

## SECULAR EUROPE VERSUS RELIGIOUS AMERICA: EXPLAINING THE GAP

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**Abstract:** *Europe and the United States are very different as far as the significance of religion is concerned, both in the private and the public sphere. Whereas autochthon Europe is secularising to a great extent and any growth of religiousness is mainly a matter of immigrants, the United States is the scene of a vivid market of numerous churches, congregations and sects culminating in a high rate of people that belong to a church or religious community and that believe in God. The aim of this paper is to explain this gap between Europe and the United States on the basis of social science theory and theoretical insights derived from (historical) political and cultural geography. It is argued that a different kind of historical political territorialisation (from below in the US versus from above in Europe) in combination with culturally selective settlement (US) is at the centre of the explanation.*

**Keywords:** *geography of religion, political geography, cultural geography, Europe, United States, secularisation, territorialisation*

### A RELIGIOUS GAP

When, just after the start of the new millennium, an American senator was asked how he evaluated the common values that bind Europe and America together, he answered: 'What common values, they don't even go to church' (cited in Lieven 2004, p. 8). In the same year during his campaign for president of the United States, George Bush was asked what his favourite philosopher was and he answered: 'Jesus, because he changed my hart' (cited in Micklethwait et al. 2005, p. 144). These statements illustrate the importance of religion in American society and the gap with Europe. For most of the European politicians religion is private matter not to be discussed in public. Many of them even do not adhere to a church or religious community. In the United States, it is unthinkable that an atheist could be elected as president. As Michael Kingsley wrote in his article in *Time* during the last campaign for presidency (September 17, 2007): 'These days presidential candidates are required to wear their religion on their sleeve. God is a personal adviser and inspiration to all of them' (cited in Guétin 2009, p. 1). The head-line of the article was significant: 'God as their running mate'.

Survey data support this picture. In 2001, 94 percent of the American people said that they believed in God and 46 percent said that they went to church on a weekly basis or even more often. Between 1981 and 2001, this proportion even increased with 3 percent points (Norris et al. 2004, p. 74). For comparison: In my own country, the Netherlands, the weekly or more church attendance declined from 26 percent in 1981 to 14 percent in

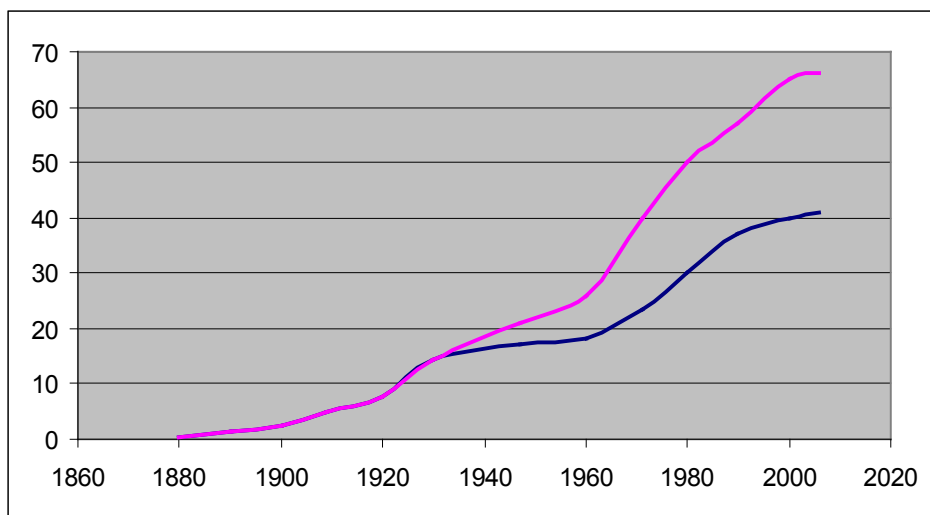
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2001 (Ibidem, 90). According to recent surveys 61 to 66 percent of the Dutch population do not belong to any church or religious community (Sengers 2005; Becker et al. 2006; Bernts et al. 2007). Figure 1 shows the decline in Dutch church adherence since 1880 (see for more details Knippenberg 1992, pp. 227-243; 1998). In 2006, only 40 percent of the Dutch population had a traditional belief in God, that means in the sense churches or religious communities belief in God (Bernts et al. 2007, pp. 63-64). Most other European countries are a little bit more religious, but show the same trend (Norris et al. 2004, pp. 84-94; Knippenberg 2005). In general Europe is far more secularised than the United States.



