Why the Dutch (Think They) Break Taboos: Challenging Contemporary Presentations of the Role of Religious Actors in Narratives of Sexual Liberation*

by Brenda Bartelink (University of Groningen)[1], Kim Knibbe (University of Groningen)

Abstract

In contemporary approaches to sexual health in the Netherlands, religion and culture are often framed as a source of taboos that need to be broken in order to create more openness around sexuality. This view is often projected onto migrants with a religious background and onto other parts of the world that are 'still' religious. In this article, we suggest that one element to developing a more inclusive approach is to question existing narratives of 'sexularism' and to acknowledge that both religious and secular actors have historically been involved in the search for better ways of approaching sexual health and sexuality in the Netherlands. In contemporary characterizations of Dutch culture, the sexual revolution is referenced as a time in Dutch history when religious small-mindedness around sexuality was dismantled through a series of transgressive media events. Iconic moments in the sexual revolution have become ingrained in a collective memory of the 1960s as liberation from the firm grip of religion on peoples' intimate lives. In this article we argue that the contemporary Dutch equation of secularization with openness around sexuality obscures a more complex dynamic between conservative and progressive forces within Dutch religious history. Based on existing research, we show that openness around sexuality was taking shape from within Catholic and Protestant communities and being materialized in new discourses, services and practices around sexuality in the 1950s and 1960s. Frictions between Protestants and Catholics, the clergy and the people, and liberal and conservative circles were part and parcel of some of the iconic moments that are now considered to have shaped Dutch culture.

Keywords: sexual health, religion, secularity, taboo, the Netherlands

Introduction

In 2017, the largest Dutch sexual health organization, Rutgers, celebrated fifty years of its existence. In looking back, its director at the time referenced the origins of its predecessor organization (Nisso) in 1967, in the middle of the sexual revolution:

> The revolution led to all kinds of small rebellions and demonstrations. The boundaries regarding what was allowed and what was not were pushed further. The Dolle Mina's [Dutch feminist group] were influential there. But 1967 was also the year of Phil Bloom, the first woman to appear naked on Dutch television. It led to a lot of commotion, people were fired, and even questions in parliament. Also nowadays, everything concerning sexual freedom

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[1] Corresponding author: k.e.knibbe@rug.nl. Both authors should be considered as first authors for this article. The authors gratefully acknowledge the comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper by Rachel Spronk, Jelle Wiering and Amisah Bakuri, and the very constructive and detailed suggestions of two anonymous reviewers.

and rights is accompanied by incidents, struggle and activism.[2]

Wiering, who attended the event, noted that this image of the ongoing sexual revolution was accompanied by a tacit construction of religion as a brake on these developments. For example, the presenter of the programme, Sophie Hilbrands, announced that the guest of honour, the King of the Netherlands, Willem Alexander, was coming from another event celebrating five hundred years of Protestantism: 'so you can imagine how relieved he will be to get here,' she joked (Wiering, 2020, p. 68).

The framing of religion during this event, as well as the representation of the importance of the sexual revolution as a pivotal moment in the Dutch history of sexual liberation, are staples of the so-called secular frame that is prevalent in Dutch approaches to sexual health and sexual well-being in general. As other authors have outlined, this also informs the ways in which people with a religious and/or migration background are approached. The prevailing construction of the Netherlands is that it is progressive and enlightened in its approach to gender and sexuality, in contrast to those from 'other' cultural and religious backgrounds. This is particularly evident in relation to migrants with a Muslim background around issues of gender and homosexuality (Balkenhol et al., 2016; Bracke, 2012, 2011; Bracke and Fadil, 2008; Knibbe and Bartelink, 2019; Mepschen et al., 2010). However, it is also evident in the framing of research among migrant groups on the transmission among them of sexual transmitted diseases, including HIV (e.g. Fakoya et al., 2008; Stutterheim et al., 2011; see Krebbekx et al., 2016 for a critique of how ethnicity is framed as problematic in such research).

The need to break taboos also figures prominently in the public policy documents and public activities of Dutch organizations advocating sexual health. This is evident in the work of the largest such organization, Rutgers. This organization published a small booklet on religion and sexuality remarkably entitled 'Zwijgen is zonde' (Ohlrichs and van der Vlugt, n.d.). This title can be read in two ways, namely: 'staying silent is a sin' or as 'staying silent is a pity/a waste'. In the booklet, the authors explain that 'in some cultures and religions it is taboo to speak about sexuality, even prohibited' (p. 20). In its international work, Rutgers also frequently refers to taboos around sexuality which have a striking similarity with how they present the need to break taboos vis-à-vis minorities in the Netherlands (Leerlooijer et al., 2011; Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2016). Another influential group of organizations referring to the need to break taboos are the local public health offices of the municipalities in the Netherlands (GGD). In their 2011 policy document, the public health office (GGD) of Amsterdam links the aim of supporting the cultural and religious organizations of migrants to tackling stigma and taboo around HIV/AIDS.[3] The same discourse can be observed with Pharos, a Dutch NGO that works in the area of cultural differences and health that published a toolkit for professionals in 2016 to help them talk about taboos ('taboe-onderwerpen bespreekbaar maken'), such as sexuality and sexual abuse in migrant communities.[4] References to taboos and the need to break them in relation to religion and sexuality are also observed in Dutch international development discourses and practices (B. Bartelink and Wiering, 2020).

