Reshaping Protestantism in a Global Context

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Volker Küster
Protestantism, Globalization and
the Democratic Constitutional State

Hans-Martien ten Napel

According to the Human Development Report 2004, entitled Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World, 'cultural diversity is here to stay – and to grow. States need to find ways of forging national unity amid this diversity. The world, ever more interdependent economically, cannot function unless people respect diversity and build unity through common bonds of humanity. In this age of globalization the demands for cultural recognition can no longer be ignored by any state or by the international community.'¹

In the past, Protestantism in general and Calvinism in particular have acted as a force toward cultural liberty by helping to pave the way for the 'three great revolutions' in the Netherlands (sixteenth century), England (seventeenth century) and North America (eighteenth century) that gave rise to the democratic constitutional state.² As constitutional lawyer John W. Sap has argued in his doctoral dissertation, although the relationship between early Calvinists and political tolerance – one of the foundations of such a state – is "complex", they have "created an extremely important condition for democracy and tolerance by defending the free church". He continues: "Ironically, this free church also brought about the destruction of their own theocratic ideal, and thus ultimately cleared the way for the separation of church and state."³

In this article I want to explore whether Calvinism has the potential to once again act as a force toward cultural liberty in today's world, and if so, to what extent. Because religion is of profound importance to one's

¹ At 2. The report is published for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).
identity, I will thereby focus on religious liberty. In paragraph two I will, first of all, indicate what the pluralist approach to constitutional democracy is about, that neo-Calvinists have developed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Paragraphs three and four will then look at the prospects for this approach in the Netherlands, where it originated, and in other cultural contexts, respectively. I will round up with a conclusion in which I will refer to Alister E. McGrath's thesis about the end of mainline Protestantism.

1. A Pluralist Approach to Constitutional Democracy

The pluralist approach to constitutional democracy is characterized by the public role it assigns to religion. In order to illustrate this, I will use the typology of church-state relations developed by American political scientists Stephen V. Monsma and J. Christopher Soper in their book *The Challenge of Pluralism* (1997). Monsma and Soper distinguish three models of church-state relations.

In the strict church-state separation model, religion is seen as an essentially private matter. The state should be neutral as far as religion is concerned and this neutrality is considered to be realized best by stripping the public sphere of all religious elements. The United States since 1950 is probably the best example of a country with this type of church-state relations. The opposite of the strict church-state separation model is the established church model, under which the state either formally or informally recognizes the church and often also provides financial support. Since the middle of the sixteenth century, England is an example of a country with a formally established church: the Church of England.

Somewhere on a scale between the strict church-state separation model and the established church model lies the pluralist model. In contrast to the established church model, according to this model government is supposed not to accommodate a particular church or particular religions. In contrast to the strict church-state separation model, however, governmental neutrality with respect to religion is believed to be achieved best by recognizing and supporting all religious and secular worldviews in society and their affiliated associations. The Netherlands is traditionally the clearest example of a country with this type of church-state relation. Because the Dutch approach is rooted in well worked-out

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pluralist theories of society of Reformed and Roman Catholic origin, Monsma and Soper refer to it as ‘principled pluralism’.

On the Reformed side, the pluralist theory of society was developed, as mentioned above, by neo-Calvinists, notably Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) and legal philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977).5 A major starting-point for this theory of society is that, no matter how sovereign nation states and other political entities might regard themselves to be, ultimate sovereignty only belongs to God. This goes back as far as the early church’s confession that ‘Jesus is Lord’ (1 Corinthians 12: 3). From this it follows, that neither the national state nor for example a supranational institution like the European Union in themselves can claim to be the ideal of political organization in this world. The criterion for the legitimacy of both is how well they are doing in establishing justice, nationally as well as internationally. Since justice in the political sphere will not easily amount to the ideal of biblical justice, it is referred to as public justice instead.

As far as domestic justice is concerned – to which I will limit myself in this article – in addition to such classical doctrines of the democratic constitutional state as the rule of law, separation of powers, checks and balances and democratic accountability, two kinds of pluralism are important. The first type can be called associational pluralism.6 It starts from the idea that God has created society with the potential to unfold into a number of different spheres, such as the family, education, business, the arts and government. Since the government constitutes only one of these spheres, it is under an obligation to recognize and uphold the autonomy and freedom of civil society that has responsibilities of its own.

The second type can be called directional pluralism.7 This principle implies that religion, on the other hand, does not constitute a separate sphere, but has instead a bearing on all aspects of life.8 However, since Jesus and Jesus only is Lord, society should neither be governed by a particular religion, such as Christianity or Islam, nor by some other value

7 Ibid.
8 Note that religion is not synonymous with the church as an institution, which is confined to its own sphere.
system, such as secularism. Instead, a government should uphold the right of all people who live within its territory to be free to practise their diverse religious or nonreligious faiths in both private and public life.

