Breakpoint or Binder: 
Religious Engagement in the Dutch Civil Society

by
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Introduction

Religion and religious activism are at the center of public debates in the Netherlands. It is questioned again whether religion is a binder or a breakpoint in modern societies. To answer this question I examined the character and intentions of religiously inspired organizations, and the relationship between the religious and secular involvement. I also focused on the attitude of politics towards religious inspired engagement and the government policy on the “identity organizations.”

In this article, I am not concerned primarily with politics and governmental choices, but I explore the relationships of these choices to the Dutch civil society. I inquire about the opportunities and risks of religiously-inspired social engagement, and I discuss thereby religious identity organizations. A comparison is made between the Islamic and Christian traditions.

In addition to a systematic review of the relevant literature in society and previous research, I have combined qualitative interviewing with case studies of four Dutch identity organizations: two Christian-inspired and two Islamic-inspired organizations. These are typical cases which may be defined as exemplars or prototypes. Fifteen respondents were interviewed using a topic list and further specified questions per respondent group, categorized around three subthemes: interaction with and between groups; experiences of working with a religious inspiration in the civil society; and financial cooperation with local authorities. I labeled the interviews using these subthemes. I then sorted thematically all relevant fragments, which enabled a structured analysis and comparison.

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1 Religious identity organizations are organizations that work from a religious inspiration. The activities do not always have to be linked with religion but can also serve the public interest.

2 The interviewees are separated into three categories: local politicians, fieldwork organizations, and academics. For the politicians and the representatives of the fieldwork organizations their personal religious belief is added. Local politicians: Achmed Baâdoud (Muslim; district chairman Amsterdam New-West for the Labour Party PvdA); Eric van der Burg (secular; alderman Amsterdam for the liberal party VVD); Alaattin Erdal (Muslim; district chairman Rotterdam Charlois for the Christian-democratic Party CDA); Femke Halsema (secular; member of parliament for the progressive-secular Green Party GroenLinks); Wouter Kolff (secular; alderman in Nieuwegein for the liberal party VVD); Korrie Louwes (secular; alderman in Rotterdam for the social-liberal party D66); André Rouvoet (Christian; member of parliament for the Christian party ChristenUnie).

Fieldwork-organizations: Alper Alasag (Muslim; director of the Turkish-Islamic foundation Islam en Dialoog); Fatima Zahra Lachhab (Muslim; volunteer project manager at the Moroccan-Islamic foundation Ettaouhid); Edwin Ruigrok (Christian; manager of Christian identity at the Christian peace-organization IKV Pax Christi); Rudolf Setz (Christian; director of the Christian community work organization Present).

Academics: Maarten Davelaar (Social researcher at Verwey Jonker Institute); Paul Dekker (professor of Civil Society at Tilburg University); Paul Schnabel (director of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research and distinguished professor at Utrecht University); Anton Zijderveld (professor emeritus of Sociology at Erasmus University).

3 This article is partly a revision of a Dutch-language book about religious engagement in the Netherlands (Dekker, Çelik, and Creemers, 2011).
Following a brief description of civil society concept, a sketch is given about the Christian and Islamic civil society in the Netherlands. Then, I discuss the interaction of the Christian and Islamic civil society with the secularized Dutch society. Finally I draw some general conclusions. This article closes with a discussion of the religious engagement in the civil society.

Civil society as social sphere

Opinions are divided if religious organizations and religious groups should belong to the civil society. If we define the civil society as independent of state or market, it obviously offers space for churches, temples and mosques, but not for a state church. If we describe the civil society as social sphere of voluntary associations, it is less clear that those religious organizations can be included. The self-image of religious communities does not fit with the idea of self-conscious human freewill (Kennedy, 2010). In fact, there is not often a voluntary occurrence (people grow up in it as a child) and the possibility of voluntary retirement from the community is not always there.

Civil-society organizations could be voluntarily associations but also foundations or other legal structures. Not every association is part of civil society – for example, a trade association does not belong there. Voluntary associations are dominant in the civil society and are coherent including their mutual relationships.

Civil society as a social sphere is constantly subjected to change. Individual movements become solid organizations; they grow and lose followers, merge or are eliminated. Other movements and organizations come up with new ideas. Regardless of the dynamics within the civil society, there are changes in the character of the organizations and individual activities. Associations become less intense and members behave more often as a customer than as a member. Face-to-face organizations have partly made way for mailing list organizations without meetings between members or sponsors. Also volunteer work is changing. Traditional forms of volunteer work are difficult due to individualization and busy schedules (Van Houten, 2010). The relationships become increasingly loose, are more temporary and are organized in a branched connection with associations, schools, and businesses. Besides strong, established relationships and daily meetings – as was the accustomed in the “old” volunteer activities – people commit themselves, individually or in groups, for temporary projects to the benefit others. Social media plays an increasingly important role in mobilizing this volunteer effort. The new organizational frameworks are lighter, more volatile, and less transparent than the old ones.