**Figure 1** Percentage of the Dutch population that do not adhere to any church or religious group, 1880-2006

Note: After 1930: upper line represents measurement by two-step questioning (Do you regard yourself as belonging to a church or religious group? If yes, which church or religious group is that?). Lower line represents measurement by one-step questioning (Which church or religious group do you adhere to? Answer options include 'none').

Moreover this gap between Europe and the United States is already old. When in 1831 Alexis de Tocqueville was sent to America by the French government in order to examine the American prison system, he fortunately did not confine himself to that prison system. During seven months he visited large parts of America. The first thing that struck his imagination was the religious character of the country and its political implications, which differed so much from his home country. In his own words: 'In France, I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country' (De Tocqueville 1998, p. 121).

How could we explain this longstanding difference between Europe and the United States? The aim of this paper is to answer this question.

## EXISTING THEORIES

The classical secularisation paradigm considered secularisation as a consequence of modernisation, based on ideas of Max Weber concerning a growing rationality (*die Entzauberung der Welt*),<sup>1</sup> or from Emile Durkheim on functional differentiation, that is the fragmentation of social life as specialised institutions are created to handle functions previously carried out by one institution, in this case the church (see for the classical secularisation paradigm Wilson 1969, 1982 and 1998; and more recently Bruce 2002). Once, religion covered the whole of society as a kind of *sacred canopy* (in the words of Berger 1967), now religion has been reduced to only one of many domains of modern society and has been privatised to a large extent. Also the rise of new secular ideologies such as socialism and nationalism was considered to have contributed to a declining importance of religion, both on the individual and societal level. In that respect, one should not only think of the developments in the former communist world, but also in the West (concerning the Netherlands, see for instance Kruijt 1933, pp. 175-211).

According to the classical secularisation paradigm, it all started with the Reformation, although the rationalisation process has older roots, which according to some scholars can be traced back to the birth of monotheism (Berger 1969, p. 115; Bruce 2002, pp. 5-7). Reformation removed the institution of the church as a source of authority between God and man, eliminated the ritual and sacramental manipulation of God and so unintentionally encouraged individualisation and fragmentation (Bruce 2002, pp. 10-12). Moreover, the Reformation fostered the growth of literacy; a protestant should be able to read the Bible himself, which benefited modernisation. Also the protestant ethic, which encouraged industrial capitalism and economic growth, contributed to modernisation.

How plausible these explanations were in the European context, they could not explain why a modern nation such as the United States remained so religious or became even more religious in certain periods. That is why American sociologists developed a different kind of theory based on the principles of a market (Stark et al. 1985 and 1987; Stark et al. 1994; Finke et al. 1996; Finke et al. 1998; Stark 1999; Stark et al. 2000). In fact, they assumed a stable demand of religious 'products'. They explained differences in church going and religiosity by differences in the supply side of the religious market. A strong regulation of the religious market (for instance in case of a state church, that by its monopoly prohibits the freedom of choice of individuals) and a small diversity of the supply side (i.e. no competition between the religious 'firms') should conduce secularisation. Because the United States are characterised by a wide variety of churches and sects and moreover (in contrast to most European countries) there is no state church of otherwise dominant church, a optimal situation of something for everybody has developed, that prevented secularisation.

Although these market theories experienced much empirical support in the American context, there still was much criticism both on theoretical and empirical grounds (Bruce 1999 and 2002; Norris et al. 2004; Wunder 2005; Gooren 2006). A first point of criticism concerned the rational choice paradigm that was behind it. Like many economic theories also the religious market model is based on the assumption that individuals make rational choices in order to reach an optimum between its profits and losses. In practise, this

1 Max Weber coined the term secularisation in his essay *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* from 1904 (Swatos et al. 1999, p. 209)

assumption does not hold, because no one is able to consider all relevant factors and because the knowledge on which the choice has been made is selective and strongly influenced by tradition and culture. In the words of Steve Bruce (1999, p. 126) – a prominent adherent of the classical secularisation paradigm – : ‘One of the most curious features of the rational choice model is that it treats actors without identity and history.’ Also the maximisation of profits was criticised. Again a quote from Steve Bruce (Ibidem, p. 157): ‘I do not think people believe in God because they get a good return on that belief. Most people believe because they are socialised into a culture of belief.’ As a geographer, I should say: market theorists neglect the cultural and political geographic context that has been developed in the past.

