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## Three Types of Liquid Religion

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*This article explores ways to think of religion using Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity. The concept of liquid religion opens up perspectives for both "new" and "old" social forms of religion that seems to flourish within a liquid milieu. Attention is also drawn to the types of relationship between solid and liquid religion. The first type consists of liquid phenomena in the religious sphere: religious events, small communities, global religious networks and virtual communities. The second type consists of phenomena on the boundaries between the religious and the secular sphere, such as religious services in a hospital or a prison. The third type consists of meetings and collective activities outside the religious sphere, such as those in the political and cultural spheres, which nonetheless have important religious qualities. This typology is used to make general observations on the basis of empirical research, mainly conducted in the Netherlands.*

In liquid modernity, solid institutions, such as class and the family, have eroded. Instead, the access to networks of communication becomes an important factor for social participation (Bauman 2000). Such is Zygmunt Bauman's view of the structure of contemporary Western societies, characterized by others as postmodern or late modern. Religion is included in the series of institutions that are supposed to have fallen apart because of the changing social fabric. Thus, in a (crude) sense, the secularization thesis persists in the work of a key author in social theory—although the same author has pointed out how modernity produces its own ontological insecurity, which may foster a typical, self-oriented religiosity.

In Bauman's view, religion as far as it is collectively organized, is bound to play the role of a countermovement. In my view, this approach fails to

perceive the collective dimension of religion, including in liquid modernity, such as becomes apparent in religious events, small communities, global religious networks and virtual communities, as well as religious meetings and collective activities outside the religious sphere, for instance, in the cultural, political and medical spheres.

This article focuses on Christian religion outside the congregation, mainly within the Dutch religious landscape. The Netherlands constitute an interesting case in this respect, since it is a country where the congregational model was extremely successful, yet lost significance, within a few decades. My interest is not so much in individualized spirituality. What I am interested in is the collective level, more specifically, the way religious community is taking shape in a context of crossing boundaries, and shifting and blurring boundaries between institutionalized religion and the surrounding religious field, and between the religious and the secular sphere. My question is: what place is there, still, for religious community? This implies a question of religion and a question of community in liquid modernity.

I will take my point of departure in Bauman's theory of liquid modernity and his discussion of the role of religion. Then, I will present an alternative view. I will illustrate this view with some examples and conclude with an evaluation of the concept of liquid religion.

### **Religion and community in liquid modernity<sup>1</sup>**

The first question is about religion: Is there such thing as religion in liquid modernity? Zygmunt Bauman (2000), taking up insights of Ulrich Beck, Manuel Castells, Michel Foucault, and Anthony Giddens, sketches a world where fixed class and status boundaries are vanishing, people have more choice than ever, and identity is no longer prescribed, but has to be constructed. In solid modernity, people were determined by their role in the production process; in liquid modernity, they are determined by their role in consumer society. The market has become more powerful than the state, the church, or the family once were. We are tempted to buy the products that provide elements of an "authentic" identity. We have to choose: what to wear, what to do, what to eat, what to believe. Even leading a traditional life, and clinging to a religious tradition, must be by choice. Religion, however, does not receive much attention in his work.

According to Bauman (1997, 197), liquid modernity, or postmodernity as he used to put it, does not generate a demand for religion, but for identity experts. Following Kolakowski, Bauman identifies religion with the

at risk in society? awareness of human insufficiency. People living in risk society do not appreciate the religious message of vulnerability, but are longing for the reassurance that they are able to deal with the uncertainties and need a short introduction in the way they can do this. They need experts.

Whereas religion, according to Bauman, may be characterized as the communication of peak experiences to the people by religious virtuosi, in liquid modernity all are “sensation-gatherers.” Since these experiences are difficult to communicate, this behaviour generates new uncertainties and therefore a new demand for experts. I disagree with the opinion of Bauman (following Maslow) that religion is “based” in peak experiences. First, because it leaves out the communal dimension of religion. Second, because sociology and anthropology of religion have shown that religion occupies a place—sometimes important, often unimportant—in everyday life. Religion has to do with work and education, with making love and getting sick, with giving birth and dying. Besides that, it is remarkable that the idea that religious experts may enter or rather have helped to create the field of identity expertise (De Groot 1998) is far from Bauman’s line of thinking. Bauman fails to “appreciate the continuous importance of religion throughout history, including the modern period” (Beckford 1996, 33).