Civil-society organizations can operate by law in different legal forms. There are large and small foundations and associations, especially in the field of social welfare and religiously inspired commitment. In particular, in the Netherlands, under the law of Social Support (WMO\(^4\)), social government and voluntary associations (that is, civil society) are promoted, as well as the encouragement of citizen initiatives and the co-responsibility of citizens for each other (Dautzenberg and Van

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\(^4\) The Dutch Law on Social Support (WMO) was introduced on January 1, 2007. It is a comprehensive law giving the municipalities responsibilities in nine fields in order to protect and support vulnerable civil groups, increasing self-reliance and promoting participation.
Westerlaak, 2007). Increasingly, all these civil organizations in the Netherlands are developing a more important role in making policy.

Finally, religious associations have a role by telling stories that inspire people to commit themselves. Research of modern meanings of the “Divine” for the Dutch population shows that religious people can put their aspirations more easily into words (Dekker, Çelik, and Creemers, 2011). Their motivation for volunteering is often better augmented than the motivation of nonreligious people, who often had the simple arguments of “someone has to do it” or “because I like it.” Apparently, they could not or dare not articulate why it is of importance for them to do something really good. That does not mean that the justification of civil commitment must be religious, but a clear motivation can help change intentions into action.

Three models of civil society

Discussions about the concept of civil society rotate around three main axes. These models have arisen in the aftermath of the Cold War and within the context of increasing globalization (Mandavilli, 2010; İçduygulu et al., 2011).

The first model involves the model of a civil society emerging from within, without any influence from the government. This model specifically refers to the historical developments that came as a result of the demands of the urban population for civil liberties and individual rights. The idea of the formation of civil society from within indicates the development of bottom-up organizations and is in parallel with the enlargement of individual rights and freedoms.

The second model puts civil society against the quality and character of the form of democracy in the immediate area. This model is rooted in the discussions of a good society and sees civil society as a means by which democracy is initiated and established. It is stated that the primary means for change, especially in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes with a strong governmental influence, is to create an independent civil society that is even able to oppose the system. In this respect, civil society is seen as both a result and an indicator of democratization.

The third model is based on a combination of both the first and second approach. Here civil society is not approached as an organizational arena that spontaneously appears in liberal economic and political systems, and it is not perceived to be apolitical. This third approach rather defines civil society as an area of associational life with various social, economic, and political functions (Keyman, 2006). Civil-society organizations generally do not pursue political goals, even if they are in contact or lobbying with a government. Despite the fact that civil-society organizations have no political ambitions, it does not mean that they are neutral actors in the social sphere and the political arena. On the contrary, socioreligious issues are not neutral matters. They are social phenomena, which always generate political forces (Çelik, 2010). Thus, civil-society organizations – whether religious or not – cannot be impartial in policy and political choices, while working on the solution of social problems in society.

A reflection on the civil society in Muslim countries

The aforementioned three models of civil society have important implications for the understanding of the civil society in Muslim and non-Muslim countries. The first
model describes a civil society emerging from within as result of the development of civil and individual rights. For a long time it was questionable to what extend this would be possible in Muslim countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, Morocco and Egypt, where Western modernization took place at a much later time in their history. This issue connects the traditional weakness of those civil societies with the “late and slow process of modernization” that was experienced in many Muslim countries (Sajoo, 2002).

At this moment, the civil society in a number of Muslim countries can be characterized by the second axis, which relates to the development of civil society to the quality and character of local democracy. This includes Turkey, Indonesia and several countries in North Africa and the Middle East, where the Arab Spring has started in the beginning of 2011. It is interesting to note that governments in these Muslim countries are increasingly listening to civil-society organizations and their initiatives that have the intention to modernize the country in the changing world. In those countries the civil society has emerged as an influential factor in the transformation of the worldview of their administrators and politicians.

Civil society in many Muslim countries is experiencing a fast transformation. The number of organizations (religious and nonreligious) and their impact continue to grow. Religious organizations such as mosque-building associations function as grassroots organizations for the Muslim community. For example, in Turkey, this is the case for 18.13 percent of approximately 86,031 associations (İçduygu et al, 2011).

Civil-society organizations work with the governmental agencies and other principals to cope with social problems. They are emerging as relevant actors in the development of Muslim countries and their democratization agenda. The organizations facilitate active citizenship and social commitment and contribute to the welfare of liberal democracy through the involvement of citizens. They bring efficiency, transparency, and legitimacy to the state and create an environment for discussion and reflection between economic, social, and political actors.

However, a lack of civic involvement and weak organizational structures remain as an important challenge for many Muslim countries. In addition to these weaknesses, the impact of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as well as their relationship with the government, is often not very efficient. It is legally allowed for NGOs to exist and function independent from the state in many Muslim countries. Third-sector organizations should be free to operate without excessive government interference and supervision. They are subjected, however, to frequent unwarranted interference in their activities. As a result, this causes reluctance to organized social commitment. More recently, if the government allows no room for solutions, civil-society organizations have taken the lead in protests. Often, the existence of the civil society has to be fought for and does not come by itself. This is now visible in the Arab Spring.