A second point of criticism concerns the one-sided orientation on the supply side of the religious market. Probably this orientation has to do with the wish to counter the classical secularisation paradigm that on the contrary focuses on a decline in religious demand. By assuming a constant demand of religion individuals are reduced to ‘passive recipients of collectively created goods’, as Bankston (2003, p. 165) once wrote. From social science research we know that religious choices are affected by several individual and group characteristics such as education level, occupation, racial or ethnic minority status, socialization by family and peers, individual life events, et cetera. None of these characteristics are distributed in a constant fashion across history or geography (Ibidem).

Apart from its theoretical content, the religious market theories has been criticised on empirical grounds. Especially the from these theories derived hypothesis that how more religious diversity, how more religiosity and religious participation, is not supported in the European context (Chaves et al. 2001; Wunder 2005, pp. 175-186). The main feature of the changing religious landscape of Europe is the combination of growing religious plurality caused by immigration and crumbling religious monopolies on the one side, and continuing secularisation on the other (Henkel et al. 2005). Thus, growing diversity is attended with growing secularisation, just the opposite of what religious market theories expect. Also in earlier phases of secularisation we do not find the expected relationship. Recently, my colleague Sjoerd de Vos and I could show that in the Netherlands in 1930, there was a positive correlation between the religious diversity of local communities and the rate of secularisation, measured as the proportion of the people that did not adhere to any church or religious community, in stead of the negative correlation that market theorists would expect (Knippenberg et al. 2008). Besides, this result was consistent with the classical secularisation paradigm, since religious diversity correlated positively with indicators of modernisation.

Also the assumption of the market theorists that there is a constant need for religion misses a firm empirical basis. Recently Norris and Inglehart (2004) made a courageous effort in analysing statistically the world wide differences in religiosity. No need to say that they experienced many methodological problems. Nevertheless, they made plausible that their data did not support a supply theory on secularisation. Consequently, they reject the notion of a stable demand of religion in all parts of the world. Instead they find a diminishing demand of religion in the more developed parts of the world, and a constant high level or even growing level of religiosity in other parts. In order to explain these differences, they developed the theory of existential security. Growing up in a society with

a large amount of insecurity would lead to a relatively high level of religiosity and vice versa. The relatively high level of secularisation in the modern (West-)European welfare states can thus be explained by the relatively high level of existential security. On the other hand, the relatively high level of religiosity of many countries in the South, but even of the United States with their less developed social security systems, could be explained by a relatively high level of existential insecurity.

The advantage of such an approach is that it takes into consideration the socio-economic and political context. The importance of this context becomes also clear when we follow the sociologist of religion Jose Casanova (Casanova 2001, p. 426) when he points out that the discussion on secularisation between American and European sociologists of religion is in an impasse: 'The orthodox model works relatively well for Europe but not for America, the American paradigm works for the US but not for Europe.' That means that both theoretical models have a limited empirical reach. He elaborates that further by – I almost should say as a good political geographer – pointing at processes of territorialisation in the past, which at the same time included a territorial embedding of religion. This territorialisation had to do with the rise of a system of modern nation states, that recognised each other's sovereignty over the territories concerned. The territorial embedding of religion was most influential there where state churches developed. The well-known principle of the Augsburg Peace Treaty of 1555, in 1648 confirmed by the Westphalian Peace Treaty, *cuius regio, eius religio* was the basis. *Cuius regio, eius religio* means that the ruler decides on the religion of the people on his territory.

My colleague Gertjan Dijkink (2008, p. 181) analysed this process of territorialisation in three dimensions: *closure*, *control* and *identity*. *Closure* represents the delimitation of territory, including all arrangements that define the relations with the outside world; *control* represents the influence over persons, activities and resources on the territory; *identity* represents the ideology that united the people and legitimates the power and authority over the territory. The first two dimensions concern state formation, while the latter concerns nation building.

