can in one case lead to a reinforcement of the idea that compelled celibacy is an impracticable task which the church can no longer demand of its office holders. In the other case, referring to similar situations and cases of aid to the communist polity can lead to background information in the media in which attention is given to e.g. the efforts of someone like Pope John Paul II to end the regime enforced by Moscow in his native country. This way, other frames of interpretation that live among the public are addressed.

The following seems to be fixed and can serve as a conclusion to the theoretic exploration. Journalists of mass media (newspapers, magazines, television, radio and news websites) select the news from a nearly infinite offer and with that they follow certain criteria of newsworthiness, mostly based on the routine of their professional practice. What is eventually published is the result of the process of gatekeeping. On the basis of a small-scale analysis of the content of the three national daily newspapers "Trouw", "de Volkskrant" and "NRC Handelsblad", one can conclude that subjects in the field of churches and religions are amply receiving attention. The variety in subjects seems to be large. To get coverage as full and varied as possible, "Trouw" had to be followed during the period of research. All three newspapers regularly offer background articles in the field of Islam. News from Vatican City turns out to be selectively and alertly followed for "de Volkskrant" by its correspondent, Michaël Zeeman, who isn't Catholic. From both Zeeman and "NRC Handelsblad"'s

correspondent in the Holy City, Bas Meesters, much less articles were published, of course, during the period of research than at the time of Pope John Paul II's death and the election of his successor, Benedict XVI.

### **Stimulation of the public debate on religion**

An accompanying result of gatekeeping is agenda setting: particular issues become topics of conversation and end up on the public agenda of opinion makers, politicians etc. The agenda of the media needn't necessarily coincide with the public agenda, but topics that are high on both agendas are elucidated more frequently and more extensively. In special cases, a media hype may even arise by overheating of attention in the media and among the public. On Saturdays, "de Volkskrant" offers a section entitled "Het Betoog" ("The Plea"), which is specifically oriented towards opinion forming. In here, e.g. Fouad Laroui (2006) holds a critical discussion about religious fanaticism in Islam in the shape of the so-called "Islamism": politically exploiting Islam.

Laroui, a writer of Moroccan descent, isn't opposed to Islam as a religion, but sees a danger in the fundamentalism of those who are trying to bend the Quran to their will. Through this form of framing, Laroui is promoting the public debate on the excrescences of religious fanaticism of both Muslims and Christians. On January 27, 2007, "de Volkskrant" published the translation of an article on Tariq Ramadan's Islamism, written by Caroline Fourest (2007), a French research journalist who among other things is editor in chief of magazine "ProChoix". The occasion was Ramadan's visiting professorship at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. According to Fourest, Ramadan is a controversial scholar, who merely causes confusion being a 'courteous fundamentalist'. Six months earlier, he had published an article in "de Volkskrant" at the occasion of the Pope's speech in Regensburg. (Ramadan, 2006)

By devoting a series to "The pastor and his herd", "de Volkskrant" presents itself in a way entirely different from being the stimulator of the public debate. This way, e.g. Alie Hoekman can speak out about her work as a mental caretaker that offers comfort in a hospital. By letting this human touch story sink in, a reader might develop a positive opinion about her work, start a conversation with someone about it and change his image of the pastor. (Vermeulen, 2006)

Anyhow, opinion articles with lots of background information contribute more to a balanced forming of an image and opinion than other news items in "de Volkskrant" about the Reverend Ted Haggard who after all

appears to be completely heterosexual (February 7, 2007), nuns of the Greek Orthodox Church who are in debt up to their necks because of the bankruptcy of their home-knitted clothing business (January 31, 2007), the death of forty Shia pilgrims in Iraq who were celebrating the Ashura ritual to commemorate the martyr's death of the Prophet's grandson (January 31, 2007) or the imprisonment of a Romanian pope who had performed an exorcism, thereby killing a Romanian Orthodox nun.

