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The New Spirituality and Religious Transformation in the Netherlands

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Summary: This article discusses the difficult current situation of the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands. It also shows how Christian spiritual centers are trying to attract the growing number of unbound spiritual seekers, who reject any limitations on their personal freedom and who value autonomy, authenticity and personal growth. These centers do so by incorporating into their programming courses and activities with non-Christian content, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, Shamanism etc., in addition to psychological approaches such as psychosynthesis, the enneagram, bodywork etc. The article demonstrates that the centers are attracting people who for the most part are connected to a faith community, but who at the same time have many characteristics in common with unbound spiritual seekers. Further research is needed to establish to what extent this group is representative of the greater Christian population in the Netherlands and whether this group is growing. It raises the question how the church should respond to this development and whether and how it should cater to the spiritual needs of these seekers.

Abstract: This article describes the current situation of the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands, together with specific factors that have contributed to its unusually rapid decline. The relatively new phenomenon of the unbound spiritual seeker has caused Christian spiritual centers to adjust their programming in such a way as to attract members of this new group. The article presents a number of results of our research project on these centers and their visitors. It shows that the majority of the visitors are Christians who are connected to a local parish or congregation and who simultaneously show typical characteristics of unbound spiritual seekers: they are individualistic, value personal growth, authenticity, autonomy etc. Apparently being a Christian and being an unbound spiritual seeker are not mutually exclusive, as has been thought. Finally, the article discusses a number of implications for the church and for the way in which it could respond to this situation.

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Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel beschreibt die aktuelle Situation der römisch-katholischen Kirche in den Niederlanden sowie die spezifischen Faktoren, die zu ihrem ungewöhnlich raschen Relevanzverlust beitrugen. Das relativ neue Phänomen der „ungebundenen spirituell Suchenden“ führte zu einem Bemühen von Seiten der Kirche, in ihren Einrichtungen neue Angebote zu schaffen, um für diese Gruppe attraktiv zu werden. Als ein Ergebnis dieser Studie stellte sich heraus, dass die Mehrheit der befragten Besucher dieser Einrichtungen Christen sind, die zu einer lokalen Gemeinde gehören und die zugleich Eigenschaften der „ungebundenen spirituell Suchenden“ aufweisen. Offenbar schließen sich das Christsein und die Zugehörigkeit zur Gruppe der „ungebundenen spirituell Suchenden“ nicht gegenseitig aus. Abschließend diskutiert der Artikel Konsequenzen, die sich aus den Ergebnissen für die Kirche und ihre mögliche Reaktion auf die dargestellte Situation ergeben könnten.

1 Introduction

The Christian churches in the west have now been on the decline for some decades now.¹ At the same time different forms of alternative spirituality are on the rise. This raises many questions, for example: who are the people that are turning to alternative spirituality and why are they doing this? How have the traditional churches responded? This article addresses these and other questions with regard to the situation in the Netherlands.

The Netherlands have often been at the forefront of new developments in society and the changes described here may also occur in some form in other western European countries. The decline of the Roman Catholic Church has been more marked in the Netherlands than it has been elsewhere.² At the same time the number of people has increased who have no ties to any institutional religion, but who are nevertheless searching for meaning and spirituality and who are interested in personal development. These people can be called *unbound spiritual seekers*.

The terms spirituality and spiritual are quite vague and, despite many efforts, scholars have so far been unable to give a precise definition.³ I will follow Hill

1 Cf. Staf Hellemans, *Das Zeitalter der Weltreligionen. Religion in agrarischen Zivilisationen und in modernen Gesellschaften*, Würzburg (Ergon-Verlag) 2010.

2 For example church attendance in the Netherlands declined by 44 % between 1981 and 1999. The decline in church attendance in other western European countries was not as strong: e.g. Germany 33%, France 30%, Belgium 37%; see Hellemans, *Zeitalter* (n. 1).

