

# The Religious Contribution Of Dutch Migrants To Multicultural Australia

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*The religious consequences of Dutch migration to Australia have been noticeable and enriching. Dutch migrants introduced a new religious group to Australia – The Reformed Churches in Australia (Deenick, 1991), strengthened a number of Catholic parishes and Presbyterian congregations, and swelled the ranks of those claiming to have ‘no religion’ (Victorian Office of Ethnic Affairs, 1991:15, 20, 27). The settlement of Dutch migrants has involved the introduction of Dutch religious orientations and expectations some fitting easily into the Australian relaxed attitude toward religion while others did not. Dutch migrants have also brought orientations to the ways religious groups are supposed to relate to each other that contribute to issues of religious diversity facing Australian society. This paper will describe some features of the religious institution of Holland as a backdrop to understanding some of the contributions made by Dutch migrants to Australia.*

Religious settlement refers to the processes involved in the movement from one socio-cultural location to another of a religion, or a religious group. (see Bouma, 1994, 1995a, 1995b and 1997). The processes involved in religious settlement have become more obvious in Australia as post-war migration brought a wider range of religions to Australia including Islam, various strains of Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. While each of these religious groups has had a small number of adherents in Australia prior to 1947, they have now grown to become significant minority religious communities. Each of these ‘new-to-Australia’ religions has made an impact on Australian religious life and on the interaction of religious groups in Australia.

## **Religious Institution and Religious Settlement**

Each society has a religious institution – a set of norms governing the ways religious groups interact, specifying the levels of appropriate religious activity, and setting the range of religious practice and belief considered acceptable (Bouma, 1998). Religious institutions are distinct from such religious organisational structures as churches, schools, convents, denominational or congregational structures. A society’s religious institution shapes and directs the interactions of religious groups and religious activity found in or introduced to the society by immigration or by conversion. An

examination of the process of religious settlement should include a consideration of the contribution made by the religious institution from which a group of migrants has come.

The norms of the religious institution of the society from which migrants have come are likely to influence the way in which they settle religiously in a society. In the case of Dutch migrants an examination of the role of these norms in settlement involves an identification of those social norms about religion in Holland influencing the religious settlement of these Dutch migrants in Australia. These norms include expected patterns of religious belief and practice as well as patterns of expectations of the ways religious groups relate with each other.

The approach taken in this paper to understanding the role of the religious institution of the society from which migrants have come on the processes of religious settlement and religious inter-group relations in Australia, focuses on groups of migrants and not on the experiences of individual migrants or migrating families. While individuals and families have been the carriers of Dutch culture to Australia, the ways in which elements of Dutch culture and society have shaped the religious cultures migrants have brought to Australia - particularly through new images and religious diversity - can be analysed without reference to individuals or families.

### **A Central Feature of Dutch Religious Institution**

The most outstanding feature of the religious institution of the Netherlands is referred to in Dutch as *verzuiling*, which can be roughly translated as pillarising, or columnisation. *Verzuiling* refers to a set of norms governing the relationships among religious groups and communities in Holland (Goudsblom, 1967 and Lijphart, 1968). This pattern of social relations emerged in a society among the first in Europe to establish a lasting policy of religious freedom. This system was not formally introduced, but emerged over time as religious groups established themselves, organised their infra-structures and found ways of living together in a context of peace and mutual respect. It came to fullest expression in the second half of the 19th century and continued well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In this religious institution the various religious groups have organised themselves in parallel communities. These parallel religious communities include a Catholic group, one for the Hevormde (Reformed, which is the state church of the Netherlands), one for the Gereformede (literally, the re-reformed) and other conservative Calvinist groups arising in the 19th century as protest/revitalisation groups in the reformed tradition, as well as ones for Jews and secular Hollanders. These parallel columns of religious communities each have their own media (news, print, radio), their own schools, their own preferred shopping precincts, their own professionals, their own unions, their own universities, their own political parties. The *verzuillen* also structured religious conflict. Religious difference was not papered over. Tensions over belief and practice were expressed, and each group lobbied the government over legislation. However, this genuine conflict, even while at times bitter, was conducted within the norms of the religious

institution, and where these were violated the state would intervene. While there was some geographic segregation (ghettoisation) of these religious communities, primarily in rural areas, in most Dutch cities they all lived together.