In "NRC Handelsblad"'s lifestyle section "Leven etcetera" ("Life etcetera") of February 24-25, 2007, two reporters, under the pseudonyms of Haest and de Graaf, devoted a report to a visit to an Orthodox Reformed service in the Dutch Bible belt and to a black gospel service in south-eastern Amsterdam, where a lot of foreigners live who in their own way preserve about a hundred small religious communities. They also entered a confessional in the Opus Dei church in the centre of Amsterdam to confess their sins. One would rather expect such caprices in a satirical television programme in the sixties of the previous century. On February 1, 2007, columnist Martin Brill devoted his column in "de Volkskrant" to a book shop in a small Orthodox Christian place that sells dozens of different kinds of Bibles, Christian literature and cd's, under the headline "God". "God is alive. In Oldebroek", thus read the initial words. However, the hidden message is: how can people in the Netherlands be so backward nowadays! This is a form of framing, too.

### **The turmoil on account of the Pope's statements**

Fortunately, in the person of Michaël Zeeman, the son of a Protestant clergyman, "de Volkskrant" has a correspondent in Rome that likes art, culture and tradition instead of football and cycling. In his column "Vaticanologie" ("Vaticanology"), he e.g. analyses Pope Benedict XVI's fondness for the Turkish (December, 2, 2006) in an equally objective as expert way that could even please a Pope hater. Zeeman also knows how to engage in a polemic and he exploited this skill on September 30, 2006 to take up a position in the debate on religion in the public domain. (Zeeman, 2006) On September 18, 2006, "de Volkskrant" devoted the lead to current news from Castel Gandolfo, after the turmoil surrounding the Pope's statements in Regensburg on September 12 had broken loose. Zeeman's report was accompanied by a large photograph over five columns of the damaged interior of the Greek Orthodox church in Palestinian Tulkarem.

According to Alex Burghoorn, "de Volkskrant"'s correspondent in Jerusalem, the fire was started by Muslims out of anger over Benedict XVI's

speech. By adding a (small) picture of the person in question, that day's front page looked rather Catholic and Greek Orthodox at the same time, while Islam comes up on top of that. In this way, multiple religions can coincide on one page on the same day. "De Volkskrant's" editorial of that day was devoted to the Pope and to whether or not he should offer his apologies to the Muslims. Fear of an escalation of the Islam issue and the lack of self-criticism within the Catholic Church because of outrages against heretics in the past could indeed be heard in it, but the Pope wasn't torn to shreds. In most newspapers, there was some confusion for a while concerning the Pope's expression of regret of September 17, 2006, which, as eventually turned out, related to the anger he had caused among Muslims.

Later on, it was reported that adjustments to the speech's text had been published on the Vatican's website. In the new version, an addition was made to the controversial passage containing the quotation of the fourteenth century Byzantine emperor which stated that the last mentioned had made the remark "with a brusqueness that we find unacceptable". In a footnote, a further addition was made which stated that the quotation had unfortunately been taken as a personal view of the Pope and that this had aroused "understandable indignation". On the basis of the adapted text, the Pope hopes, the reader could see that he hadn't expressed his personal view of the Quran, "for which I have the respect due to the holy book of a great religion". The fact that one could read about one thing and another in the papers a few weeks after the speech in Regensburg is to the credit of the professional ethics of the gatekeepers who were responsible for it. Just like Pope John Paul II was proclaimed "the travel Pope and a television personality", Benedictus XVI was initially called "the Pope of words". World Youth Day in Cologne, his visit to Bavaria, but especially his conduct in Turkey have made Joseph Ratzinger a "Pope of images". On November 30, 2006, he took off his shoes in front of the cameras to pray in the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. By doing that, he stole the hearts of the Turks, who were so sceptic at first. The role of the mass media that registered the small gesture can't be overestimated if one wants to explain the turn in the attitude of the Turkish people towards the Pope of Rome. (Dros, 2006b)

On September 30, 2006, newspaper "Trouw" devoted two long articles to "Regensburg" in its section "Letter & Geest" ("Letter and Soul"). On the cover, designed as a poster, one could see the Pope's feet on a red carpet, along with the text "The Pope is right". The authors, progressive Catholic theologian Erik Borgman (2006) and interpreter and publicist of Egyptian descent Nahed Selim (2006), follow the Pope in his appeal to reasonableness. The fragments of the Pope's speech text that were

published in the section enable the reader to form an opinion of his own.