3 See for example: Brian J. Zinnbauer / Kenneth I. Pargament / Brenda Cole / Mark S. Rye / Eric M. Butter / Timothy G. Belavich / Kathleen M. Hipp / Jill L. Kadar, *Religion and Spirituality. Unfuzzy-*

et al. who have concluded: “Given our limited contemporary understanding of religion and spirituality, it is perhaps premature to insist on a single comprehensive definition of either.”⁴ Other authors have used a compact definition of spirituality as privatized, experience-oriented religion.⁵ Central to any understanding is “spirituality as a universal feature of human experience addressing a feeling of transcendent force or presence, which need not to be framed within any theological or belief system but can instead rely solely on the individual’s experience”.⁶

In this article I will discuss the Dutch Catholic Church’s decline in membership and the relatively new phenomenon of the unbound spiritual seeker. Many Christian spiritual centers, often set up by religious orders and religious congregations such as the Dominicans, the Carmelites and the Jesuits, are trying to attract these unbound spiritual seekers by adjusting their programming to suit this group’s needs and interests. To what extent are the centers succeeding in attracting these seekers? And who are these seekers? I will present some results of research we carried out of these centers and their visitors and will subsequently discuss a number of implications for the churches.

2 The situation of the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands: an extraordinary decline

For some decades now the Catholic Church in the Netherlands has been in decline. This is borne out by the number of its personnel, where there has been an 11% decline in 5 years’ time (since 2006). Moreover, the number of volunteers

ing the Fuzzy, in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36/4, 1997, 549–564. Also Eileen Barker (ed.), *The church without and the God within. Religiosity and/or Spirituality. The Centrality of Religion in social Life. Essays in honour of James A. Beckford*, Aldershot (Ashgate) 2008; Joantine Berghuijs / Jos Pieper / Cok Bakker, *Being spiritual and being religious in Europe. Diverging life orientations*, in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28/1, 2013, 15–32; Peter C. Hill / Kenneth I. Pargament / Ralph W. Hood Jr. / Michael E. McCullough / James P. Swyers / David B. Larson / Brian J. Zinnbauer, *Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality. Points of Commonality, Points of Departure*, in: *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 30/1, 2000, 51–77.

4 Hill et al., *Conceptualizing Religion* (n. 3), 52.

5 Cf. Heinz Streib / Ralph W. Hood, “Spirituality” as privatized experience-oriented religion. Empirical and conceptual perspectives, in: *Implicit Religion* 14/4, 2011, 433–453.

6 Miguel Farias / Elisabeth Hense, *Concepts and misconceptions in the scientific study of spirituality*, in: Basia Spalek / Alia Imtoul (eds.), *Religion, spirituality and the social sciences challenging marginalisation*, Bristol (Policy Press) 2008, 163–176.

working in the church has declined by 8%, and the number of baptisms and first communions has seen an annual decline of between 5 and 10 %.⁷ The causes are manifold. There are general factors at play that are valid in other countries as well. Other factors, however, are more or less specific to the Dutch Catholic Church.

First it is necessary to look at just a few of the general factors, which are quite diverse and in part are longstanding. In the last few centuries the western worldview has undergone drastic changes. There was the turn from geocentrism to heliocentrism: the discovery that the sun does not revolve around the earth, but the earth around the sun. There were also the startling discoveries of the expanding universe, of the big bang, evolution, etc.

In the twentieth century the rational questions of the age of Enlightenment gained footing, challenging many ideas grounded in tradition and faith through rational thought. This way of thinking became democratized, so that gradually not only an intellectual elite, but also the man and the woman in the street started to embrace this rational and critical approach and began questioning previously fixed and unwavering convictions.

An entirely different type of factor that undermined belief in God was the problem of the shocking evil of the Second World War. The atrocities which men such as Hitler and Stalin and their followers committed against millions of humans caused many to ask the question: “If there is a God, how could He have let these horrors happen?”⁸

In addition, the “problem of God”, the problem concerning the relation between God and the human being, became more widespread: is God’s presumed existence a matter of revelation or of projection? Authors such as Sigmund Freud⁹ and Ludwig Feuerbach¹⁰ propagated the idea that belief in God is a form of wishful thinking: God did not create humans; in fact humans created a God for themselves.

Furthermore, modern people come into contact frequently with a multiplicity of other religious and moral systems, and this fact in itself has pointed to the relativity of the Christian worldview and has diminished its supremacy.

7 Cf. Joris Kregting / Jolanda Massaar-Remmerswaal, *Kerncijfers 2010 uit de kerkelijke statistiek van het Rooms-Katholieke kerkgenootschap in Nederland*, report no. 616, October 2011. http://www.ru.nl/kaski/virtuele_map/publicaties/, last viewed January 13, 2014.