The Dutch religious institution of *Verzuilling* has served to maintain and enable religious difference as well as organising the way religious difference was held together in the one society inhabiting a very small geographic territory. This pattern is different from that in Switzerland where religious, linguistic and other differences are largely geographically separated and politically organised in separate units within a federated state. This pattern is also very different from that in the United States where there is a vast variety of religious difference but these differences are not associated with the range of identifiably religiously distinct social organisations. Such a pattern of organising religious communities was also not found in Australia. The Netherlands is a single society, a unified state, a constitutional monarchy in which religious difference has been permitted and tolerated for many centuries. Religious difference has been allowed to flourish and to become organised not only to influence the course of life in the whole of Holland but in such a way that religious difference forms a primary field of social differentiation. While each column provides to those in it a full range of services, occupations, a system of stratification and a form of social differentiation in Dutch society, the various columns are not stratified. Each column is different, the differences are socially recognised, but not hierarchically organised. Hence the use of the term *verzuilling*, pillarisation - or columnisation - which suggests parallel rather than hierarchical organisation.

The religious institution of the Netherlands has established a society in which religious tolerance is the norm, religious difference is expected and considered a non-threatening aspect of social life, and in which there is socially regulated competition among religious groups. In this way the religious institution of *verzuilling* has provided a legitimate space for each of the religious groups, shaped competition among them, and legitimated religious difference. This can be seen as one example of the ways religious difference in post-modern, multicultural religiously diverse societies is socially organised. There is no single over-arching meta-narrative providing an integrating legitimisation of the society, but a pattern of social organisation enabling the co-existence of multiple meta-narratives separately organised into fully structured religious communities.

The religious institution of *verzuilling* has formed the religious expectations of Dutch migrants to Australia. As a result of their experiences in Holland, they would have expected to find and to be part of religious difference in the society to which they had moved. They would not have been fearful of religious diversity, so long as their own group was allowed space to grow and establish itself in the panorama of religious groups. While other groups were attempting to merge to reduce diversity, the Reformed Dutch felt free to form their own new denomination (Hoving, 1991). They also would have expected a degree of competition among religious groups. Experiences with *verzuilling* can be seen to influence the ways in which Dutch migrants

settled religiously in Australia. The discussion of these effects treats separately migrants from different *verzuillen* by focusing on The Reformed Dutch, the Catholic Dutch and the Secular Dutch.

## The Reformed Dutch

Roughly 26% of the 160,000 Dutch migrants to Australia were from the *Hevormde Kerk* and another 14% were from the *Gereformeerde Kerken* (VanZetten, 1991:22). One of the achievements of these Reformed Dutch migrants to Australia has been the formation of a denomination of Christianity new to Australia: the Reformed Churches of Australia (Deenick, 1991). The need to establish another religious denomination seemed surprising to some Australians at the time. Given the rise of ecumenical thought and the sense that Australia already had plenty of denominations to cater for the religious needs of its citizens, such an activity ran counter to the prevailing Australian religious institution (Hoving, 1991; VanZetten, 1991). Nonetheless, The Reformed Churches in Australia was formed after a genuine effort had been made by many to find a religious home among the Presbyterians in Australia. Some Dutch migrants continue to find their religious homes in Presbyterian or Uniting Church congregations. However, a significant body felt strongly the need to maintain the purity of the Christian faith in the way they were accustomed to expressing, inculcating and celebrating it. This group banded together and organised congregations and then a denominational structure through which to express and pass on their specific understandings of Reformed Christianity.

It is part of the religious heritage of the Reformed Dutch to form new and distinct religious organisations. The norms of freedom of religion established in Holland, a freedom in the context of an established state church, has provided an opportunity for the rise of quite a number of distinct religious denominations and the formation of new, or separate groups on the basis of what to the outsider may seem to be extremely fine points of theology. This cultural heritage was expressed in my youth in another part of the Reformed Dutch diaspora by the following aphorism, 'You cannot split dead wood'. Which meant if a congregation or denomination was theologically alive and growing the endeavour of finding new ways to express, in the current context, their timeless faith, could lead to serious differences of theological view points. These differences often lead to charges of heresy and organisational differentiation. This pattern of theological and organizational differentiation continues to occur wherever groups of Reformed Dutch find themselves in sufficient numbers. Australia became such a place after World War II (Piggin, 1996:180-2).

As the numbers of Dutch migrants to Australia increased and passed the 50,000 mark the press for resources for the establishment of a separate religious organisation were met. The question of separate religious organisation of other aspects of society has been a continuing issue for the Reformed Dutch in Australia. Like their counter parts in other parts of the world, separate, parent controlled schools have been organised. However, separate unions, professional associations, media and universities

have not yet formed. There is some talk of a separate university, but finding sufficient numbers of well-resourced, like-minded people has not been successful. In these efforts the Reformed Dutch are beginning to form tentative alliances with other conservative Calvinist evangelical groups in Australia (Aldridge; 1991; Vanderbom, 1991). Whether such an alliance will yield a population base sufficient to support a separate socio-cultural column in Australia remains to be seen. The most serious obstacle is the propensity to internal disagreement and organisational differentiation of the groups that would be involved. Should such alliances be successful, there could emerge a conservative evangelical Calvinist Christian *verzuil*, or column in Australia.