Finally, in countries with a longer democratic history, like the Netherlands, we see examples of the third model of civil society, where organizations develop activities in the social, economical, and political arenas. The Dutch Islamic civil-society organizations learn more and more how to position themselves as lobbyists for their rights – for example, to criticize new policy on religion-related issues such as ritual slaughtering or a ban on wearing a headscarf in specific professions.
Christianity is the mainstream of religious life in the Netherlands, followed by Islam. According to Putnam, churchgoers make a major contribution to the social capital of society. They are active within and from their own religious organizations and are more active than others such as secular associations and institutions, and they give more to general charities (Putnam 2000; Putnam and Campbell 2010). This was already noted for the United States (Wuthnow and Hodgkinson, 1990; Verba, Lehman Schlozman, and Brady, 1995; Wilson and Janoski, 1995). In this section, I use data from several large-scale surveys to explore what can be said for Europe and the Netherlands. First, I look into the survey data of the European Values Study of 2008–2009 for all twenty-seven countries of the European Union, Norway, Switzerland, and Turkey. Table 1 shows the countries in ascending order of monthly church attendance (or visits to any other houses of prayer) – visible in the third column as “churchgoer”. This shows a range from 8 percent churchgoers in Sweden to 82 percent in the Maltese.

The first column indicates the proportion of the population who belongs to a religion, and the second column indicates the share of a Christian faith. The second rate is not much lower than the first for most countries – with the major exception of Turkey, where almost everyone supports the Islamic faith, followed by Bulgaria with its historic Muslim minority, and then countries with a large immigrant population (Spain, United Kingdom, and Switzerland).

After the column of percentages of churchgoers, the columns indicate religious and secular volunteer work (fourth and fifth column) and political activism. Although few people in the Netherlands belong to a faith and the share of worshipers is limited (only in Czech an Estonia people perceive themselves as less religious), the proportion of people who do religious voluntary work is with 12 percent of the highest of all countries. Also in terms of secular (nonreligious) voluntary work, the Netherlands is at the top – with 45 percent volunteers, followed by Luxembourg (39 percent); Switzerland, Denmark, Finland, and Norway (35–36 percent). The Netherlands has a middle position with activism with 57 percent, followed by Sweden (84 percent), Norway (76 percent), Denmark and France (73 percent).

My interest here is the connection on the individual level. The last two columns of the table demonstrates the number of churchgoers who are over- or underrepresented in secular voluntary work. Volunteers usually show an overrepresentation, as in the Netherlands. According to this study, 54 percent of churchgoers and 42 percent of nonchurchgoers are active in secular voluntary work, or who interfere actively with society or politics. For activism, churchgoers deviates less often than the rest of the population. If they do, then churchgoers would be less active. In short, churchgoers are more active in nonreligious volunteer work.

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5 The data and analysis are taken from Dekker, Çelik, and Creemers (2011), Breakpoint or Binder: Religious engagement in the civil society, pp.30–46.
6 In other international surveys, the Netherlands is also in the European top but next to the Scandinavian islands (Dekker, 2009). The reason of this extreme high score is not clear.
7 Results of volunteer work are the same as the results of the European Social Survey 2002/3 (Dekker and De Hart, 2006).
Table 1. Religious involvement and social engagement in Europe, in percentage of the population, eighteen years and older in 2008–2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land</th>
<th>Religious</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Churchgoer</th>
<th>Religious voluntary work</th>
<th>Secular voluntary work</th>
<th>Activist</th>
<th>Position of churchgoers&lt;sup&gt;g&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Secular. voluntary</th>
<th>Activists</th>
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<sup>a</sup> percent – belongs to a religion
<sup>b</sup> percent – belongs to a Christian religion
<sup>c</sup> percent – visits at least once a month a church or any other religious house of prayers
<sup>d</sup> percent – voluntary work for a religious or church organization
<sup>e</sup> percent – do secular voluntary work (not for any religious or church organization)
<sup>f</sup> percent – participated in petitions, protests or boycotts
<sup>g</sup> column – indicates whether church members (or visitors to another religious worship) are statistically significant (p <0.05 two-tailed) overrepresented (+ and + + at odds ratio> 2) or underrepresented (-, no odds ratio <0.5) under the secular volunteers and activists

The survey data from the time of the pillarization does not exist or was not readily available to use for this article. But the data between the 1970s until 2005 available from the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) is useful for this article.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The data are derived from the Time Use Survey of SCP in the period of 1975–2005 (based on analysis of people’s diaries).
The study of SCP, which indicates only volunteer work in general, shows over a period of thirty years that churchgoers are more likely to do voluntary work than nonchurchgoers. Nonchurchgoers include both people outside the church and people who count themselves as member of a church, but rarely or never go to church. These two groups cannot be clearly separated over the entire period.

Additionally, more recent research involves Catholic and Protestant regular churchgoers and nominal church members who visit their church less than once a month. They are compared with people who do not visit any church or religious community.\(^9\) The groups are compared on three measures of volunteer work (general, and more specifically religious or secular). When asked about their unpaid voluntary work done for an institution or an organization, most people think of it as regular performed work. This describes 28 percent of the volunteers. More specifically asked, 9 percent of the people mentions voluntary work for religious organizations, while 44 percent of volunteers offer their time at a number of secular organizations such as sports clubs, communities and schools. In addition, we can look at participation in collective activities (31 percent) and preparation to take actions for political protest (56 percent). When nonreligious people are compared with churchgoers and nominal church members (both Catholic and Protestant), the results indicate that churchgoers and Protestants are the most active. Protestant churchgoers have the highest scores. Half of this group is active in religious volunteering.\(^10\) The differences are smaller in collective activities and protest. It is possible that this willingness is slowed by the authority of the church (Putnam and Campbell, 2010: 279).