8 Karsten Harries, *Between Nihilism and Faith. A Commentary on Either/Or*, Berlin / New York (De Gruyter) 2010.

9 Sigmund Freud, *The future of an illusion*, Garden City, N.Y. (Doubleday) 1964.

10 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The essence of Christianity*, New York (F. Ungar) 1957.

Apart from such general factors that have undermined the credibility of Christianity, a number of special factors unique to the Catholic Church in the Netherlands have caused it to witness a particularly rapid decrease of church attendance and commitment.

Traditionally the Dutch Catholic Church was very dedicated and obedient to Rome. In the sixties and seventies of the last century, however, protest became an important part of life in the Netherlands. Protest against established powers was not just directed against parental authorities and secular institutional or government authorities, but also against church authorities. No other society has been quite as eager and thorough in abolishing religious traditions, rituals and symbols considered to be irrational, outdated, suppressive, hypocritical and/or conservative.¹¹

To give an example: at a certain point many Catholics – priests and laypeople alike – were convinced that the law of celibacy for priests and religious was outdated. They felt therefore that it should and would be abolished in the near future. When this did not happen, many not only called for collective disobedience, but also carried it out. Priests became involved in intimate relationships and left their ministry, or sometimes stayed, simply refusing to give up their work as a priest. In the years between 1965 and 1980 the number of priests who left the priesthood even surpassed the number of ordinations.¹²

The Vatican reacted by gradually appointing strongly conservative bishops whose task was to bring this wayward flock back into line. Since that time these bishops have fought to restrain and keep in check practices (and people) that they consider too unorthodox, that is, too liberal and free-spirited.

This has led to a power struggle and a destructive polarization that split the Dutch Catholic community into two factions: conservatives and progressives, who often profoundly dislike and distrust each other. For instance, since the conservatives kept many old religious traditions intact, it somehow seemed that they had an exclusive right to such longstanding religious and spiritual traditions as adoration, plainchant, pilgrimages, etc.¹³ Consequently, for years it was frowned upon in progressive circles to express a liking for Gregorian chant, as this was considered old-fashioned and conservative. More recently, this polarization and

11 Cf. Staf Hellemans, *De katholieke kerk in Nederland 1960–2020. Van volkskerk naar keuze-kerk*, in: Staf Hellemans / Willem Putman / Jozef Wissink (eds.), *Een kerk met toekomst? De katholieke kerk in Nederland 1960–2020*, Zoetermeer (Meinema) 2003.

12 Cf. Walter Goddijn / Jan Jacobs / Gerard van Tillo (eds.), *Tot vrijheid geroepen. Katholieken in Nederland 1946–2000*, Baarn (Ten Have) 1999.

13 Cf. Peter Nissen, *Tegenstellingen in de katholieke kerk. Voorbij of juist dichterbij?* in: *Vieren. Tijdschrift voor wie werkt aan liturgie* 1, 2008, 4–10.

the once so vehemently contested controversies have mellowed into an uncomfortable ceasefire or impasse.¹⁴

An additional factor that has accelerated the decline is the child sexual abuse scandal in the church, which has received an extraordinary amount of media attention in the Netherlands. With the help of the media and following the example of other countries such as the United States and Ireland, by 2010 victims finally began to be taken seriously by church representatives. These victims were often damaged for life by the abuse, which caused lifelong problems with self-esteem, broken relationships, divorce, depression etc., and sometimes even resulting in suicide.¹⁵ When the facts of the abuse became public, the shock and outrage in Dutch society were great. The once so powerful Dutch Catholic Church found itself under vehement and relentless attack. For a long period, virtually not a day went by without at least some media attention for the atrocities that religious personnel had perpetrated against innocent children. Priests and religious, once revered and admired, were now scorned and sometimes even verbally attacked in the streets. The upshot was that the Catholic Church lost much credit and credibility.¹⁶

The overall decline resulted in rapidly decreasing financial means, which necessitated the closing of churches and the merging of parishes to form large parish clusters. Bishops often imposed this restructuring on parishes against the will of parishioners. In addition, they gradually enforced a stricter adherence to the rules – a policy of restoration that increasingly led to a short circuit between priests and parishioners.¹⁷ It rekindled old anti-authoritarian sentiments among part of the parishioners, especially among older Catholics, and caused polarization, which had decreased over time, to flare up again.