The combination of these two kinds of pluralism, which is commonly referred to as structural pluralism, results in the pluralist model of church-state relations referred to above. This model is judged favorably by Monsma and Soper, who conclude that “Germany and the Netherlands have a far more expansive and, we contend, appropriate understanding of religious liberty than England, the United States, or Australia”.9 Therefore, they believe that there is “much to learn from the Dutch experience. (...) [T]he Dutch may do a better job at securing religious rights than almost any other country in the world.”10 A good reason to take a closer look at the Netherlands, but also to ask the question whether this still holds true.

2. Towards A New Paradigm Shift in the Netherlands

Politically speaking, the single most important characteristic of the Netherlands is without doubt that it is a pluralistic society, a country of religious and political minorities. Since the Reformation and the revolt against the Spanish (1568-1648), Dutch society has consisted, roughly speaking,11 of three groups: Roman Catholics, orthodox Reformed and a secular or humanistic minority.

Thus, Dutch politics during the past 400 years can be interpreted as a permanent struggle for power between these three groups of about equal size, but with distinctive identities. After Roman Catholics had been dominant during the Middle Ages, orthodox Reformed took over during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and humanists dominated the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The twentieth century has been dominated by orthodox Reformed and Roman Catholics together.

Throughout this period, one of the main discussions has been about the type of church-state relations that should be preferred. As a result, the Netherlands has known very different regimes.12 In the time of the Republic (1579-1795), the Dutch Reformed Church was more or less the established church. After the Batavian Revolution of 1795 had brought a formal separation between church and state, the nineteenth century was

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11 Roughly speaking, if only because (certainly in the beginning) many humanists were practising Christians.
12 Monsma and Soper, Challenge of Pluralism, 51-86.
characterized by the strict church-state separation model. Finally, in 1917, under pressure from a political alliance of orthodox Reformed and Roman Catholics the model of principled pluralism was introduced. Unfortunately, until now this latter paradigm shift is misinterpreted in the so-called ‘consociational democracy’ literature, through which the Netherlands is known internationally. According to consociational democracy theory, the key issue at the beginning of the twentieth century was whether the stability of the political system could be maintained, despite the relatively high degree of segmentation of Dutch society. This was eventually done by establishing a consociational democracy, characterized by pragmatic elite bargaining.

In reality, however, as the American political scientist Stanley Carlson-Thies has rightly pointed out, ‘[t]he four subcultures which took shape in the latter decades of the nineteenth century [by this time the secular or humanistic minority had split up politically into Liberals and Socialists, HMrN] did not pose a deadly challenge to democratic governance, as assumed by consociational theory. The challenge was instead to state policies inhospitable to the diversity of ways of life embodied in the subcultures. The prevailing liberal model tolerated, but privatized, differences. But Catholics and orthodox Protestants insisted that their religious beliefs should guide also their public activities and institutions. (...) Segmentation (...) necessitated the transformation of state policies and structures. The Netherlands became not a consociational democracy but a pluriform democracy — a democracy in which subculturally-rooted differences are affirmatively accommodated by the state.’ After it had been introduced first in the field of education, by means of the adoption of a constitutional amendment in 1917, the model of principled pluralism has later also been applied to other areas, such as the media, and — after World War II — to health and social welfare services.

Because of the shifting worldview beliefs of the society, however, from the 1960s onwards a new paradigm shift with regard to church-state relations in the Netherlands is gradually taking place, even though the Constitution has not yet been changed back with respect to education. In essence, this most recent shift involves a return to the liberal public order of the nineteenth century, at a moment in time when society is becoming more plural than it already was because of both secularization and immi-

13 Stanley Warren Carlson-Thies, Democracy in the Netherlands: Consociational or Pluriform?, Ph.D. University of Toronto 1993, iv-v.
gration. The pace of change is slow, because – as Monsma and Soper have noted – the pluralist theories of society of Reformed and Catholic origin ‘have become part of the Dutch mindset on issues of church and state’.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, the change is unmistakable, as is currently demonstrated for example by the demise of the pluralist broadcasting system.

3. Contextual Pluralism
Contextual pluralism is the third kind of pluralism that Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen distinguish in their book \textit{Pluralisms and horizons} (1993), in addition to associational and directional pluralism. The term highlights the fact of a plurality of cultural contexts. Under this heading, I will now deal with the question whether the pluralist approach to constitutional democracy can be applied outside the Netherlands as well, in the European Union, the United States and the two-thirds world, respectively.