## In conclusion

My observation is that the public debate in the mass media and especially in the printed media in the Netherlands once again does justice to the position of churches as denominations, recovers religions from the margins of society to the core of the public domain or, on the contrary, wants to banish them even further away from it and that spirituality is receiving recognition as a sinew for the multidimensional human being. These results of a mass medial effort that takes place in the atmosphere of sometimes heated discussions and in the public nature of the public domain should from time to time be individually interiorized in peace and quiet. In the sacral space Henau (2005) deserves our attention. When churches - and mosques - can function as places of reflection, inspiration and contemplation, they also have a social function in addition to a religious one. More than print media, they can - comparable with movies and television documentaries or films on the Bible and the life of Jesus Christ - visitors affect in their attitude to and experience of religious and spiritual life. There can be no other conclusion to this research in Dutch newspapers and magazines than this: Dutch journalism is (once again) aware of the fact that religion matters and that it isn't a marginal phenomenon in post-Christian society. Although the connections with political issues may not always be equally clear, there is question of a curiosity to discover new connections and perspectives. This professional attitude of journalism is a reaction to the confusion of the politicians and the doubts among the public they hadn't recognized in time. A process of critical introspection was the effect of it and now this appears to be fruitful. Politicians notice the change: political journalists have returned to being watchdogs instead of lapdogs, which serves public debate.

If one considers the effects originated with the media, there seems to be no agreement on its nature and exact effect on the thinking, the emotional mind-set, the attitude and the behaviour of people who have exposed themselves to media communication. The environmental factors and individual characteristics of people are brought into discussion as intervening variables. People are moulded by education, by culture and - although not in every case - by religion, or the lack of it. The classic print media - newspapers and opinion magazines - are struggling with multiculturalism and the multireligious society. The debate also takes place in scholarly publications, at universities, on public debate nights, in acad-

mic conferences and on television. In this contribution, no attention was given to this medium, but it may work as an appetizer to read about subjects that came up for discussion in e.g. a serious late-night discussion programme. Not infrequently, talk shows on Dutch public, thus non-commercial, television of the public broadcasting service degenerate into a pub or bar atmosphere. (Maarse, 2007) As a consequence of this, for in-depth study of a subject and for the supply of background information, well informed and professionally edited newspapers and magazines are indispensable in the process of opinion forming. (Hemels, 1998). The answer to the question whether it necessarily has to be a printed edition or whether it can also be an online edition is perhaps even more than a matter of personal preference.

Time and time again, there appears to be an inclination to give account of media effects and then to cast doubt upon them again in specific situations. It appears to be impossible to trace - let alone predict - in what direction effects will develop and how long they will last. On the basis of these insights, to be regarded as a state of the art of experiential knowledge and of results of scientific research, McQuail (2005) doesn't draw a general conclusion concerning media effects. The alternative, there being no effects at all, rather seems to be of a theoretic nature. Also, when people claim that ecclesiastical and religious communication doesn't "affect" them, one can ask oneself whether this isn't a pose or a momentary snapshot. What is experienced as "strange" in this field outside of e.g. Christianity can confirm prejudices. In a Christian country of old like the Netherlands, many of the younger generation have become estranged from Christian symbols and rituals, as one can observe during funeral services in e.g. a Catholic setting.

If one e.g. reads the news items and the well-considered articles about burning issues, like a statement of the Pope in Regensburg, even without a background in communication one cannot avoid the definite impression that the mass media have an influence: on the topics of conversation and in one way or another on the opinion forming concerning current matters in dispute. That's why lobbyists and interest groups scramble for media attention. Church leaders generally put forward the point of view that they aren't primarily after media attention, but that they have a message for the world. Along with that, they direct and facilitate the journalists, photographers and cameramen. In this context, one can think of the Pope of the Roman Catholics, but also of the Dalai Lama of the Tibetan, Mongolian and Chinese Lamaists.

As regards the content, one can conclude that the approach from a particular angle leads to the public being supplied with a particular frame of interpretation, which e.g. activates and confirms certain concepts and

stereotypes (a question of framing also). If “de Volkskrant” prints that Madonna will be the next Pope, above a book review of Paul Cliteur (2007), who isn’t very fond of religion, not a single reader will believe it, even if the reviewer concludes his text with “amen”, the characteristic Catholic closing of a prayer. In such a case we are dealing with an innocent mix of framing and stereotyping.

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