As a result of these developments the Catholic Church in the Netherlands, once strong, is now dwindling at a faster rate than it is in any other country in the

14 Cf. Hellemans, *Zeitalter* (n. 1).

15 Cf. Joseph Beitchman / Kenneth J. Zucker / Jane E. Hood / Granville A. DaCosta / Donna Akman / Erika Cassavia, A Review of the Long-term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse, in: *Child Abuse & Neglect* 16/1, 1992, 101–18. See also Laura Chen, / Mohammad H. Murad / Molly L. Paras / Kristina M. Colbenson / Amelia L. Sattler / Erin N. Goranson / Ali Zirakzadeh, Sexual Abuse and Lifetime Diagnosis of Psychiatric Disorders. Systematic Review and Meta-analysis, in: *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* 85/7, 2010, 618–629.

16 Cf. Hessel Zondag / Rien van Uden / Jacqueline Kasdorp / Ilse Klaassen / Renata Lemmens, Veel kritiek, weinig erosie. Seksueel misbruik en commitment aan de Rooms-Katholieke Kerk in Nederland, Tilburg (KSGV) 2014.

17 Cf. Eric Borgman / Marit Monteiro, Katholicisme, in: Meerten ter Borg / Eric Borgman / Marjo Buitelaar (eds.), *Handboek Religie in Nederland. Perspectief – overzicht – debat*, Zoetermeer (Meinema) 2008, 86–121.

west. Nowhere in Europe has secularization hit as hard as it has in the Netherlands. In 1970 63% of Catholics went to church at least once a week. In 1999 this number was down to only 8%.¹⁸

3 The new spirituality

As the number of Catholics was declining, another phenomenon went on the rise. More and more people are currently searching for meaning, inspiration and transcendence; but they do not want to belong to an institutionalized religion. These are the so-called unbound spiritual seekers. Kronjee and Lampert¹⁹ conducted a survey among a representative sample of Dutch people, asking them about their experiences regarding religion, spirituality and the meaning of life. This resulted in six different categories of life philosophies, one of which consisted of the unbound spiritual seekers: people who do not belong to an organized religion, but who do often believe in God, the transcendent, angels etc. The unbound spiritual seekers are characterized by a transcendent, spiritual orientation, which does not conform to doctrines. People who belong to this emancipated category are often empathetic, focused on harmony with the world and trusting of their own intuition. This category is growing rapidly in Dutch society. A considerable part of the Dutch population – 26% – already falls into this category, slightly more even than the total proportion of Christians (25%), Catholics and Protestants combined.²⁰

The upsurge of people with an interest in spirituality fits into what sociologists of religion have by now come to realize: that the widespread predictions of global secularization have not come true.²¹ Traditional forms of religiosity and faith in the west may have shown a downward trend for decades, in recent years many other types of spirituality have emerged and religion and spirituality are still very much alive – although not in their traditional forms. Humans are turning out to be incorrigibly religious. All kinds of alternative forms of spirituality and spiritual centers are booming and contemporary spiritual authors, movements and schools attract a large following.

18 Cf. J.W. Becker / J.S.W. de Wit, *Secularisatie in de jaren negentig*, Den Haag (SCP) 2000.

19 Gerrit Kronjee / Martijn Lampert, *Leefstijlen en zingeving*, in: Wim B.H.J. van de Donk / A.P. Jonkers / Gerrit J. Kronjee / Rob J.J.M. Plum (eds.), *Geloven in het publieke domein. Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie*, Amsterdam (Amsterdam University Press) 2006, 171–207.

20 Cf. Kronjee / Lampert, *Leefstijlen* (n. 19).

21 See also Loek Halman / Ruud Luijkx / Marga van Zundert, *The Atlas of European Values*, Leiden / Tilburg (Brill and Tilburg University) 2005.

It seems that the theistic institutionalized forms of religion are being replaced at least partly by subjective forms of spirituality. Heelas and Woodhead²² have observed an inclination to the subjective in modern society, which they consider to be the main cause of the growth of the new spirituality. Taylor²³ has also spoken of a “turn to the subject”, which explains the contemporary search for a morally and spiritually meaningful life. The loss of the natural cosmic order since the eighteenth century actually resulted in the modern notion of the self: the meaning and depth that were formerly found in the cosmos are now being found in the inner life. The subject has to turn in to itself to find moral and spiritual resources; personal experiences give access to these. Thus a meaningful life can only be constructed by the individual himself or herself, and can only be shaped through the individual’s own authentic life experiences.