The differences which I have been shown in this section indicate that a frequent visit to a church (Catholic or Protestant) makes a difference in the number of volunteers rather than a church membership alone. Given the differences between Catholics and Protestants, the doctrine may not be entirely ignored. Maybe the differences are not to be found in the effects of churchgoing, but are to be traced in the hard socio-demographic differences. The high score of the Protestant churchgoers can exist because this group mainly consists of older and better educated women, who according to research are willing to do more volunteer work and care anyway.

Driving force behind the great commitment of church members

The Giving in the Netherlands Panel Survey (GINPS) collected by the Center for Philanthropic Studies at VU University Amsterdam offers valuable information about giving money instead of time (volunteer work) (Bekkers and Schuyt, 2008). Up to 47 percent of all cash donations from households in 2009 were for “church and religion” (Bekkers and Boonstoppel, 2011: 37). So religion appears to be a very important purpose for gifts. The summary of the analysis of Bekkers (2003) suggests that religious people also give more to secular causes than do the nonreligious. The more orthodox and closed a faith group is, the more members give, and the greater the share is for religious purposes. Particularly in the orthodox Calvinist movements, which are organized in smaller denominations outside the Protestant Church in the

\(^10\) This is a huge part, but it corresponds with a more detailed survey of Rotterdam in which half of the frequent churchgoers participated as a volunteer (Castillo Guerra, Glashouwer, and Kregting, 2008).
the old pillarized structure of the Dutch society is still active. Social life is often strongly inwards and large amounts of donations and volunteering are spent in their own institutions. Part of the donations is for the church, and part is for organizations that are identified as possessing the same spirit but organized and formed outside the church (Kennedy 2010).

I stated above that churchgoers are more generous with their money and their time, but it is still not evident what is the driving force behind their voluntary work. Is it the church as a social community that social networks are ensured, and that allows for them to be easily mobilized for volunteering? Or is it the mission and values of the church? If the role of the church is a matter of networks, participation in other voluntary organizations should have a similar positive effect. We can compare churchgoers with sports-club members. 

Membership in a sports club usually involves active participation and contacts with other members. These associations create, as well as churches do, many opportunities for volunteer work in the association. Members of sports organizations seem to do more volunteer work that is non-directly related to sports, than non-members do (44 percent versus 36 percent). Still, this difference is smaller than between churchgoers and nonchurchgoers doing secular volunteering (54 percent of churchgoers and 42 percent of nonchurchgoers). Sportsmen and sportswomen volunteer more often just in their own sector. So, the reason why so many churchgoers volunteer is not only a matter of being part of a social network. Also important is that the church is a moral community. The promoted values within the church encourage people to participate in social activities and social engagement.

Several studies indicate that the rejection of the pursuit of self-interest and the support of altruistic values is higher with churchgoers than with nonchurchgoers. This is emerged again in a recent U.S. survey of Putnam and Campbell (2010). The assumption is made in their survey that even just participating in social networks of religious people – who espouse these values – has a positive effect on civil commitment, regardless of one’s own religiosity and religious practices.

**Upcoming Islamic civil society in the Netherlands**

As for the Islamic civil society in the Netherlands, I can say that there is a trend of Islamic social engagement in the Netherlands. Muslims are – just as non-Muslims – able to organize themselves to create, express, and maintain a collective identity and group interests. Muslim minorities are increasingly taking part in the civil society and participate in the process of influencing the political and administrative systems and structures. Large ethnic minorities – that is, Turks, Moroccans, and Indonesians and their religious organizations – have established themselves in the Dutch society. Their civil-society organizations are demanding a voice within political processes and are important and instrumental in the functioning of government and the

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11 The Protestant Church in the Netherlands is the largest Protestant Christian denomination in the Netherlands. With 1,700 congregations and a membership of some 1.8 million (or 10.8 percent of the Dutch population, 2010), it is the second largest church in the Netherlands after the Roman Catholic Church. It was founded May 1, 2004 as a merger of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Statistic Annual Report 2010 of Protestant Church in the Netherlands, www.pkn.nl).

12 The information is derived from the periodic survey of SCP: Cultural Changes in the Netherlands & Living Situation Index SLI 2010/11.
development of society. Muslim migrants increasingly participate in public life through voluntary associations – as members of a sports club or an advocacy group. Muslim migrants are also donors to charitable foundations or are volunteers in a community center, a library, a care facility, or a parent committee at their child’s school (see also Dekker, 2008). Through these voluntary connections, Muslims in the Netherlands come in contact with people outside their own informal networks.

Although Islamic civil society is not mentioned in many literatures on civil society, it is clear that Muslim movements, communities of mosques, and migrant organizations are taking part in the civil society. This is also the case with other religious institutions as well as the Dutch churches. It is customary in religions to give attention to the part of society situated between state and market. For example, there are religious-orientated schools, as well as cultural and secular activities of transnational Muslim movements in the Netherlands and many other European countries.