[2] Die revolutie kwam tot uiting in relletjes en demonstraties. De grenzen van wat wel en wat niet mag, werden steeds verder opgerekt. Onder meer door de Dolle Mina's. 1967 is ook het jaar van Phil Bloom, de eerste blote vrouw op de Nederlandse televisie. Dat leidde tot veel commotie, weggestuurde redactieleden en zelfs Kamervragen. Ook nu gaat alles met seksuele vrijheid en rechten nog gepaard met relletjes, strijd of activisme. (Rutgers, 2017).

[3] GGD Amsterdam (2011) 'GGD Visie op Seksuele Gezondheid'.

[4] Pharos (feb. 2016) 'Toolkit. Seksueel misbruik in migrantenfamilies. Voorlichting aan migranten over seksueel misbruik in de familie. Handreiking voor Hulpverleners'. For a direct reference to the word taboo cf. the press release on the Pharos website: **http://www.pharos.nl/nl/kenniscentrum/algemeen/nieuws/868/toolkit-voor-hulpverleners-om-taboeonderwerpen-bespreekbaar-te-maken**

Indeed, it is true that internationally, and to a lesser extent nationally, approaches emphasizing comprehensive sexual education are often opposed by conservative religious actors, particularly Catholic and evangelical Christian groups (Adams and Pigg, 2005; Ahlberg, 2011; Beckmann et al., 2014; Vik et al., 2013). In addition, evidence-based sexual health policies and programmes are increasingly being seen as 'western moral impositions' in the context of broader nationalizing projects, entangling them in civilizational dynamics (B. E. Bartelink, 2016; Roodsaz, 2018; Sadgrove, 2007).

As many scholars have noted, this opposition between religious and secular approaches to sexual well-being and sexual health is unhelpful since it seems to create a choice between 'progressive' secular approaches to sexual health and well-being and religious identities and practices. Indeed, critical researchers have pointed out the secularist and culturalist biases in approaches to sexual health and sexual health education (Bartelink, 2016; Bartelink and Wiering, 2020; Rasmussen, 2010; Roodsaz, 2018; van den Berg, 2013). This is not particular to the Netherlands: generally, what are known as evidence-based sexual health practices are not neutral but mobilize particular cultural narratives in their encounters with religion (Burchardt, 2015). Public health institutions that base their interventions on scientific evidence often frame and communicate these interventions in the context of narrative of progress and sexual liberalization (Adams and Pigg, 2005) and dismiss religion as a brake on these developments, something to 'overcome'. This critique fits in with a broader trend within the interdisciplinary study of religion that calls for a critical examination of the secular and how it is caught up with notions of modernity, portraying those who do not fit into this narrative as 'not yet modern', backward, etc. (Balkenhol et al., 2016; Brandt, 2019; Cady and Fessenden, 2013; Knibbe, 2018; Mahmood, 2015; Scott, 2018; Wiering, 2020).

Public health organizations are also increasingly engaging with these critiques. As researchers, we were often involved in debates and discussions with representatives of Rutgers and other sexual health organizations where they were struggling to become more aware of their implicit bias and framing.[5] Yet, as we will show, there is still more to do. In order to be able to generate more nuanced views on the role of religion and culture, we propose that it is important to re-examine the Dutch equation between secularization and the sexual revolution as the royal road toward openness around sexuality, and thus as a healthy approach to sexuality. As we will show here, the narratives of the sexual revolution and secularization that the Netherlands went through are in fact more complicated, and religious actors were much more involved in them than is often thought.

In the following, we will trace the post-WWII history of thinking on sexuality in the Netherlands within the networks of organizations that were developed around particular denominational (Protestant and Catholic) identities until the 1960s. Reading through the historical research on how sexuality was discussed within these networks gives us a much more complex picture than the uniform 'repressive' moralizing that is often associated with religion in secular discourse in the contemporary Netherlands. After that, we analyse several iconic moments connected to the sexual revolution in the 1960s when taboos were broken. Here too, religious actors could be found on all sides of the controversies that arose around these acts of breaking taboos. Where relevant we will refer to broader developments in the Netherlands and western culture, but our focus is on the role of religious actors and organizations.