The territorial embedding of religion meant that each state developed its own relationship between church and state, which in Europe induced a rich variety (Davie 2000, p. 15). On the one hand there are states where state and church were strongly separated such as France and to a lesser degree the Netherlands. On the other hand, there are countries with a state church such as the Scandinavian countries, England and the countries in Eastern Europe where orthodox churches dominated. In between, there are countries with a mix of both systems (Robbers 1995, pp. 352-354). Those variety induced a partitioning of Europe not only in a Lutheran bloc in the North, a Catholic bloc in the South and an Orthodox bloc in the East with mixed countries in between like the Netherlands with a Calvinist oriented majority and a Catholic minority, but induced also a further differentiation in the Catholic bloc, as the differences between France, Spain, Italy, Bavaria and Poland illustrate (Madeley 2003; Knippenberg 2006; GeoJournal special issue 2006, vol. 67, nr 4). A good illustration of those differences is the recent study of De Busser (2009) on the political territorial meaning of three Catholic places of pilgrimage in Spain (Santiago de Compostela), Bavaria (Altötting) and Poland (Jasna Góra). This partitioning of Europe also had consequences for the level of secularisation. Protestant nations secularised more than Catholic ones and within the Catholic bloc: France secularised more than Italy.

If historical state formation and nation building have been so important for the religious differentiation within Europe, are these processes also the key for the difference between Europe and the United States?

### TERRITORIALISATION FROM BELOW AND FROM ABOVE

American society has often been depicted as *A Nation of Immigrants*, which also is the title of a well-known volume written by president John F. Kennedy (1964) and published after his death. Still, this image is at least partly wrong and in a way deceptive too. The first groups of people that reached America from Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were not immigrants, but settlers (Huntington 2004, pp. 38-46). The fundamental difference is that settlers create a new society in an empty area, while immigrants move from one society to another. Consequently, those first settlers had a disproportionate impact on the culture and institutions of that colonist society. The cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky (1992, pp. 23-24) terms this phenomenon the 'doctrine of first effective settlement'. Of course, there were Indian tribes in sparsely populated America, but they were simply driven away or passed away because of violence or diseases, that were brought by the Europeans. They never functioned as a potential host society. In that sense initially American society was not a nation of immigrants, but a community, or better a number of separate communities of settlers, who came to the New World in groups and would unite into the United States of America after the American Revolution.

And those first groups of settlers had a number of specific features, that were decisive for the historical development of the American culture and identity. The vast majority was British, white and protestant. And important for our subject: they were protestant of a dissident kind. It was the opportunity to hold in freedom dissident religious ideas and bring these in practise collectively, that encouraged many dissident protestant communities to cross the ocean, to start with the puritan *Pilgrim Fathers*, who reached the American coast with their ship the *Mayflower* in 1620. They compared themselves with the Israelites of the Old Testament. America was the New Jerusalem, the Promised Land, far away from the corrupt world of the Old Europe, which in their view included the roman-catholic and Anglican churches (Guétin 2009, pp. 19-20). They rejected the Episcopal hierarchy of these churches. Being the word of God, the Bible was their only source of authority.

Also in later times, America functioned as a 'asylum for the oppressed' to quote a well-known slogan from the American Revolution (Ibidem). Half way the nineteenth century, for instance, the Dutch dissident *Afgescheidenen*, who had separated from the Dutch Reformed Church, were overrepresented in the emigration into America (Stokvis 1977; Krabbendam 2006). Under the leadership of well-known Dutch ministers such as Scholte and Van Raalte hundreds of my fellow country men departed to the Promised Land and settled predominantly in Michigan and to a lesser extent in Iowa. From eighteenth century Switzerland and Germany, to give another imaginative example, Anabaptists crossed the ocean to found their still existing Amish communities in Pennsylvania (see Hostetler 1968 for more details).

However, most early settlers came from Great Britain. That appeared to be true at the first census after the thirteen existing colonies had conquered their independence from England in 1776 and had united in a confederation and later on in a federation (see Figure 2). Besides, Old-Testamentary symbolism also played a part in this Union. The 13



colonies were compared with the tribes of Israel. The Bible mentions 12 tribes, but the tribe of Joseph had been subdivided into Ephraim and Manasseh (Dijkink 2008, p. 50). According to that first American census, which was held in 1790, the total population of the United States – Indians excluded – counted almost 4 million people, among them 700,000 slaves. Circa 80 percent of the white population was British (60 percent English), the other 20 percent were largely German or Dutch. No fewer than 98 percent of that white population was protestant, predominantly of a Calvinist or Baptist kind (Huntington 2004, p. 44; Bruinsma 1998, p. 51).