It stands to reason therefore that the focus on doctrine, rules and obedience that is characteristic of traditional religions does not appeal to unbound spiritual seekers. They value personal growth, personal experience, authenticity, autonomy and individuality and they want to live in accordance with their inner experience rather than to live up to expectations that are being imposed from outside.²⁴ They prefer personal ties to institutional ties and refuse to accept limitations to their own individual freedom. Woodhead²⁵ speaks of a striking absence of doctrinal authority and a great freedom of belief among adherents of this new spirituality.

Of course these unbound spiritual seekers cannot hope to be entirely original. They choose elements from existing religious and philosophical systems to fit their needs and experiences. We can say that they exhibit a pluralistic attitude, sometimes also called syncretism, *bricolage*, or do-it-yourself religion.²⁶

For quite some time it was thought that these unbound spiritual seekers, like New Age enthusiasts, were mainly interested in themselves and in their own personal development – leading to negative characterizations such as: spiritual narcissism, religious opportunism, narcissistic self-deification or consumerist

²² Peter Heelas / Linda Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution. Why religion is giving way to spirituality*, Oxford (Blackwell) 2005.

²³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge (Harvard University Press) 2007.

²⁴ Cf. Heelas / Woodhead, *Revolution* (n. 22). Also Peter Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life. New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism*, Hoboken (John Wiley & Sons) 2009.

²⁵ Linda Woodhead, Gender differences in religious practice and significance, in: James Beckford / N. Jay Demerath (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, Los Angeles (Sage) 2007, 550–570. Woodhead links this greater freedom of belief and this absence of doctrinal authority to less male dominance.

²⁶ Cf. Dick Aupers / Stef Houtman, Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket. The social and public significance of New Age spirituality, in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21, 2006, 201–222.

capitalism, etc.²⁷ Contrary to expectations, however, it turns out that unbound spiritual seekers actively engage in causes such as human rights, the environment, peace, etc. While self-realization plays a central role, it does not negatively affect social involvement. Their values are even strikingly similar to Christian values such as charity, justice and compassion.²⁸ Heelas and Woodhead²⁹ found that the new spirituality attracts people who espouse humanistic values such as freedom, the sanctity of life, respect for others and personal development.

The situation in the Netherlands therefore consists on the one hand of a rapidly shrinking Catholic Church and on the other of a rapidly increasing group of spiritual seekers. It will come as no surprise that some believe that this situation presents a challenge or even an opportunity to the church to establish a connection with these spiritual seekers and their religious longings.

In recent years several attempts have indeed been undertaken to attract these seekers and to bridge the gap between what the Catholic Church has to offer on the one hand and contemporary religious needs on the other. In order to address this tension between the Christian tradition and contemporary spiritual desires and needs, a number of spiritual centers have been founded in cities by or in cooperation with parishes, together with Protestant congregations or with financial support from dioceses.³⁰ These urban centers combine attention for personal growth and personal spirituality with a belief in the vitality and the value that the Catholic tradition can have for spiritual seekers.

In addition to such urban spiritual centers there are quite a few similar institutions in monasteries and abbeys. Roman Catholic religious orders and congregations such as the Franciscans, Benedictines and Carmelites etc. have a long tradition of catering to the needs of spiritually interested people by opening their houses to the public and offering different kinds of courses and programs. In addition to these centers, there are also retreat centers, local parishes or congregations with spiritual programs or centers that were originally connected to a Catholic order or congregation. Such centers, although originally set up by religious orders and congregations, are increasingly being run by laypeople who

27 Cf. Jeremy Carrette / Richard King, *Selling Spirituality. The silent takeover of religion*, New York (Routledge) 2005.

28 Cf. Joep de Hart, *Zwevende Gelovigen. Oude religie en nieuwe spiritualiteit*, Amsterdam (Bert Bakker) 2011. See also Kronjee / Lampert, *Leefstijlen* (n. 19).