In describing these developments we make use of existing historical research. Thus, in a sense the stories we tell here are not new, partic-

5 Bartelink, Brenda (2019) Presentation and Panel Discussion at the *Johannes Rutgers Dialoog: De strijd om seks* (3 October 2019) **https://www.rutgers.nl/dialoog**; Bartelink, Brenda (2019) Presentation for the International Department of Rutgers, Knowledge Centre on Sexuality, 7 february 2019.

ularly to historians of religion in the Netherlands. Nor are they exhaustive and complete. Rather, we focus on the ways in which religious actors and networks were changing their discourses and practices around sex before the sexual revolution and how they were involved in some of the iconic moments of this cultural break. This more complex history problematizes and complicates current secular framings of religion as inherently and inevitably conservative in relation to sexuality. We reflect on this in the final section of this article.

Sex and Taboo in Dutch Religious Subcultures

The Netherlands is known for its Christian pluralism and its social organization in terms of different religious denominations and ideological groupings. Although the Catholic community was numerically the largest, the Protestant subcultures were politically and culturally more dominant, while the socialist and the humanist organizations gained ground at the cost of the religious denominations. The existence of powerful religious subcultures in the Netherlands suggests a particular kind of secularity that situates itself within a typology developed by Wohlrab-Sahr and co-authors as secularity for the sake of accommodating religious diversity (Schuh et al., 2012).

How sex was discussed, or rather turned into an area of opaqueness within the Catholic and Protestant subcultures in the early twentieth century, should be seen against the background of a broader project of modernization which came with fundamental changes in views and practices around raising children, as well as with the rise of the modern nation state (Hekma and Stolk, 1990).[6] According to these authors, the primary goal of Dutch elites became to safeguard the sexual innocence of children. This led to a lack of sexual socialization even for those who had reached adulthood. At the same time, as a modern nation state the Dutch government became increasingly interested in controlling sexuality and the sexual health of its population. Institutionalizing this control within and via religious communities, sexual opaqueness was undergirded by restrictive Catholic and Protestant moralities.

In the late nineteenth century, some of the medical elite had acknowledged the lack of sexual education in children as problematic and started to research and publish on sexual health. Motivated by projections of exploding population growth developed by the British theologian and scholar Robert Malthus, the New Malthusian Union established in 1881 became an influential organization advocating birth control. From 1901 onwards, the work of the NMB gained more popularity under the leadership of the medical doctor (and former protestant Minister) Johannes Rutgers. Rutgers advocated that contraceptives should become accessible to the general population. Despite this plea (or, as we shall see, sometimes because of it), sexual opaqueness and control was further institutionalized within the Catholic and Protestant subcultures, sometimes as a direct response to the activities of the NMB and other organizations. This has led to a complex dynamic of liberation and control in the history of sexuality within Dutch religious subcultures and consociational networks in the twentieth century. The following two sections will trace these developments for Catholicism and Protestantism respectively. These overviews will necessarily be brief and lacking in precise detail, for which we refer the readers to the works cited.

Catholic Consociational Networks

Within Catholic consociational networks, a strong emphasis on regulating sexuality – always a concern within Catholic theology – became increasingly systematized in theology and in the training of priests during the first half of the twentieth century. Catholic moral theology developed a view of sex as only meant for procreation and opposed the use of contraceptives, following the encyclical Casti Connubii published in 1932. Although a Catholic doctor, Smulders, developed

[6] The chapter by Schnabel is particularly relevant in this regard.

a method of 'natural' birth control (the rhythm method) in the 1930s, this method was controversial and generated opposition from Dutch organizations of family physicians and moral theologians. It was decided that his method should not be publicized, let alone published, but only offered as a possibility for women to use after a priest had examined the circumstances of 'marital life' in the confessional (Hofstee, 2012, pp. 20-21).

In universities and seminaries, the teachings on preventing any kind of sexual activity that was not geared towards procreation was developed in ever more detail. This emphasis was strongly bound up with the so-called 'frontier mentality' of Dutch Catholics: after centuries of discrimination, Dutch Catholics only started to emancipate again in 1853, when the Catholic hierarchy was re-established on Dutch soil. There was a big push after that to gain equal rights and status in the Netherlands. Indeed, for a while Dutch Catholics had a distinct demographic advantage: due to their strong stance on prohibiting birth control and encouraging large families, they grew at a rate that was noticeably faster than other groups in the Netherlands, aiming to become at least half of the population of the Netherlands, up from around 30% (Knippenberg, 1992; Schoonheim, 2005; Van Heek, 1956).

Westhoff, who wrote several important and detailed studies of the changing discourses around sexuality and mental health in Dutch Catholicism, describes the period after WWII as one where the emphasis on regulating sex through moral prescriptions and detailed behavioural guidelines first increased and was then challenged from within Catholic networks of organizations (Westhoff, 1996).[7] The tightening of control occurred partly in reaction to the heady days after the liberation from German occupation. At this time, sexual engagement and pleasure became part of Dutch popular culture through the mixing of soldiers from the allied forces with local girls and through the introduction of popular culture and music from the US and the UK. This led to concerned and disapproving reactions among Catholic clergy and professionals. The regulation of sexuality became an explicit concern in schools, in organizations dedicated to leisure activities and in the training of priests. The focus was on promoting sex (understood as vaginal penetration) within heterosexual marriage, positing a view of procreation as a natural and sacred duty. Any other kind of sex, eroticism or displays of sexuality were prohibited.