Instead of elaborating my own definition of religion, I will focus on the social sphere that is generally considered as the religious field, and will proceed to investigate how the boundaries of this field are being discussed, how boundaries are historically changing, and how the distinctiveness of the religious field appears to be regarded as less important than before.

The second question is about community. Elsewhere, Bauman (2001) is equally negative about the possibilities for community. On the one hand, people are forced to be, and to act as, individuals. On the other hand, large proportions are only individuals *de jure*. They suffer under their dependency of structures beyond their influence, but their suffering does not create solidarity—at least not by itself. This use of the concept of community has normative qualities, as will be shown later. Furthermore, community seems to be absent or present—with no options in between. Again, I will not present an alternative definition of community. Instead, I will speak of community, or communal qualities, as a way of referring to contact between people associated with a sense of belonging. In this general way of speaking, I will tentatively include the possibility of temporary communal ties.

Since Bauman himself does not provide a systematic account of religion in liquid modernity, we have to construct his position, combining these two analyses. It seems, then, that in liquid modernity only two options

are left for religious communities, such as churches. Firstly, a *community of equals* may be invented and imagined in religious rituals, beliefs, and ethical behaviour. Like an ethnic community, this religious community does not address the actual social networks. In the real world, people of different backgrounds and of different religions are interdependent. The unification of one segment of the population means segregation, a flight from reality, as long as the existing inequality is not addressed. Such a church provides the experience of belonging. It is a surrogate community, however, since the people in the church are not the people one works with, lives with, exists with.

This “ghettoization” corresponds with the only “specifically post-modern form of religion” Bauman discerns: *fundamentalism*. In accordance with the dominant point of view in sociology of religion, Bauman considers this phenomenon as fully contemporary, both embracing and resisting against modern developments. Bauman focuses on a particular inconsistency: the choice of fundamentalism liberates individuals from the agony of choice. The submission to God and the group promises to unload the individual from the uncertainty of choice-making. Hence, this category is of a paradoxical nature: it fits post-modernity precisely because it doesn’t.

The second theoretical option for a religious community would probably be the *aesthetic*, “instant” community. With this term, Bauman refers to momentary, in his view merely superficial, experiences of community. One dresses up for the party, takes part in its rituals and experiences a connectedness with the people in the crowd. Gathering to participate in a spectacular event may provide a sense of being part of something that transcends the individual. For a moment, the togetherness of individuals may provide a sense of community without ethical or long-term commitments (Bauman 2001, 69–70). Religious festivals may provide good examples of this. According to Bauman’s judgment, however, “genuine” community cannot be found in these cases. A person does not join a community temporarily. Therefore, “cloakroom” communities and “carnival” communities are not “genuine” (comprehensive and lasting) communities, but symptoms and, sometimes, causal factors of the social disorder of liquid modernity (Bauman 2000, 199–201).

The idea of “aestetization” corresponds with Bauman’s view of sects and churches, as having become irrelevant for “serious matters.” They may be reduced to leisure commodities. If not, Bauman suggests, they must have appropriated “other functions than catering for the preoccupation with the mysteries of existence and death” (Bauman 1997, 173). Apparently, it

is hard to imagine that “real” religion might be important in post-modern societies.

In one sentence: Bauman does not leave room for religion in liquid modernity, *except* for fundamentalism. There is, however, a third option. This option is implicit in Bauman’s own vision of how people can live together in less misery or no misery at all. The moral commitment that Bauman displays entails an empirical option that has been left out of his sociological analysis: “If there is to be a community in the world of the individuals, it can only be (and needs to be) a community woven together from sharing and mutual care; a community of concern and responsibility for the equal right to be human and the equal ability to act on that right” (Bauman 2001, 149–150). So, after all, there *is* the possibility of community within the context of individualization. However, the *community of individuals* is rather a critical category than an empirical reality. Examples are scarce, or absent as in the case of religious communities. On the one hand, this concept refers to a utopian ideal; on the other, it provides a criterion for evaluating the present day situation. It is a concept that belongs to the semantic field of hope.