29 Heelas / Woodhead, *Revolution* (n. 22).

30 Cf. Robert-Jan Peeters, *Een lege ruimte? Bewust christen zijn in een seculiere context*, Paper at symposium 'De Lege Ruimte', The Hague (Boskant) 31 May 2008.

are committed to the mission of the religious and who are trying to continue their work.³¹

In this time and age, when there is such a distance between the Christian tradition and the unbound seekers, these centers are more than ever trying to connect to these unbound spiritual seekers' interests, practices and way of life. Thus in order to attract them, they have started to incorporate into their programs non-Christian contents and methods, deriving from different traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism and Shamanism, in addition to psychological approaches such as psychosynthesis, the enneagram, bodywork etc.³²

4 Christian spiritual centers and their visitors.

It is an interesting question to what extent these Christian spiritual centers, which operate within the context of the church and the Christian tradition, are successful in catering to contemporary spiritual desires and needs. It is difficult to differentiate the new spirituality from traditional Christian religiosity. Although many authors have tried, there are no clear criteria.³³

Together with my colleagues we conducted a study of the programs, courses and mission statements of a total of 51 Christian spiritual centers in the Netherlands that are deliberately adjusting their programs to attract those who are interested in new forms of spirituality.³⁴ The large majority of these centers were

31 The religious orders and congregations nowadays increasingly depend on laypeople, since vocations to the religious life have drastically decreased; there are hardly any young people anymore who are joining a religious order. At the moment the average age of religious in most convents and monasteries is 70 or higher.

32 By doing this the religious orders and congregations are standing in a long tradition. When Christianity was introduced in western Europe, the preachers also incorporated certain habits and traditions of the local people. To this practice we owe – among other things – our Christmas trees and Easter eggs.

33 Cf. Eileen Barker (ed.), *The church without and the God within. Religiosity and/or Spirituality. The Centrality of Religion in social Life. Essays in honour of James A. Beckford*, Aldershot (Ashgate) 2008; Berghuijs / Pieper / Bakker, *Being spiritual* (n. 3), 15–32. See also Zinnbauer et al., *Religion and spirituality* (n. 3) and Hill et al., *Conceptualizing religion* (n. 3).

34 Cf. Anke Bisschops / Kees de Groot / Jos Pieper / Willem Putman, *Inleiding. Zelf zorgen voor je ziel*, in: Kees de Groot / Jos Pieper / Willem Putman (eds.), *Zelf zorgen voor je ziel. De actualiteit van christelijke spirituele centra*, Almere (Parthenon) 2013, 9–15; Kees De Groot / Willem Putman / Anke Bisschops / Jos Pieper / Suzette van IJsel, *Verdieping van geloof – verbreding van de horizon*, in: De Groot et al., *Zelf zorgen*, 167–181; Jos Pieper / Anke Bisschops / Willem Putman / Suzette van IJsel, *Christelijk geïnspireerde spirituele centra. Tussen christelijk geloof en nieuwe spiritualiteit*, in: De Groot et al, *Zelf zorgen*, 45–71; Willem Putman / Anke Bisschops / Jos Pieper /

Roman Catholic: 34. Ten centers were from a Protestant background and seven were ecumenical.

We also conducted a survey among almost 800 visitors of 41 of these centers,³⁵ who filled in a questionnaire about their personal background, motives and experiences. I will discuss a number of the results of this research project.

We first analyzed the content of the courses and programs offered. As was to be expected, part of the courses and programs that were on offer fell within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Examples of these were courses on the letters of Ignatius of Loyola, *lectio divina*, the book of Job, the Bible, Bibliodrama, the Carmelite rule and Benedictine spirituality, and a course called “following in the footsteps of Moses”, etc.

But the majority of courses offered at these centers did not contain traditional Christian content, but content, practices and methods from other religions, or from esoteric psychology or psychotherapeutic approaches. Examples are as diverse as: a Course in Miracles, courses on Buddhism, the philosophy of Eckhart Tolle and the power of the Now, sacred dance, Chi Neng Qigong (ancient Chinese kinematics that strengthen body and mind), the enneagram (a model of human personality and personal growth), Tai Chi (an internal Chinese martial art), mindfulness (a therapeutic method based on Buddhist meditation), Zen meditation, Tarot, mandala painting etc.

In addition to this inventory of the existing centers and their programming, we also conducted a survey among their visitors.

Their average age turned out to be quite high: 61 years. 76% were female and 24% male. Most are well educated: 26% are university graduates and 49% have a college education. Thus the visitors of these centers are certainly not representative of the Dutch population in general: they are older and better educated and women are overrepresented.

In general the satisfaction of the participants was extremely high. The activities largely met their expectations and were evaluated very positively: 89% of the visitors were satisfied or very satisfied (5 point Likert scale) with the course or program they attended.