This tightening of control created a counter-reaction. Towards the end of the 1950s, mental health professionals within Catholic consociational networks started to express their doubts about the soundness of the Catholic approach to sexuality. Because of their catalysing role in changing the way Catholics thought about sexuality, authority and punishment, the (mostly) men of this movement have been described as 'spiritual liberators'[8] by Westhoff (see the title of her monograph, Westhoff 1996). Psychiatrists treating student priests signalled that many of them developed 'neuroses' and traced this to the rules regarding celibacy and masturbation. Furthermore, it was thought that the strong emphasis on preventing sex outside of marriage led to sexual problems after marriage.

According to some prominent figures in the Catholic mental health movement (notably the physician and psychologist Buytendijk), the small-mindedness of Catholic regulations concerning morality was the source of many psychological problems, a higher delinquency among Catholics due to a not fully-grown personal conscience, and a high rate of sexual delinquency. Catholic moral education and the social and spiritual machinery of parish life focused on punishing those who sinned by excluding them from the sacraments, and thus from God's grace. According to Buytendijk and other spiritual liberators, Catholic moral teaching should focus on *inspiring*

[7] Much of the following in this section is based on Westhoff's superb study of the Catholic mental health movement, where sexuality was a primary concern.

[8] In Dutch: geestelijke bevrijders.

believers to live a morally good life, whereas now the emphasis on rules in fact *prevented* believers from developing fully as independent adults. Catholic morality as it was enforced at that time, according to the spiritual liberators, mostly inspired a fear of accidentally sinning rather than faith in God's goodness.

At first, the discussions on Catholic morality concerning sexuality took place behind closed doors. Gradually, however, the censorship of the church loosened, and sexuality and birth control became openly discussed topics in the Catholic media: first some Catholic magazines, later the radio, and finally television. Sexual relations became a subject for mental health, to be addressed by professionals trained in psychology. Within a few years, a paradigm shift occurred within the Catholic community, from combating sins to combating the psychological problems that were thought to cause the sinning.

Importantly, 'official' Catholic morality, and more specifically Casti Connubii, the encyclical that had been published in 1930 in response to the promotion of birth control by Neo-Malthusians, remained the primary moral source for the spiritual liberators. For example, they often referred to a 'sensus Catolicus', a supposedly typically Catholic receptivity to direction by the Holy Spirit and the Church as the Body of Christ. It was on this 'sensus Catolicus' that they relied to make their efforts to improve the mental health of Catholics not just neutral and professional, but a truly Catholic endeavour that would promote the liberating message of Jesus Christ (Westhoff 1996: 314-315).

Nevertheless, Casti Connubii was reinterpreted in such a way that the role of sexual relations in the 'primary' (procreation) and 'secondary' (a loving relationship) aims of marriage came to be seen quite differently, leading to the conclusion that limiting the number of children, and thus using birth control, could be warranted to safeguard the secondary aim of marriage. The aim of a loving relationship was also emphasized and elaborated theologically in the 'Nieuwe Cathechismus' (new Catechism) in the light of God's love (van den Bos, 2021). Although this Catechism was later redacted and a newer version has been in use officially since 1992, it is often still cherished by Catholics who came of age at the time of its publication, as it shaped their views on how religion and sex could be understood as imbued with love and pleasure.

In time, lay Catholic professionals implemented these ideas in the many institutions and organizations of the Catholic community: from kindergarten to university, from the first experiments with co-education to the re-organization of the training of priests in open institutes mixed with the training for lay pastors. Furthermore, due to radio and television, 'the public' at large was also drawn into the discussion. And since it concerned issues very close to their heart, this public listened avidly: the radio shows of a Dr Trimbos were especially important here. A key moment, moreover, was the pronouncement of Bishop Bekkers during a television broadcast that he thought that contraception should be a matter for personal conscience (van Schaik, 1997, p. 347). This was revolutionary, since it removed an entire area of life out of the control of the Catholic Church.

The Protestant Subcultures

Whereas Dutch Catholics were quite concerned with the need to operate as one block in the Dutch religious and political landscape, Dutch Protestantism is notoriously prone to splitting. Thus, the following should be read as quite a broad sketch of some of the developments within the main strands of Protestantism in the Netherlands: the 'Hervormden' and the 'Gereformeerden', which internally were also quite disparate in their views and practices.

Within these communities, in the first half of the twentieth century an understanding of sexuality emerged that focused on its connection to love rather than procreation. This development took place against the background of broader shifts in the Protestant churches, whereby the social role of the church was emphasized over its role to safeguard certain moral standards

and dogmas.[9] The Lambeth conference in 1930, in which the Anglican Church in England had accepted contraceptive use, also influenced Protestant approaches to sexuality in the Netherlands. Arguments that contraceptives were problematic because they were artificial were soon rejected within more liberal circles. Family planning was therefore accepted as a practice even before artificial contraceptive use became widely available. Over the years, the idea that the planning and spacing of children was part of being a responsible parent and spouse became firmly rooted within many Protestant communities.