As in plural societies around the world, Islam is not only represented at an individual level, but there are also many institutions – Islamic organizations and associations such as migrant organizations, Muslim communities, faith-based movements, and Sufi brotherhoods. They rely also on the upper- and middle-class segments of society. These communities, movements, and businessmen who are associated with them lead several companies, dormitories, schools, Islamic charities, hospitals, magazines, newspapers, and radio and TV stations and so on. They run many other types of NGOs, in which citizens participate in order to exert pressure to maintain their rights and liberties. Their activities range from fighting poverty to human rights advocacy, from social cohesion to interreligious and intercultural dialogue. In short, the Islam-inspired civil society is not only religious but also political, social, and cultural – and is economically active in the Dutch society.

The Islamic civil society in the Netherlands has four general characteristics: voluntariness, responsibility, solidarity, and generosity (Çelik, 2010). First, the Islamic civil society is formed by voluntary involvement, using different forms for membership to participate in associations and foundations. Second, civil-society organizations initiated by Muslim civilians allow them to put their social and community responsibility into activities and projects in social life. This sense of social responsibility contributes to another characteristic of the Islamic civil society – the solidarity of the Muslim citizens to attempt and support civil initiatives. This solidarity manifests itself particularly in terms of participation in religious gatherings, religious associations, educational initiatives, and cultural and charitable activities. In addition to this, the generosity or the philanthropic involvement of people is the fourth important characteristic. One can say that Muslims are accustomed to generosity – also referred to as magnanimity. They still have the custom to give money to charity when needed, such as good education. The zakat (religious charity) is an important annual religious and social obligation to cede a part of the equity in support of vulnerable groups and people who are needy.

Civil society organizations mainly rely on volunteers, as their activities often can be implemented only by voluntary efforts, given the lack of financial resources to employ professionals. Religion is a motivating factor for people to volunteer and to

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13 There are numerous organizations that are inspired by religion, but due to their activities and projects they cannot be qualified as a religious organization. There is, thus, a clear distinction between being religious and the services and projects of the organization in the public domain.
be involved in social projects. It is, therefore, an important binder for voluntary associations. With the support of volunteers, faith-based organizations can give a multiple contribution to the social development of society. It appears that the social return of people’s voluntary efforts through mosques and affiliated organizations is manifold. Not only do the volunteers fulfill key supporting tasks, presumably this saves a lot of money for many municipalities.

The Christian and Islamic civil society in the secularized Dutch society

Using the three subthemes distilled from literature review and expert interviews (interaction with and between groups; religious identity; and cooperation with authorities), I will elaborate in this section on the experiences of my respondents, focusing on four organizations.¹⁴

Interaction with and between groups

The four case studies cover and include two Christian-inspired and two Islamic-inspired organizations. The Present Foundation is a Christian community organization, which strives to motivate people to take care of each other. IKV Pax Christi is a peace organization with a Christian background. Ettaouhid, a Moroccan Islamic organization, is committed to activate the Islamic community in the Netherlands. Islam and Dialogue is a Turkish organization with Islamic inspiration, which aims to stimulate interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

The four organizations organize a wide variety of activities. The two Christian organizations are mainly – but not exclusively – active within Christian circles. IKV Pax Christi also operates internationally in Islamic countries. During their annual Peace Week in the Netherlands, especially their older traditional Christian supporters are reached and participate. Present encourages its grassroots to help fellow citizens in need with advice and assistance. It offers practical one-day projects to groups of volunteers – for example, to paint the house of a single mother with a limited social network. Many projects are delivered by social workers. The volunteers are Christian, but they also help needy Muslims, who are often amazed by this help in a country where Islam is frequently questioned.

Almost all activities of Islam and Dialogue have a mixed Turkish and Dutch audience consisting of especially Muslims and Christians. They promote mutual knowledge of Islam and Christianity to enlarge and to stimulate dialogue, by organizing activities such as lectures, theme nights, and training in interfaith dialogue skills – when possible together with Christian organizations. With Islamic festivals, Islam and Dialogue organizes accessible and cross-religious activities. Despite their wide Islamic approach, Moroccan Ettaouhid focuses mainly on the Moroccan community in the Netherlands. They organize activities for the Islamic people to help them develop themselves – for example, with integration courses, sewing classes for women, and educational guidance for disadvantaged youth. Both Islamic organizations are participating in the Dutch National Day of Dialogue, and participate in various interfaith platforms.

¹⁴ These results are discussed in detail in a recent Dutch-language book about religious engagement in the Netherlands (Dekker, Çelik, and Greemers, 2011)
There, regardless of their religion, both Christian and Islamic organizations are operating in cooperation with external partners and are committed to different target groups. But the Islamic foundations act more often and more explicitly from an interfaith perspective than the Christian organizations. Our explanation for this fact is that for Muslims, as a minority in the population, it is more important for them to have good cooperation with outsiders.