This same positive attitude was apparent when we looked at their motives for attending and at the reported effects of the activities they participated in. We presented the respondents with a list of 32 possible motives, in addition to an open question where they could list possible other motives.

Suzette van Ijsel, *Bezoekers van Christelijke Spirituele Centra in Nederland*, in: De Groot et al., *Zelf zorgen*, 71–119.

³⁵ Of the participating centers 25 were from a Roman Catholic background, 9 Protestant and 7 ecumenical. We received 795 usable questionnaires from these centers.

As for the motives of the participants: table 1 shows the top ten (this does not include the open question). Between 66% en 41% of the respondents reported that the following motives were applicable to them (they could check more than one item):

Table 1: Motives for participating in the activities of the center.

1	To be inspired	66%
2	To get closer to my own core	48%
3	To develop wisdom	47%
4	To reflect on my life	44%
5	To expand my consciousness	44%
6	To deepen my relationship with God /the mystery /the Other	43%
7	Because I am looking for peace and quiet	41%
8	To meet kindred souls	41%
9	To achieve a better balance between mind and body	39%
10	To better accept life as it comes	36%

We also asked the respondents about the effects of their participation in the programs of the centers by presenting them with 32 possible effects. Table 2 shows their top ten – between 67% and 54% of the respondents reported that the following effects applied to them:

Table 2: Reported effects of participating in the activities of the center.

1	I gained better insight into myself	67%
2	I came closer to my own core	66%
3	I developed more wisdom	66%
4	I am more inspired in my life	62%
5	I found more peace and quiet in myself	60%
6	My faith/spirituality/religion has deepened	60%
7	I feel more connected with other people	56%
8	My consciousness has expanded	55%
9	My mental health has improved	54%
10	I am better able to accept life as it comes	54%

There is a clear correspondence between motives and effects. The top-ten reasons for attending the courses and the subsequent effects which the participants

reported are practically identical. If we consider motive 4 – “to reflect on my life” – as being related to effect 1 – “I gained better insight into myself” – then we can say that the 10 items in table 1 correspond to items 4, 2, 3, 1, 8, 6, 5, 7, 9 and 10 respectively of table 2.³⁶ This is consonant with the fact that the respondents are generally satisfied and content with what the centers have to offer.

If we look at the contents of the above motives and effects, their subjective and individualistic character stands out. They all speak more or less about self-improvement: more peace, wisdom, mental health, self-insight etc. The single theme that is different is motive number 8 “To meet kindred souls”, which corresponds to reported effect number 7 “I feel more connected with other people”.

These and other results from our research project reveal that the participants of these centers have a lot in common with the characteristics of the unbound spiritual seekers discussed at the beginning of this article. Like them, the visitors of Christian centers are interested in personal growth and in personal experience; they are individualistic and show a definite “turn to the subjective”, as Taylor and Heelas and Woodhead have described it.

Thus at first sight it seems that the Christian spiritual centers are indeed successful in attracting unbound spiritual seekers.

However, we also investigated the respondents’ religious socialization and commitment; see tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: Religious Socialization.

Roman Catholic	Protestant	Other Religion	Spiritual tradition	Humanistic	None
44%	41%	2%	2%	3%	9%

Table 4: Prior connection with parish/congregation/faith community.

Yes in past and present	Yes in past, not in present	Not in past, yes in present	Never
52%	32%	6%	11%

To our surprise it turned out that the vast majority of the visitors (85%) had been socialized into Christianity in childhood.

In total, almost 90% of the visitors were at one time or are still connected with a faith community. A majority of 58% is currently connected with a faith commu-

³⁶ We cannot however exclude the possibility that the reported correspondence between motives and effects is an artefact, i.e. (partly) due to cognitive dissonance reduction.

nity. A fairly large group (32%) had such a connection at some time in the past, but has since broken it off; only 11% never had any connection with a faith community.

In another part of the questionnaire we asked the respondents to what extent they felt connected to a parish, congregation or faith community (table 5).

Table 5: Current connection to parish/congregation/faith community.

(Very) strong connection	Moderate connection	Not connected
38%	26%	36%

It turns out that 64% of the respondents feel a moderate to (very) strong connection to a local church. Through questions in another part of the questionnaire we found that as many as 51% are active volunteers within their local faith community.