A new Protestant view on sexuality was introduced by the *Hervormde* medical doctor Felix Dupuis, a sexual liberator in the Protestant community. Dupuis had become aware of the sexual health needs of young women in particular through his experience with the death of a young woman after a self-induced abortion during WWII.[10] Dupuis published a widely sold book on sexual health in 1947, introducing a positive view on sexuality with reference to the Bible book *Song of Songs*. Following this, the Dutch reformed synod published a pastoral letter on marriage (Herderlijk Schrijven over het Huwelijk) in 1952 that argued against the common association of the sexual with sin and affirmed sexuality as a gift from God (Bos, 2010).

Within the *Gereformeerde* community, there was a stronger emphasis on sin in relation to sexuality, yet the need to educate people about sexuality was also noted. Influenced by articles written by the *Gereformeerde* theologian Waterink and medical doctor Drogendijk, who collaborated with Dupuis, issues regarding sexual health and well-being came to be addressed directly rather than silenced or ignored (Drogendijk, 1952).[11] For married couples, the most visible change occurred when the Synod of the 'Gereformeerde Kerken' accepted contraceptives in 1963 (Vellenga, 1995). The *Hervormden* were much earlier than the *Gereformeerden* in their formal ecclesiastic response to the sexual and reproductive questions that were emerging in the Protestant communities (Bos, 2009). In addition, the notion of sin and the illegitimacy of sexuality continued longer for the *Gereformeerden* because of their understanding of marriage as a metaphor for humankind's unity with God and with the nation (Drogendijk et al., 1961).

The Protestant liberators, Dupuis, Waterink and Drogendijk, saw sexuality as part of human flourishing, expressing its relationship to the transcendent (God) and to the immanent (society) (Drogendijk et al., 1961).[12] Eroticism was seen as an essential element in a healthy marriage. Like the views of the Catholic spiritual liberators, this positive view of sexuality was still confined within a traditional morality. Marriage was seen as a spiritual and legal frame in which sexuality was practised. Children were an expression of the spiritual and physical unity within marriage, but procreation was not seen as the main purpose of marriage. This more liberal understanding of sexuality became institutionalized when, five years after the publication of the pastoral letter, the Protestantse Stichting voor Verantwoorde Gezinsvorming (PSVG) was established under leadership of Dupuis. Together with the Hervormde Raad voor Kerk en Gezin (Dutch Reformed Council for Church and Family) and the Nederlandse Vereniging voor Seksuele Hervor-

9 The *Hervormde Raad voor Kerk en Gezin* (Reformed Council for Church and Family) was established to support families affected by WWII and the colonial wars in the Dutch East Indies.

10 Dupuis and his colleagues found out later that girl in question had not been pregnant in the first place (Hageman 2007).

11 Cf. A.C. Drogendijk *Man en Vrouw voor en in het huwelijk; Een boek over het seksuele leven voor verloofden en gehuwden*, was first published in 1941. The 1964 version is significantly different in giving more attention to love within marriage in view of 'de vorming van een gelukkig huwelijksleven.'

12 Cf. the contributions of the *Gereformeerde* members of the working group on sexuality education of the *Nederlands Gespreks Centrum*, a foundation to improve communication between diverse groups and communities in Dutch society. Pp. 7 discusses sexual development and growth as essential to human development within the context of marriage.

ming (Dutch Foundation for Sexual Reform), the PSGV played a crucial role in changing medical law in 1966, which decriminalized the public selling and advertising of contraceptives. When the PSVG started Protestant counselling centres that offered medical, pastoral and social support to Protestant families, it became an accepted institution for family-planning services able to reach the Protestant constituencies that did not easily access the services offered by the secular organization, the NVSH.

Oscillating Between Control and Liberation

In summary, within both Catholic and Protestant subcultures, tendencies toward liberation and tendencies toward exercising stronger control over sexuality can be observed in the post-war period. Among Protestants, the family-planning movement emerged independently of the mental health movement that was such an inspiration for the Catholic liberators and was less controversial. Yet, even before PSGV became part of the National Protestant Centre for Mental Health in 1966, there are important similarities in how the understanding of sexuality changed within Catholic and Protestant circles. The similarity is particularly evident in how promoting knowledge on sexual health emerged out of the growing importance of pastoral approaches and the professionalization of spiritual care. The then dominant moral, dogmatic understanding of sexuality was questioned, while awareness of the body, health and emotions increased. In Catholic circles this was explicitly referred to as the breaking of taboos. This shift also enabled a more material and technical approach to sexuality.