Experiences of working with a religious identity

According to Schnabel (2011), the director of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research, believers are traditionally the cornerstone of civil society. Generally, the age of believers is growing older, except for members of the new immigrant churches and mosques. This is echoed by the Christian Present Foundation. They see that in the former structure of pillarization, people took much more care of each other. Christian communities have no central role anymore, but with the individualization and the forthcoming economic cuts in the welfare, there still is an important task for them – not to join their forces, but to motivate others. This is consistent with the aforementioned recent law for Social Support (WMO), in which the government gives more space to religious organizations to interact in nonreligious activities in order to help people with solving their social problems. From this point of view, the growing multiculturalism offers opportunities in the society for religious organizations.

Both Christian and Muslim organizations and politicians invoke their religious background as an inspiration for the work they perform. They quote virtues and duties mentioned in the Qur'an and the Bible as the base from which they want to help their fellow citizens. At the same time, they realize that religion is not the only inspiration possible. According to the Christian Present, a shared dream can form an intrinsic motivation to help – whether it is religious, humanist, or atheist from origin. Alaattin Erdal, a local Muslim politician for a Christian party, sees the religious civil society as a start for dialogue, tolerance, and cooperation. Religious writings, and Muslim philosophers and poets have encouraged him to be a successful Muslim role model for coming generations. Ettaouhid carries out that volunteering is the highest form of Islamic faith, for it is putting faith into action.

Christian and Muslim organizations alike want to use their network to get through to otherwise difficult to reach believers. This strength is recognized by the local politicians. Present made a calculation that if all the churchgoers committed themselves voluntarily for just one day a year, they would achieve as much work as many full-time professionals. Likewise, Ettaouhid and Islam and Dialogue indicate their knowledge about the specific religious and cultural problems of the Muslim immigrants is very useful. They state that their approach is more effective than the generic (local) governmental.

For IKV Pax Christi, its Christian name and identity helps to allow it to join other churches, religious groups, and organizations internationally. It gives – even in Muslim countries – recognition that they have a shared connection with the values of “the Book.” But, due to increasing global tensions, this advantage is becoming less effective. Islam and Dialogue is often asked for because it has “Islam” in its name. According to the respondent, this Islamic identity opens doors to schools, hospitals, and community centers.
Besides advantages of having a religious identity, as mentioned above, the respondents also mentioned some disadvantages. IKV Pax Christi noted that the Netherlands is highly secularized. A significant part of its own staff no longer works from a Christian commitment. While working from a religious inspiration is not questioned internationally, this is not the case in the Netherlands. IKV Pax Christi sees that the moral position of churches in modern society is decreasing, and this has an effect on its work. Their Christian name evokes disgust and trepidation as well as attraction.

Islam and Dialogue has had a similar experience. An Islamic identity opens doors, but also regularly raises questions. In the current political and social climate, an Islamic organization is often viewed with suspicion. In addition, this identity is sometimes detrimental during fundraising – though it’s not so much related to the Islamic identity, as to any religious identity in general. Of the local politicians, especially the liberal councilors Wouter Kolff and Eric van der Burg focus on the separation between church and state. Although they recognize the value that religious organizations can have on society, they are extra vigilant before deciding to cooperate with a religious organization. With them, nonreligious organizations are an advantage.

Two former members of the Dutch Parliament (André Rouvoet, Christian Union; Femke Halsema, GreenLeft Party) have stressed the importance of freedom of choice in the exercise of religion. The progressive secular Halsema sees a governmental task to prevent the coercion of conscience. According to her, as long as people choose to live by certain religious rules, such as wearing a headscarf, it is their civil right. If, however, force is used by family, community, or social organizations to wear a headscarf, the government has the obligation to protect women and girls against that force. In contrast, the Orthodox-Protestant Rouvoet is very reticent regarding the role of the government to intervene in the case of religious misconduct. He has made a distinction between politics and the state. A political party may be religious or nonreligious, but the state should be neutral.

In sum, despite the few minor setbacks about a religious name, the respondents see their faith in general as a great advantage – giving them direction, inspiration, and collaboration. In politics, the views differ about whether the government should act in case of misconduct.

Financial cooperation with the local authorities

All the aldermen who were interviewed indicated that the separation between church and state plays a role in their choices and policies regarding organizations with a religious background. Regarding this, it is needed to make a difference between cooperation and the funding of social organizations.

Four of the five local politicians (Alaattin Erdal, Korrie Louwes, Eric van der Burg, Wouter Kolff) indicated that the civil society has an important role in the implementation of the law for Social Support (WMO) by helping hard-to-reach civilians. They appreciated the contribution of religious organizations, churches, and mosques – which helped to increase participation, and to function as a safety net for

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15 These two respondents were members of the Dutch Parliament at the time of our study. Femke Halsema was the leader of the Green Party, and André Rouvoet was the leader of Christian Union.
vulnerable groups. Nevertheless, the condition for cooperation with the municipality is that those activities are nonreligious.

All four organizations I analyzed stated that cooperation with local authorities was very important in order to be able to coordinate and carry out their activities properly. In the policy of the WMO, the government has a “directing role.” Present stated that, like a good referee, a good director is not visible, but crucial for the success of the players. Sociologist Zijderveld (2011) indicated that the civil society gives citizens influence and power – for example, through inter-religious councils. According to him, this shared power leads sometimes to the irritation of politicians, who prefer to keep the reins.