In fact, all of these three options have a strong evaluative character. I suggest a more formal view on liquid religious communities to precede this evaluation. Earlier, the British theologian Pete Ward (2002) has called for a *liquid church* and identified examples of it. He argues against the identification of the church with the solid modern church—the organized congregation—and points to unexpected ways of being church that exist within contemporary culture: small groups of Christians who support each other, read the Bible and praise God; events such as the Greenbelt Festival (with music, meetings and worship); Alpha-courses; and activities within youth ministry; and the presence of the gospel in the old and new media. Elsewhere, I have argued that his approach takes the sting out of Bauman’s social theory (De Groot 2006, 91). Yet Ward does challenge us to stop identifying religious community with a particular (modern) historical phenomenon.

In my view, Ward is particularly concerned with contemporary Christian culture, claiming that it is a setting in which one may detect fluid ways of being church. I regard contemporary Christian culture as one type of fluid way of being church, beside others, varying in their position with respect to the religious field. Ward’s examples are derived from outside the institutional church, or what is usually associated with it, but they still refer to the (Christian) religious field.

A second category consists of organized religious (ecclesial) initiatives in a secular setting, such as a religious service in a hospital or on television. These activities take place in a setting that is not controlled by religious organizations, although these activities still depend on them in a more or less obvious way.

A third category consists of secular-religious phenomena: happenings in the secular sphere, at the boundaries with the religious field, or making these boundaries irrelevant. Examples are particular theatre plays, exhibitions, concerts, or the political event and the multicultural interfaith project which I will be discussing here.

### **Community building within religious culture**

Youth churches constitute a striking example of religious community in contemporary Christian culture (Roeland 2005, 2007). During past years, several groups of (evangelical) young persons have organized swinging religious meetings in several parts of Western Europe. In the Netherlands, a vast website has facilitated youngsters to start their own “youth church” ([www.jeugdkerken.nl](http://www.jeugdkerken.nl)). Instructions can be downloaded from the site, and are to be combined with personal creativity and the use of existing networks. Despite the name, however, the intention is not to form a separate church, but to present an alternative to the existing church services, which are considered boring.

A second example, which I will develop a bit further, is constituted by World Youth Days. The World Youth Days is one of the mega-events that Pope John Paul II initiated. Since 1986, almost every two years, hundreds of thousands (Cologne) or even millions (Manilla) of (young) people have accepted his invitation to participate in a large-scale religious event in a city within the Roman Catholic sphere of influence.

The word “event” is used as a technical term to designate a particular public gathering that bears resemblances, both with collective rituals (such as a commemoration), and with spectacles (such as the Olympic Games). With events, the distinction between participants and spectators tends to become blurred. Usually, there is a crowd involved, which is why events often take place in the open air.

Events are considered phenomena that are typical for the “experience society” (*Erlebnisgesellschaft*) (Schulze 1992). Sharnberg and Ziebertz (2002) derive six criteria for, or rather, sensitizing elements of the concept of, an event.

1. An event creates a definition of reality which is shared by its participants.

2. An event offers a post-traditional type of community: participants commit themselves for a short time to a scene with a certain life style.
3. An event is accompanied by signs and symbols expressing a sense of belonging.
4. The participants in an event embody the event for the outside world.
5. The unique character of the event contributes to the participants' experience of being unique.
6. Whereas participants are motivated by the desire to experience something, organizers have their own goals, for example, to sell or to convince.

Although the World Youth Days do belong to the family of events, such as music festivals or the celebration of the World Cup, one aspect is absent. The World Youth Days are hardly a public event. Participation is carefully prepared in parishes and youth clubs. Visitors are not just participating temporarily in a singular event, but also members of the multinational Roman Catholic Church, attending its biannual youth conference. The Church, however, pays a price for moulding this as an event: the experience of the event is more appreciated than orthodoxy, the event is regarded as more important than the Church, and the Church gets involved in a setting it mistrusts. Events generate their own dynamic. Being there with kindred spirits and experiencing something special are important (Kregting 2005; Kregting and Harperink 2005). In this context, representatives of the official Church tend to operate as stars in a media event.