The Australian religious institution also had norms about the degree to which one took religion seriously. These norms were at variance with the deep seriousness with which the Reformed Dutch took their theological and ecclesiastical heritage. In doing this the Reformed Dutch migrants became one of the first of several groups of post-war migrants to take their religion more seriously than the Australian norm. These groups, including Muslims, orthodox Christian and Buddhists have established a contrary pattern and have been instrumental in re-awakening interest in the dynamics of the relationships among religious groups in an religiously plural society (Bouma 1984, 1989, 1994).

### **The Catholic Dutch**

According to Duyker (1987) about 40% of Dutch migrants to Australia were Catholic and according to the 1986 census 38% who were born in Victoria, declare themselves to be Catholic (Victorian Office of Ethnic Affairs 1991:15). However, the experience of the post-war Catholic Dutch migrant was somewhat different to the Reformed Dutch migrant. There was considerable pressure for separate Dutch ethnic parishes. For a while Dutch speaking Catholic chaplains were supplied for these migrants, in part funded by Dutch sources and in part from Australian Catholic resources. However, as they constitute less than 1% of Australia's Catholics (Victorian Office of Ethnic Affairs 1991:15), separate ethnic parochial organisation was refused, as it was to other non-Irish Catholic migrants by a Catholic hierarchy committed to the universality of Catholicism and the necessity of Catholics from all backgrounds to find their religious home in the (very Irish) Australian version of Catholicism (Overberg 1981, Lewins 1978 and Duyker 1987). This violated the expectations of these migrants, some of whom formed *de facto* Dutch parishes in Melbourne and Sydney. The consequences of this policy decision for the levels of participation in Catholic parishes of migrants from Italy, Holland, Germany and other parts of the world have yet to be fully examined.

The Catholic Dutch would also have expected to find a range of Catholic social and cultural organisations from the media to sporting clubs and unions. In terms of separate religious organisation of other aspects of social and cultural life, the Catholic Dutch arriving in the 1950s would have understood the motivation behind

the Democratic Labor Party and found that it would have made sense to them (Dixon 1996:34-44). The system of Catholic Schools would have been familiar, except that they would have expected a higher level of government support for such education than was the case in the early 1950s. However, other forms of separate Catholic religious organisation were not found in any significant strength in Australia when compared with Holland.

As Netherlands born Catholics make up only 0.73% of Australia's Catholics (Dixon, 1996) it is not possible to disentangle data on the Catholic Dutch from other Catholic data at this time to see what effects they have had on levels of participation in Catholic parishes in Australia and whether their patterns of involvement are more consistent with or distinct from other groups of Catholics.

### The Secular Dutch

The secular Dutch migrants who made up about 16% of Dutch migrants had little trouble 'assimilating' into Australian culture and society given the Australian expectation that religion was something to have as a label, or identity, but not something that would demand much in time, resource or involvement. Later in the 1960s and 1970s there was also the growing expectation that secularisation was an inexorable process and that religion was largely on the way out as a force in Australian society. According to this secularisation perspective that began to dominate the Australian religious institution, religion was becoming a leisure pursuit selected by a decreasing minority of the population. The secular Dutch joined the ranks of those who declared 'no religion' in the census and disappeared religiously. Again it should be noted that a declaration of 'no religion' had been widely accepted in the Dutch society from which they had come and so the secular Dutch had no adjustment to make in making such a declaration in Australia. By 1986 24% of Netherlands born Victorians declared that they had 'no religion'. The percentage for all Victorians was 13.8% (Victorian Office of Ethnic Affairs 1991:28). Indeed, Australians were learning what it meant to register oneself in the census as having 'no religion'.

While in the Netherlands, the secular *verzuil* was seen as one among several religiously organised columns of socio-cultural life. One of the geniuses of the Dutch system of *verzuiling* is to preserve an understanding of religious diversity and to make room for a variety of approaches to religion, none of them having to be seen as dominant. Australian Anglicans have had to learn to be one group among several, as have several more recently arrived religious groups. The Dutch have had an experience with a form of diversity that may help some other groups that have a tendency to seek to dominate the scene, to find another way of living with religious diversity in a religiously plural society.

### Conclusion

As Australia now moves to settle a wide variety of religious groups and to find a way to socially organise this religious diversity, Dutch migrants to Australia can be seen as offering an example of a workable model of religious inter-group

relations in postmodern, multicultural societies. The experience of Dutch migrants with the management of religious difference through a religious institution of *verzuiling* in the Holland from which they migrated may help other Australians in the search for social structures and norms that enable diversities to coexist, promote mutual respect, and give each group the security of being a legitimate part of the whole while allowing for a wide range of internal organisation and elaboration of religious infra-structure.

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