The municipalities have no clear policy for funding faith-based organizations. The aldermen saw possibilities, provided the case is about non-religious activities. Compared to the other aldermen, the liberals (Kolff and Van der Burg, both from the liberal party VVD) were less enthusiastic about funding such organizations. But, they are reluctant to provide any subsidies at all. They think cooperation with social activities in general and of a neutral nature might be possible, but funding these might bring the municipalities on a slippery slope. All other aldermen – social democratic (Baâdoud, PvdA), Christian democratic (Erdal, CDA) or social-liberal (Louwes, D66) – saw mainly advantages for cooperation with the civil society. Social liberal Korrie Louwes (D66) even wanted to subsidize religious organizations, specifically as a confirmation of the governmental acknowledgement of diverse society. She recognized the value of diversity in society – in which religion can work as a connecting element, instead of being a breakpoint.

The research of the Verwey Jonker Institute (Davelaar and Smits van Waesberghe, 2010; Davelaar, 2011) confirmed what was stated above by the aldermen. According to Maarten Davelaar, about half of the fifty-nine Dutch municipalities, which were surveyed, did subsidize religious organizations. Most of it went to “traditional” Christian organizations. Islamic and Hindu organizations and immigrant churches were only subsidized by a few municipalities, and generally just for small amounts and not funds for structural conditions. According to Davelaar (2011), there is much local color in the vision of municipalities. There is little on paper and often decisions are not made by policy but are based on each situation. Pragmatism is a key driver: the work must be done, and if there is no “neutral” organization, municipalities will choose a religious organization. However, there are no arbitrary solutions; there are instead general and specific rules for subsidies. The requirements have become stronger concerning the quality of grant applications, transparency, and accountability. There is no leniency for migrant organizations that do not really know how to apply for funds.

For the four case studies, government funding creates a dilemma. IKV Pax Christi indicates that since the government is a major funder, their input with respect to content and decision making is also great. This is the main reason for Ettaouhid to work completely without subsidies. As contrast, Islam and Dialogue has chosen for professionalizing their staff – to a certain extent. They wonder though whether the achieved improvement in quality outweighs the loss of flexibility. Increasing fixed costs are at the expense of time and money for the core business: making connections between people.

I can briefly say that local politicians generally see opportunities to collaborate with religious organizations and to support their nonreligious, social activities. The
policy in this area is inconsistent and often very ad hoc. The researched organizations would like to cooperate with municipalities, even though such a collaboration also has its disadvantages in the form of requirements and restrictions.

**General conclusions**

This article provides an outline of Christian and Islamic engagement in modern Dutch society and feeds the open debate about this subject. The following are some general conclusions.

The Netherlands have a high score among European countries for voluntarily participation, for religious as well as nonreligious participation. Another outcome of literature analysis, statistics and the case studies is that religiously-inspired people and their organizations are more socially committed – for example, as volunteers for voluntary organizations. Putnam & Campbell (2010) show the intrinsic motivation of churchgoers is more driven by altruistic values they are taught through their religion and their immediate surroundings, then just by the fact that they are believers. Most of our statistical information about volunteers is derived from research about Christians; we have less statistics about Muslims. The information indicates that the involvement of church members in volunteer work is mainly due to the frequency of church attendance and the values the believers internalize; it is expected that it would be the same mechanism with active believing Muslims. Further statistical research is needed, but this conclusion is confirmed by the four case studies. Members of both Christian and Muslim organizations are motivated to help other people and rely upon their religious beliefs – ideas such as the importance of voluntariness, responsibility, solidarity, and generosity, ideas which are mentioned in the Bible and Qur’an.

I note that the traditional forms of voluntary organizations are subjected to change. Contacts within these organizations are more volatile and people commit themselves less often formally to a movement or an organization, in the form of a membership. It is a challenge for civil-society organizations to adapt their approach, to find new volunteers, and to make sure they commit themselves on the long-term.

Another development is the increasing depillarization and secularization combined with policies such as the law for Social Support (WMO), which requires more responsibilities of citizens and social organizations to participate in solving social problems. Where the traditional Christian civil society gets smaller, there is a significant role for new religious groups, in which religion has often a stronger part of their members everyday life. The best opportunities are for new groups in the Netherlands that are able to join the existing institutional frameworks, for example the University of Humanist Studies and the Buddhist Public-Broadcasting Association, as well as Islamic educational institutions such as the Islamic University Rotterdam and the Islamic-oriented primary and secondary schools in the Netherlands. The pillarization cannot function as a model for social order anymore, but for funding and acknowledgement the model still exists. I confirm the observation of Schnabel (2011) that it still answers the need to express one’s own ideological identity in the form of publicly financed social services.

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16 See also the periodic survey Cultural Changes in the Netherlands & Living Situation Index Research SLI 2010/2011 (SCP).
The four case studies about the Christian Present Foundation and IKV Pax Christi and the Islamic Ettaouhid and Islam and Dialogue, show they are active in bonding, bridging, and linking. They form a meeting point for their own community, and the Islamic organizations also work to increase the emancipation and participation of their supporters. Due to the depillarization, there is decreasing bonding within the Christian communities. At the same time, the Islamic community is beginning to develop this more and more, even though this happens along ethnic and religious boundaries.