Interviews and a survey among German participants indicate that World Youth Days produce the experience of being part of a worldwide Christian community, an experience that stands in contrast with the everyday experience of being an exception within a secular world. Besides providing the opportunity to have religious experiences with peers, this international youth meeting has effects in life after the World Youth Days. Research among Dutch participants in Cologne (Kregting and Harperink 2005) confirms that youngsters make friends and keep in contact with people they have met, often using e-mail. German participants at the WYD in Toronto (2002) indicated that not only did they feel motivated to cooperate with the WYD in Cologne, but they also felt encouraged to testify to their faith. To a certain extent, the event may be characterized as a post-traditional type of community: a short-term meeting of strangers, among



whom one may have the experience to “be oneself.”

Bauman would perhaps call this a cloakroom community. Yet this is only half the story. What is left out is the tension between the organizing (solid) Roman Catholic Church and the fluidity of the event. The convictions of the participants only partly correspond with the intentions of the Church. Youngsters rightly perceive that the Church wishes to express the importance of community and of Jesus, and they largely agree with this. They do not, however, perceive “loyalty to the Church” as an important motive of the Church, and still less do they agree to this objective.

This tension between “prescribed order and actual practice” became apparent in the concluding celebration of the Eucharist in Cologne. Although in Roman Catholic teaching the Eucharist is considered “source and summit of the Christian life,” participants were more impressed by the preceding vigil. Probably because of this vigil, the visible participation of the wearied youngsters was rather limited. Only a few of them sang and prayed along with the celebrants on the podium, far away from “**the maddening crowd.**” In this setting, Benedict XVI (2005), the former professor in systematic theology Joseph Ratzinger, rendered a well-wrought sermon. After expounding the meaning of the Eucharist, he made two critical remarks on religious youth culture. In the first remark he criticized religious seekers for turning religion into a commodity:<sup>2</sup>

And so, together with forgetfulness of God there is a kind of new explosion of religion. I have no wish to discredit all the manifestations of this phenomenon. There may be sincere joy in the discovery. But to tell the truth, religion often becomes almost a consumer product.

People choose what they like, and some are even able to make a profit from it. But religion sought on a “do-it-yourself” basis cannot ultimately help us. It may be comfortable, but at times of crisis we are left to ourselves.

Ratzinger’s second remark expresses his critical appreciation of the emerging so-called “new movements” and communities within Roman Catholicism, such as Focolare, stressing the necessity “to preserve communion with the Pope and with the Bishops. It is they who guarantee that we are not seeking private paths.”

It is interesting that the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, while performing at the centre of a religious youth event, criticizes this very culture of fluidity. Solid church and liquid church seem to be entangled in a complex relationship at the World Youth Days. The institutional church and the various “new movements” it co-operates with, facilitate an event that generates its own dynamics of merchandizing, providing spectacle,

Is this a play on Hardy? If so, Hardy’s novel is “Far from the Madding Crowd”

and satisfying needs. Youngsters use the event for their own purposes, especially, to meet other young people and to experience a feeling of solidarity and spirituality. Being isolated from their daily routine, participants may feel at home with strangers. This dynamic of strangeness and familiarity is enforced by the circumstance that young people from all over the world are together at one place .

The interest and approach of the institutional church at the same time contributed to and tended to conflict with the dynamics of the event. Apparently, the church seeks to play a role in contemporary youth culture, and succeeds, to different degrees, in doing so, depending on the appreciation of this involvement by the participating audience. Church-based religion seems to be of continuing importance in liquid modernity. The World Youth Days represent both the event-culture and religion, with its emphasis on respectively hierarchy and life transient.

In one respect, the World Youth Days could, in Bauman's categories, count as an example of fluidity. This event illustrates the dominance of consumerism. Furthermore, this event proclaims that it is a personal choice to give expression to a Catholic identity. Religious experts continue their pastoral power tactics in a new context. Young people are taught how to live as Christians. At the same time, however, this event resonates with Bauman's account of fundamentalism. Youngsters are taught to submit to the will of God, which is expressed by the clerical hierarchy, because of the individual's insufficiency. Thus this event has consequences for everyday life. Can both of these qualifications apply to the same phenomenon? Or should we acknowledge that the discussion on how to deal with flexibility and consumer culture is an internal discussion within the religious sphere as well? Whereas Bauman only leaves room for religion, in the form of fundamentalism, as a counter-position to liquid modernity, this example demonstrates how religion can be present right in the middle of liquid modernity.