The connection with a local community was stronger than with the church as an institution. Only 51% (versus 64%) answered in the affirmative when asked whether they belonged to a religious/spiritual group or church.

This means that the programming of the Christian spiritual centers, which is directed at individualistic unbound spiritual seekers, for a large part attracts people who feel connected with their traditional churches – or better: with their local community – and who at the same time exhibit a seeking, individualistic and subjective attitude. Apparently these Christians are able to combine both attitudes. In other words these people are spiritual seekers, but they are not unbound.

5 Analysis

Contrary to expectations, therefore, a majority of the participants, who show many of the characteristics of the unbound spiritual seekers, simultaneously have a high level of commitment to their local church. The approach which the Christian spiritual centers are taking, which is intended to attract the unbound spiritual seekers, is in fact mainly attracting Christians. What conclusions can be drawn from this finding? Does it mean that the spiritual centers are largely failing in their attempts to attract unbound spiritual seekers?

Perhaps this is the case. But maybe the categories of the unbound spiritual seekers and those who are connected in some form to the traditional churches are not as mutually exclusive as has been thought. Our results indicate that religious

believers too are engaged in *bricolage*; or rather, even people who feel connected with a specific religious tradition nowadays feel attracted to certain aspects of other traditions and to personal growth methods.³⁷ They too are highly individualized and interested in personal growth and personal experience. This is no reason for surprise, since of course they too are children of their time.

The question is whether these respondents are representative of the general Christian population in the Netherlands as a whole. We cannot rule out that this is a special group of discontented parishioners, who have little in common with the general group of churchgoers. It is clear that they are in fact discontented: as much as 54% is disappointed in what the church has to offer in the field of spirituality and in the lack of interest in their perceptions and experiences. The local religious community is judged less negatively: 40% experience too little attention and space for their own personal questions and quest. And 68% regard the activities in the centers as a welcome addition to their own spiritual formation in the local church.

The participants appreciate it that their own existential questions are connected with a spiritual tradition in the centers. To some extent this also happens in their local communities. But they often have more difficulties with regard to the church as an institution. As their responses to the open question that we asked in the survey show, they often regard the official church as too rigid in dealing with its own tradition.

Further research is needed to determine to what extent this discontent is also prevalent among Christians who do not visit these spiritual centers. Certainly at least some contemporary churchgoers also have the attitude of searching that is so characteristic of the growing group of spiritual seekers. Nor can it be ruled out that this group will grow in the future. Considering the visitors' high level of education, they may be at the forefront of a growing development – just as yoga and meditation in the west were initially only practiced by a highly educated elite and later became more mainstream.

A last question that must be discussed here is how the church can or should respond to this situation, if it is indeed true that this group of Christians, whose main interest is in inspiration, self-understanding and balance in their lives, represents a substantial or growing part of the “flock”. In that case, it may be warranted to give more attention to personal experience, inspiration and personal growth, while placing less emphasis on objective moral requirements. This seems especially important at the level of local faith communities, as this is where the

³⁷ In quite a few monasteries the monks themselves practice yoga, Zen Buddhism and Zen meditation. These Eastern meditative practices seem to fit well with Christian spirituality.

needs of spiritual seekers will be met or not be met. The institutional level is nonetheless also important, if only because it can give local communities more freedom.

De Dijn³⁸ has advocated a bold viewpoint: if the church really wants to adapt to modern times, as so many are hoping it will, then it needs to adapt to expressive individualism, and to respect the postmodern idea of individual freedom and self-creation. In what way could the church do this? By putting its tradition of meditation, rituals and symbols at the service of the individual quest for spirituality, thus catering to people's religious and spiritual needs. In addition, the church should make full use of modern communication technologies, especially the new social media. Any individual or group can then take from the treasure of Christian spirituality what they need and what they consider useful – as is already the case for example with the Jewish Kabbalah and Buddhism. The church has a wealth of rituals and traditions and centuries of experience with meditation, contemplation, mysticism and spirituality which she could capitalize on. The church also needs to stop completely to judge the lifestyle of individuals from the perspective of traditional morality. The response Pope Francis recently gave when he was asked about homosexuals: "If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" is a promising development in precisely that direction.

38 Herman de Dijn, *De maatschappij zal de modernisering van de kerk nooit genoeg vinden*, in: *Tertio* 690, 2013.