**Figure 2** The development of the United States of America until 1820

The protestant settler character of early American society also had its impact on what has been called ‘the American Creed’ and what can be considered as a second cornerstone of American identity: their belief in the essential dignity of the individual human being; in the fundamental equality of all men; in the inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and fair opportunity; connected with a fundamental distrust in governmental interference and in hierarchical relationships in general (Myrdal 1944, vol.1, p. 3; Huntington 2004, pp. 66-69). The principles of the Creed have remained remarkable stable over time until the present day, and commanded the widespread agreement and support of the American people, however practice might deviate from it, as the history of the Afro-Americans clearly illustrates.

The American Creed reflects important elements of Protestantism; according to Samuel Huntington (2004, p. 69), it is ‘Protestantism without God’. The protestant emphasis on

the role of the individual in achieving knowledge of God directly from the Bible fostered individualism and individual responsibility for success or failure. According to the well-known studies of Geert Hofstede on differences in national cultures among IBM employees in the 1980s, the Americans had by far the highest scores on the individualism index, followed by the Australians and the British (Hofstede 1980; 1991, p. 73). The Creed also reflects the protestant work ethic. An international comparative study among industrialised countries in 1997 showed that on average Americans worked 350 more hours per year than Europeans. In 1999, 60 percent of American teenagers worked three times the average of other industrialised countries (Huntington 2004, p. 72).

The rejection of government intervention – ‘the less government the better’ as Bryce formulated it already in the 1890s (cited in Huntington 2004, p. 67) – is a reflection of the protestant aversion to hierarchically organised churches. Freedom of religion in the American sense means the opportunity to voluntarily found, maintain and disseminate local churches, congregations or sects independent of any Episcopal hierarchy or central government. That is a large difference with Europe, where in most countries if not a state church, than at least a dominant church, supported by the state, occurred and in most cases still occurs, be it the roman catholic church in the South, the Lutheran church in the Scandinavian countries, the roman catholic or evangelical church in parts of Germany, the Anglican church in England or the orthodox churches in the East and Southeast of Europe. Even in the Netherlands with traditionally a large extent of religious freedom, the old Calvinist church had a privileged position connected to the state for a long time, which can even yet be recognised in the church membership of the Royal Family.

Nothing of this kind developed in the United States. Even the roman catholic church, that reached America through the immigration of the Irish and Germans, adapted itself to the existing American – that is protestant – society. The *roman* catholic church changed in an *American* catholic church including its attitudes, practices, organization, and behaviour (Huntington 2004, p. 95). Or as an African observer noted in the 1990s: ‘American catholics are a nuisance for Rome just because they are ... well, so protestant’ (cited in Huntington 2004, p. 98).

Against this background, we must consider the separation between church and state, which was laid down in the American Constitution after Independence and differs fundamentally from the separation of church and state as was developed in France after the Revolution. Whereas the French separation of church and state was meant to free the state from the influence of the powerful roman catholic church, the American separation, on the contrary, was meant to free church and religion from state influence. The First Amendment of the American Constitution reads: ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof’ (Wald et al. 2007, p. 69). Although both French and American Revolutions embrace the principles of freedom and equality, the French Revolution was clearly anti-religion, mindful of the often cited statement of Voltaire: ‘écrasez l’infâme’ (‘crush the infamous’, with which he meant the Roman Catholic Church; cited in Berger et al. 2008, p. 49). The American Revolution was clearly pro-religion: for the Americans the freedom *to* believe was at stake in stead off the freedom *from* belief of the French (Ibidem 2008, p. 28).

Apart from a constitutional aspect there is also an organisational aspect. All large European state churches or dominant churches are organised territorially, divided in



bishoprics or other regional territorial units, or in parishes or communities as far as local units are concerned. In many cases these territorial church units overlapped with political units and had civil functions as well. For a long time, the registration of birth, mortality and marriages, for example, was a task of local church units, in Sweden even until very recently (1991; Ibidem 2008, p. 45). Higher church authorities created the territorial division with these local church communities. The local religious communities in America are in sharp contrast to this. They are founded from below by those who voluntarily joined each other, the so-called congregations (Ibidem, pp. 29-30; Warner 1993, pp. 1066-1067). As a consequence, a rich local variety of competing congregations developed giving rise to a unique religious landscape (Bruinsma 1998; Zelinsky 2001). The continuing influx of groups of immigrants, who brought their own religion from home, strengthened this congregational model. They often used religion as a means for grounding solidarities and identities. All groups together fostered the visibility and self-evidence of religion in the American society. Because each congregation was self supporting (they got no government subsidies), the active participation and continuing care for survival became an essential part of the daily functioning. Thus, a vivid religious market was born with religious entrepreneurs, 'product innovation' and competing 'firms'.