One possible difference between the Protestant and the Catholic subcultures is the extent to which liberators were developing their thinking in dialogue with or in opposition to their respective churches. The representatives of the Catholic hierarchy in the Netherlands initially refrained from making any public statements on the use of family planning methods. Archbishop Alfrink was waiting for the conclusions of the Second Vatican Council that was ongoing at the time (van Schaik, 1997). However, in 1963 the popular Bishop Bekkers foreclosed internal dilemmas by declaring on public television that couples themselves should decide how many children to have.

This statement had a profound influence on Catholics in the Netherlands, who welcomed the emphasis on individual consciousness, rather than the strong role of the church in regulating people's lives (Knibbe, 2013, Ch. 3). It also established the role of Dutch Catholicism as leading in progressive reforms. Worldwide, developments in Dutch Catholicism were seen as noteworthy. The pastoral Council of Noordwijkerhout (1966-1970) was seen as a particularly notable process, challenging priestly celibacy and suggesting that women should be allowed to enter the priesthood, among many more radical changes to reform Catholicism from a hierarchical institution to a broad movement finding its way to God ('Gods volk onderweg') (Coleman, 1978).

These developments in Dutch Catholicism were cut short by the publication of the papal encyclical Humanae Vitae (1968) during the pastoral council in Noordwijkerhout, which re-established procreation as the primary aim of marriage and explicitly forbade the use of artificial contraceptives. In retrospect the publication of this encyclical signalled the start of a Rome-led conservative turn within the Dutch church hierarchy during the 1970s, when two outspokenly conservative bishops were appointed. This conservative turn within the Dutch Catholic hierarchy produced a lasting polarization among Dutch Catholics more broadly. In reaction, many Catholics who had embraced Bishop Beckers' message of autonomy no longer accepted the authority of the Catholic Church in the area of sexuality, family and relationships, even mocking priests who did try to re-establish these norms as attempting to 'turn back the clock' (Knibbe, 2013, Chs. 3, 4).

Because family planning and contraceptives were less problematic in Protestant circles, there was more space for conversation on matters of sexual well-being within the Protestant community and within the different Protestant churches. This difference between Catholic and Protestant

subcultures included a sense of the self-fashioning of Protestants as responsible parents vis-à-vis allegedly conservative and backward Catholics. Protestants frowned upon Catholic moralities around family planning, criticizing the poverty trap it created for working-class families (Bos, 2009; Mulder, 2013).[13]

The increasing openness towards sexuality and family planning within the Catholic and Protestant communities gave rise to contestations over sexuality within and between various Catholic and Protestant subcultures. Yet, as Kennedy has noted, there was a strong sense that the whole of the Netherlands was moving towards a radical break with hierarchical cultural values (Kennedy, 1995). In this cultural revolution, secular and religious actors both played a role on both the progressive and the conservative sides of the equation. These dynamics informed some of the most iconic events of the sexual revolution, which we will discuss in the next section. Around these events, a polarization emerged between liberal and more conservative religious moral approaches to sexuality in the 1960s and 1970s.

Breaking Taboos in the 1960s

Two issues in particular have become something of a 'litmus test' for migrants to become 'culturally Dutch': public nakedness, in particular naked breasts, and homosexuality. Not coincidentally, both topics figure prominently in the integration video for migrants who wish to immigrate to the Netherlands from so-called 'non-western' countries. This is the film called 'Naar Nederland', part of the lesson materials for the basic integration exam for migrants (Balkenhol et al., 2016; Bracke, 2012; Butler, 2008). It exists in both redacted ('gekuist', literally 'chaste') and unredacted (unchaste) versions because of the nudity and imagery depicting homosexuality.[14] In the following, we focus on two key events of the sexual revolution that are often seen as the origin point for the cultural changes now presented as the dominant cultural norm in the Netherlands and show how religious actors were in fact involved on all sides of the controversies generated. Both were broadly publicized and stretched out over a period of time.

The first concerns the controversy around the first naked woman to appear on TV in 1968 (Kennedy and Kennedy-Doornbos, 2017). In the first broadcast of the TV programme *Hoepla*, arts student and model Phil Bloom walked behind a musical performance wearing a very short flowery garment that covered her breasts and genitals.[15] The second episode made the international news because she was now fully nude. Not insignificantly, Hoepla was broadcast by the liberal Protestant broadcasting service VPRO In addition, initially Phil Bloom was supposed to hold the Protestant Christian newspaper *Trouw* in front of her.

When this plan became publicly known, it generated so much controversy that the scene was changed. When the second episode was broadcast, Bloom appeared instead reading an article in the Social Democrat newspaper *Het Vrije Volk*, which covered the controversy following her performance in the first episode. After reading, she lowered the newspaper, fully exposing her breasts to the audience. This broadcast was not only covered in the international media, it also led to questions in Parliament, notably from the conservative Protestant Christian party SGP. Responding to the controversy, the board of the VPRO, chaired by liberal Protestant minister Ad Mulder, decided to terminate the programme before the series was finished.