As far as the European Union is concerned, the first thing to notice must be that the prolonged discussion about whether a reference to the Judeo-Christian heritage should be included in the Preamble of its newly adopted constitution did not really represent the heart of the matter. To a certain extent one can understand why \textit{inter alia} the Vatican, the Conference of European Churches and the European People’s Party have spoken out in favour of such a reference, especially since in the draft Preamble humanism and respect for reason were mentioned explicitly. Yet, from a pluralist perspective such a reference is not essential, and one can very well live with the present formula that refers in general to ‘the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe’. Moreover, had one opted for a specific reference to the Judeo-Christian heritage, it would have been appropriate to make mention of in particular the role of Islam as well.

Secondly, it is noteworthy how much attention is paid in the Constitution to, what the Preamble refers to as, ‘the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, democracy, equality, freedom and the rule of law’. On the basis of such texts it is possible to be moderately optimistic about the development of the European Union into a community of values, in particular the values underlying the democratic constitutional state as championed also by pluralist thought.

Specifically with regard to the pluralist model of church-state relations, the Constitution provides in Article I-51, that the European Union

\textsuperscript{15} Monsma and Soper, \textit{Challenge of Pluralism}, 58.
'respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States' (paragraph 1) and 'equally respects the status of philosophical and non-confessional organisations' (paragraph 2).

This restraint is perhaps understandable, given the principle of subsidiarity. More plausible, however, is that the topic of church-state relations has proven too sensitive to regulate at this stage, given the already problematic nature of the discussion about the possible inclusion of an explicit reference to the Judeo-Christian heritage in the Preamble. As a result, one will have to wait and see whether either the French tradition of strict church-state separation (laicism) or the Eastern Orthodox inclination towards the established church model will prevail in the European Union.

As far as the United States are concerned, during an international conference on 'Sharing the Reformed Tradition: The Dutch-North American Exchange, 1846-1996', held in 1996, it was suggested that '[t]o resolve its dilemmas of religion and public life, America needs to adopt for itself at the end of this century the pluralistic solution the Netherlands adopted near the beginning'. Five years into the twenty-first century this has not happened yet, but for example in the case law of the U.S. Supreme Court there is a growing tendency to move away from the model of strict church-state separation.

Outside the West, the situation is different, if only because the principles of the democratic constitutional state – which can be seen as necessary preconditions for a pluralist model of church-state relations, because they forge unity – are not universally respected. Nevertheless, their adherents regard the doctrines of associational and directional pluralism as relevant to all cultures and all times, because they are believed to correspond 'with the way things really are in terms of God and the nature of human being'. As James Skillen puts it, 'Dutch society at the turn of the [twentieth, HMtN] century could not or should not be taken as a model

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16 In Article 9, paragraph 3, subsidiarity is described as the principle that 'in areas which do not fall within its exclusive competence the Union shall act only if and insofar as the objectives of the intended action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States'.


for all times, but Kuyper’s way of seeking to discover and honor the integrity of creation’s diversity illuminates one of the central social challenges people will always face in all parts of the world. (...) If individualism, collectivism, and secularism are all misleading in one direction or another, then the need for a God-centered, pluralist social vision will remain strong throughout the world.20 Statements like these, of course, reflect their worldview, but then ‘[i]n a sense, every theory is a faith-inspired “testimony” to what a theorist observes’.21

4. Conclusion
Oxford theologian Alister E. McGrath believes that religious conservatism, i.e. evangelical Protestantism, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, has the future.22 In the Blackwell Companion to Protestantism, co-edited by him, he remarks that ‘a comprehensive Protestant political and legal platform, faithful to the cardinal convictions of historical Protestantism and responsive to the needs of an intensely pluralistic modern polity, did not emerge in the twentieth century’.23 The name of Dooyeweerd does not appear in the 512-page volume.

The conclusion of this article is, however, that a public role of the historically mainline denominations still cannot be missed. In particular the pluralist approach to constitutional democracy, as developed by neo-Calvinists, has the potential to act once again as a force toward cultural liberty in today’s globalizing world. In other words, at least this aspect of Protestantism does not have to be reshaped, but ought instead to be more consistently applied in a global context than has sometimes been the case in the past. Protestantism in Africa, for example, long failed to promote the rule of law and democracy in the way that it has done in the West.

This does not mean, that it is inadvisable to build bridges between Calvinistic political theory and especially Roman Catholicism and Evangelicalism. As far as Roman Catholicism is concerned, the pluralist approach to constitutional democracy as developed by Neo-Calvinists has strong similarities with Roman Catholic social teaching.24 As far as

21 Hiemstra, Worldviews on the Air, 151.
Evangelicalism is concerned, given its growth and the simultaneous decline of the historically mainline churches, this appears to be in the interest of pluralist thought. Evangelicalism for its part has to gain from this development as well, because in the United States, and particularly in Asia, Africa and Latin America, it is characterized by a 'lack of theorisation about political engagement'. Might not the world look a little different, had American voters not just been able to send a born-again Christian to the White House, but also one who, because of his or her coherent Christian approach to public policy, was in a position to promote both domestic and international public justice?