As a consequence of the historical monopoly of the European churches, Europeans regard their churches more as public utilities rather than competing firms. The majority look on their churches with benign benevolence as useful social institutions, which are likely to need at one time or another in their lives. It simply does not occur to them that the churches might cease to exist but for their active participation. Only in those countries, where the church was not connected to state power, but to the people in resistance to foreign authority, such as in Ireland before independence and in Poland before the fall of communism, roman Catholicism became such an essential element of national identity, that these nations still are among the most religious of Europe (Berger et al. 2008, pp. 35-37).

Finally, in the United States, the protestant work ethic and the emphasis on the individual responsibility concerning success or failure shaped a culture in which the notion of a welfare state had considerably less support than in Europe. There were hardly any socialist political movements or parties, or these were not comparable in size and impact with their European counterparts. Consequently a welfare state in the European sense is missing and dependence on what are often referred to as 'government handouts' carries a stigma unmatched in other industrialised countries (Huntington 2004, pp. 69-75). That means that, in practise, many Americans are dependent on churches and congregations, when they, in case of illness or unemployment, are no longer able to care for themselves. In Europe, the state is caring 'from the cradle to the grave' and has taken over the traditional functions of churches in this respect almost completely.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the United States a kind of territorialising *from below* has taken place, which was strongly influenced by the religious, and in particular dissident protestant culture of the first groups of settlers. That culture was further elaborated in the civil American Creed, that emphasised individual freedom and responsibility, and distrusted government interference and in general hierarchical relationships, including collective welfare arrangements. That

culture also had its impact in the relationship between state and religion, which were formally separated, but not in order to free the state from religion (as in France), but in order to free religion from state interference and create maximal freedom of religion, which offered an ideal opportunity for religious entrepreneurs to start their own religious firm and extend it in mutual competition.

In Europe, on the contrary, there was territorialisation *from above*. After the roman catholic church had lost its monopoly during the Reformation, religion became embedded territorially according to the *cuius regio, eius religio* principle. Territorially organised state churches or at least dominant churches followed, which were functioning as a kind of public utilities, that gradually lost its functions to the rising welfare states. Secular ideologies such as socialism and nationalism inspired the resistance against the vested order and also against the privileged churches that were connected with that order. Industrialisation and urbanisation loosened the people from their traditional geographic and consequently also religious environment including its social control. Secularisation was the consequence. Of course, also in the US were industrialisation and urbanisation, but the vivid religious market, that was created from below offered an attractive and varied supply of active congregations, thus preventing secularisation.

Finally, putting the difference between the Unites States and Europe in a global context, there appears a remarkable phenomenon. For a long time, in the eyes of the Europeans, the United States were an anomaly in the Western World. As a logical part of modernisation, secularising was considered to be normal. Nowadays, things have turned around. Most scientists of religion consider secularised Europe the exemption in a world in which religion has taken a prominent part, be it the growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America, the Pacific Rim, but also parts of Africa, the Islam in the Middle East and other parts of Africa, roman Catholicism in the Philippines, or orthodox Christianity in Russia (Berger 1999; Davie 2002; Berger et al. 2008). The interesting point is, that as far as religion is growing in Europe, this growth is related to immigration. In a way, the religious world is moving to Europe, these days. This includes not only the Islam, that experienced a spectacular growth in Europe, but also different branches of Christendom. The roles are reversed. As in colonial times Dutch (and other European) missionaries departed to Africa in order to preach the word of God, so, nowadays, for instance Ghanese evangelists come to the Netherlands to let germ the seed of Christendom in the spiritual desert, that, in their eyes, the Netherlands has become (Ter Haar 1998; Davie 2002, pp. 84-111). For the time being, they achieve more success within the group of fellow immigrants, than within the autochthon Dutch population. The latter is still secularising further and as far as they are spiritually interested, they are resorting more to New Age forms of spirituality, which often comes to a search for the divine self. The interest in these kinds of alternative spirituality has certainly increased in the last decennia (Aupers 2005).

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