[13] The earlier mentioned *Hervormde* pastoral letter, for example, firmly rejects an understanding of sexuality as exclusively focused on reproduction, which at the time was a clear reference to Catholic morality. Mulder (2013) refers to criticisms by a minister, Jan van Boven, also noted in a personal reflection by van Boven published on the website of the Condomerie in Amsterdam under the title: Church and Condom **https://condomerie.com/condomologie/condoom-historie/kerk-en-condoom**

[14] **https://www.naarnederland.nl/lesmateriaal** accesses 19-07-2022

[15] The programme was made by four artists, all related to an international pop-art movement called fluxus.

Phil Bloom became an icon of the sexual revolution at the time, the first naked woman on TV in the Netherlands. In current cultural representations, it is still an important symbol of a break with opaqueness around the topic of sex and the body, as we saw in the reference the director of the largest Dutch sexual health organization made to it in celebrating fifty years of the organization's existence. The initial plan to have her hold the *Trouw* in front of her shows how the juxtaposition of the naked female body with Protestantism was used to generate 'shock value'. What is particularly interesting is that the VPRO, a broadcasting service rooted in liberal Protestantism, intentionally framed a certain kind of Christianity as a hindrance to the liberalization of sexual morality throughout the publicity that surrounded it.

Another iconic event where progressive and conservative religious trends became visible was the blasphemy trial against writer Gerard van 't Reve (later Gerard Reve) (Bos in Andeweg, 2015). As an openly gay Catholic convert, he was the living embodiment of the progressiveness in sexual matters that was then being pioneered among some Dutch Catholics, especially in Amsterdam and around the pastoral council of Noordwijkerhout.

Although Reve did not at first emerge as a Catholic intellectual, since he converted at a later stage, he was an intellectual, was openly gay, and after his conversion wrote explicitly *as a Catholic*. As an author, he was also the embodiment of the desire to break with the stolid 1950s. His first novel, *de avonden*, described the suffocating atmosphere of this period, was summarized in the evocative word *spruitjeslucht* (the smell of Brussels sprouts), which is still often used in relation to the suffocation that many Dutch associate with religion and the mentality of the 1950s.

In his writing, Reve creatively combined characteristics in a way that often shocked people, and that certainly grabbed attention and provoked debate. The trial on blasphemy followed a publication by Reve in which he imagines himself having anal sex with God represented as a donkey. At first, this text did not generate a lot of attention. It was only after Reve was criticized by a Catholic priest and a protestant minister that the content of this publication became known among a broader audience. Paradoxically, the pastors who criticized Reve were progressives who had organized the first pastoral counselling groups for homosexuals in the Netherlands. They feared Reve's provocative writings would cause a conservative backlash. This fear, expressed in a public letter, was borne out by I.R. van Dis, an MP for the conservative Protestant party the SGP, to urge the Minister of Justice to request an investigation.[16]

The blasphemy trial that followed was central in controversies on religion and homosexuality in the 1960s, and as such it has played a crucial role in the construction of liberal sexuality as symbol of secularism in the Netherlands. Reve was found not guilty, mainly because it could not be proved that he intended to blaspheme. His main argument was that he was himself a Catholic and that he expressed his beliefs in God as he believed, therefore he was exercising his right to freedom of religion, and the case was merely a way of making one understanding of God more important than another (e.g. Jansen 2017). Following the Supreme Courts' decision, blasphemy practically became inapplicable as an offense, which was repeatedly stressed as a corrosion of the blasphemy law by Christian political parties (ibid.). In the literary writings Reve produced during the period of the trial, which were published afterwards, critics have observed how Reve created an image of a highly personal God that reflected his own homosexual lifestyle (Batteau 2022).

Having liberated themselves from restrictive Catholic sexual morality, some Catholic intellectuals embraced Reve because his work allowed

[16] A central figure in this was the medical doctor and historian G.A. Lindeboom, professor at the *Gereformeerde* VU University. Rather than criticizing Van het Reve, Lindeboom criticized liberal theologians who had defended the writer. Cf. Bos (2015) and (Lindeboom, 1967).

for a representation of Catholic culture in which morality might seem restrictive but in practice allowed for a lot of freedom (Andeweg, 2015). Some Catholics argued that his text was in the tradition of Catholic mysticism, of becoming one with God.

In Dutch public memory, this trial is the moment when two taboos were broken simultaneously: the taboo on homosexuality and the taboo on blasphemy. After this trial, the law on blasphemy was in effect a dead letter. In particular in discussions around the Danish cartoon crisis, this cultural moment is often referenced as exemplifying the triumph of the right to free speech over religious sensitivities.