In addition, the religious-based organizations work increasingly in a more ecumenical manner, to help people of different religions and develop interreligious cooperation. The Islamic organizations are more active this way, perhaps because of their minority position. This outcome denies the assumption that religious organizations often have an inward, contemplative attitude towards their own group and that they operate very little outside their own community. However, bridging engagement does not only depend on religious affiliations. The acknowledgement of nonreligious associations and the government are also important. Are they both open to faith-based activities and to cooperation with religious organizations?

To a certain extent, this is the case. Local and national government have various interfaith councils, wherein particular, Islamic organizations participate, and can represent and influence the policies concerning the interests of their group.

The four case organizations discussed above are willing to cooperate with the government, because this way they can develop vertical cooperative relations (linking), which give the civil society some influence on policy. However, to match the financial and practical governmental obligations with the ideologies of the civil-society organizations can be conflicting. Despite local differences and unclear policies, municipalities are mostly aware of the limitations of subsidies so they try to act carefully within adjusted frameworks. At the same time, the priority is to achieve the local goals. Half of the fifty-nine Dutch municipalities studied by the Verwey Jonker Institute (Davelaar and Van Waesberghe, 2010; Davelaar, 2011) consider the social impact of subsidies more important than a possible violation of the separation of church and state.

Discussion

Based on this study, I have the conviction that religion can be both a breakpoint and binder in the Netherlands. Although it is acknowledged that religion is a source of much goodness, values, and motivation for participation, it does not mean it cannot also be experienced as problematic. This is shown in public debates about issues such as headscarves, Islamic radicalization, shaking hands with someone of opposite sex, ritual slaughtering, admission of women to political office, and the position of homosexual teachers in schools. Freedom of religion is not an absolute value. Religion may not interfere in the personal freedom of people and their personal way of believing. On the other hand, the state may not force people to embrace or reject a personal faith. People stay responsible for their own beliefs and the way they act, unless laws are exceeded due to religious positions. In other words, the state could not and should not try to impose religious solutions. The solution of religious problems must come from within religion itself. It would be
interesting for further research to see which role the civil society could play in the political and public arena in reducing tensions about the debated themes and in finding solutions.

The question arises whether pillarized institutions and organizations are still representative for a modern, mainly secular civil society, and if they hinder development of new and other initiatives? I think that this is not exactly the case. Although I realize my conclusion is based on just four case studies and a limited number of interviews, I see religious and religious-based organizations working across religious borders. They focus on their own supporters, but they are also capable of doing many good works for the broader society, even despite their less widely supported inspiration. They are prepared to cooperate with people of other faiths; therefore, I do not expect they will oppose the formation of new initiatives.

Nevertheless, ongoing secularization effects religious-inspired engagement. On the one hand, decreasing church attendance sorts out the most active church members, causing a relatively large segment of members willing to participate in activities. On the other hand, the increasing activity of immigrant churches and Islamic organizations is a sign of integration, especially because the civil society in their countries of origin is not always very well developed. Despite these developments, the numbers of religious people are decreasing and an important question is what kind of alternative is there to religion as an ideological and institutional source for social commitment?

Some solutions can be expected from the increasing level of education of the population. This reinforces the self-confidence and individual skills to initiate activities, and provides a basis for post-materialistic values, which can be an advantage to social engagement. In addition, education and technology can contribute to the development of new social networks of people with common interests and ideals. There is a risk though that these networks remain volatile and are more suitable for short-term actions for appealing global ideological goals, instead of stimulating loyal commitment to solve hard social problems in the neighborhood. For the latter problems, it is not easy to replace the church and other religious institutions. Corporate social responsibility and volunteer projects of schools are not fully successful, despite their good projects and intentions.

Further, I wonder to what extent the image of religion as a breakpoint is created due to strict requirements of neutrality, and to interpret the separation of religion and state so strictly that any religious inspiration in public is suspicious. Here I see a distinction between politics and public debate.

The separation of church and state is an important liberal position in the Netherlands and makes sure the state does not materially interfere with the religious belief of citizens, and vice versa. This concept is not the same as a separation between religion and politics. Political parties can represent the various religious and idealistic beliefs, as long as the state itself is “neutral.” This creates opportunities for cooperation and finance between municipalities and religious organizations. Religious organizations are not ruled out in advance, provided the activities are nonreligious. In this, municipalities do not make distinctions between religions. However, in the public opinion, this distinction is frequently made.

There remains a double standard in the attitude towards religious engagement in civil society. Religiously inspired people have a score well above the average as active volunteers (including nonreligious volunteer work), because
religion can motivate people to work selflessly. Besides that, religious and religious-based organizations also have the appropriate networks. However, there is still concern about improper use of the – mostly modest – social grants for religious purposes and conversion.

The immigration flow of many immigrants to the Netherlands has clearly increased the inconvenient feelings, especially towards Islamic-oriented organizations. Both internal and external, there have been fears that civil-society organizations might be used as a cover for political or fundamentalist purposes. The mere suspicion of hidden agendas undermines the idea of civil society.

Finally, there is no one formula to enhance, refine, or improve the public opinion about religious issues. Local authorities should discuss these religious themes more in the open sphere, so it can be clear what is permitted and what is not.

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