Discussion

As we outlined in the introduction, in the Netherlands, as in many other western nation states, there is a particular understanding of secularism as promoting and protecting sexual freedom. This understanding, also referred to as 'sexularism', has invited fierce criticisms from scholars, most notably the historian Joan Scott, who demonstrated that historically, secularism in fact rested on the exclusion of both women and religion from the public domain, thereby naturalizing what was a gendered and unequal social order (Scott, 2018, 2011). As Cady and Fessenden have noted, the religious hold over sexuality can be analysed as a feature of secular rule. Not only the religious, but also the secular has settled on sexuality as one of the primary domains through which contestations take place (Cady and Fessenden, 2013, p. 8). This is evident in the Phil Bloom event, which precipitated the eventual secularization of the liberal Protestant broadcasting service, the VPRO. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that secularism has provided many opportunities for questioning and breaking free of such control, thereby extending freedoms (ibid.).

Our focus in this article has been on a different phenomenon, namely how the histories of different Dutch religious subcultures, as well as several iconic events associated with the sexual revolution, demonstrate that religious actors were involved on *all* sides of the controversies around sexuality. Mass media, literature and the arts became vehicles for the celebration of liberation, resulting in powerful images that shape the collective memory and the historiography of the 1960s until today (Buelens in Andeweg, 2015). These events were produced in the context of a dynamic between progressive and conservative tendencies within religious subcultures and the broader cultural revolution of the 1960s.

This nuance is often forgotten in contemporary debates, whenever the sexual revolution is remembered as a time when the Dutch shook off the suffocating shackles of religion. The mediatisation and thus amplification of the religious voice as the conservative position vis-à-vis a secular liberal progressive agenda in the 1960s and beyond has created a blind spot regarding how the reforms in the 1960s were in fact supported rather than rejected by many Christians. Notably, many of the more 'liberal' policies introduced in the 1970s and 1980s were in fact adopted by the government while Protestant and Catholic politicians were in power (Kennedy and Kennedy-Doornbos, 2017).

As we outlined in the introduction, this association of religion with taboos and restrictive attitudes around sex is repeatedly consolidated in research into sexual health and in public debates, particularly in relation to Muslims with a migration background. Although a greater reflexivity is emerging, this association remains quite strong, especially when it remains implicit.

Indeed, the sexual revolution was the start of major transformations in Dutch society, and it took place in parallel to a process of rapid dechurching. While starting much earlier from both secular movements and intellectuals and within the Catholic and Protestant communities, there is no doubt that liberation and development towards sexual openness gained momentum in the 1960s (Schnabel, 1990). For a substantial part of the younger generation, the solid connections between sex, love, marriage and reproduction that had characterized the mod-

ern approach to family and relationships became much looser. The newly emerging infrastructure for sexual health (both secular and religious) played an important role in making contraceptives, particularly the pill, widely available and widely used in a relatively short period of time. In addition, this broader availability of contraceptives made possible a broader recognition and acceptance of sex and pleasure as avenues towards personal development and liberation even among the general population who had not been part of these emancipatory movements.

Scholars and activists have also pointed out that this 'liberation' has had mixed results, or could be called incomplete. Sociological, public health and historical research correct or even debunk the myth of sexual liberation. While new structures governing sexuality emerged, older ones continued. Cases in point are the emphasis on romantic love that resulted in people marrying at a younger age, and women's continued experiences of sexual and gender-based violence during and after this period (Hekma and Stolk, 1990).[17] Rather than having been liberated since the 1960s, sexuality is still shaped in the context of gender inequality, while it has also become part of new regimes of gendered and racialized power differences, as several scholars have noted (Balkenhol et al., 2016; Bartelink and Wiering, 2020; Knibbe, 2018; Roodsaz, 2018). As is evident in the literature, as well as in some of the other contributions to this special issue, the too easy assumption that a religious background is a burden when it comes to a healthy approach to sexuality contributes to the production of differences that intersect with other unwanted racial and gendered differences in ways that hinder inclusive approaches to sexual health and well-being.

We have suggested that one, often overlooked element in developing a more inclusive approach is to question existing narratives of Dutch 'sexularism' and to acknowledge that both religious and secular actors have been part of the search for better ways of approaching sexual health and sexuality in the history of the Netherlands. This will hopefully generate more curiosity regarding the unexpected and variable ways in which religion, culture and tradition become sources for shaping one's own sexual well-being.

[17] While until the 1980s marriage continued to be important, it was an expression of choice and no longer part of family negotiations. After the 1980s there was a qualitative change visible in marriage and relationships.

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Note on the Authors

Brenda Bartelink is a senior researcher in the anthropology and sociology of religion. Her research focuses on how people navigate culturally and religiously diverse contexts in and between Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa. She has published on the interrelations of religion and secularity with gender, sexuality, health and forms of care. Her work has been published in *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* and *Religion and Society: Advances in Research*, as well as in peer-edited volumes. Email: **b.e.bartelink@rug.nl**

Kim Knibbe is Associate Professor Anthropology and Sociology of Religion. She has recently completed the project „Sexuality, Religion and Secularism“ with Rachel Spronk (funded by NWO). Previous research focused on Catholicism and spirituality in the Netherlands and on Nigerian Pentecostalism in Europe and the Netherlands. She has also published a series of theoretical and methodological reflections on studying lived religion. Email: **k.e.knibbe@rug.nl**