### **Ecclesial initiatives in a secular *milieu***

The second fluid type of religious community can be detected in meetings that have been initiated by the church in a secular setting, are attended by believers and non-believers alike, and generate a particular experience of religious community.

One example is the continuously changing community of patients, volunteers, staff and other participants of a church service in a hospital (Steinkamp 1997, 242–243). In solid modernity, the care of souls (*cura*

*animarum*) for those in hospitals and other total institutions is organized separately, so that those parishioners who are remote from their parish priest are still within reach of the church. In liquid modernity, the hospital chaplain (who may now receive different labels) encounters a fluid community of patients, volunteers and staff from all kinds of denominations and religions, or with alternative and secular worldviews. In contemporary Dutch society, this chaplain may or may not operate from a background in organized religion (or humanism). He or she is a salaried member of the hospital staff and is regarded as a specialist in spiritual counseling. Since most chaplains are still trained in theological faculties and seminaries and have received a formal mission from their church, this situation entails a tension between the perspective of the organizing solid church and the impact of the setting where people are brought together because of their physical disabilities, regardless of their religious orientation. It appears that this situation provides an impetus to all kinds of contested ritual experiments (Post *et al.* 2003). Dutch hospitals often have ecumenical services, including Holy Communion. The Roman Catholic sacrament of extreme unction is often stripped from its specific denominational and clerical characteristics and administered by chaplains (who are not ordained priests) as “a blessing of the sick.”

A second example is provided by religious broadcasting on radio, television, or on the world-wide-web. From the encyclical *Miranda Prorsus* (1957) onwards, the Roman Catholic Church has praised the opportunities that television provides to reach numerous people at the same time with the same message, although traditional ecclesiastical attention for preaching and personal contact is considered preferable (*Communio et Progressio* [1971]; *Redemptoris Missio* [1990]). Television is considered as being a wonderful medium that can be put to use for the benefit of evangelization in particular. In reality, such arguments acted as a support to Catholic initiatives to access private ground by taking broadcasting time. This right is under discussion, in the Netherlands. A member of parliament from the conservative-liberal party suggested that special broadcasting time for religious and humanistic movements ought to be considered as an archaic privilege (*NRC Handelsblad*, 5 January 2006). Why should they not enter into competition with the other stalls in the market place of television that finance their programmes by means of sponsoring, conditional sales, and telephone games? Is it up to the state to guarantee that Christians, Jews, Muslims, humanists, Hindus and Buddhists be allowed a single hour of broadcasting time?

Besides this rather radical criticism from outside the Church on the phenomenon of broadcasting services, there has also been opposition from within the Church. The German theologian Karl Rahner (1959, 187–200) was strongly against producing a celebration of Mass *via* television, in particular to outsiders, who would consider it a most bizarre performance. It would be impossible for television cameras to convey the mystery of faith. He adds a theological argument against the case for broadcasting services, other than for those who are unable to attend the services physically. From the perspective of the solid church, services on television have always been legitimized as an alternative to real church services for the sick and elderly.

Televangelists, however, have developed this service into a genre of its own. Instead of showing liturgy that is experienced elsewhere, “tele-visual liturgy” is produced. Here, all possibilities of cameras, directing and editing are used in order to present a program with ecclesial qualities (including offertory).

Research indicates, however, that religious broadcastings of traditional churches, too, are experienced as participating in being church, rather than serving merely as an alternative to physical participation. Watching the Eucharist on television has ritual qualities. Most viewers prepare themselves for the broadcast in one way or another, by making a point of sitting down for it, with or without a service book. Half the viewers pray or sing along. The television may function as a home altar, with burning candles in silence. One respondent (answering an open question) writes about having invented a private ritual, following the liturgy on television.

I always put a piece of bread ready and hold the bowl with the bread in it during the consecration. So during communion at least I take part “symbolically.” It does not bother me whether or not this is legitimate in the eyes of the official church. It is to me and after all, that is what counts.

Here, the fluidization of a religious ritual is vividly expressed. Viewers regard the act of watching as important for their religious life. Some experience some kind of solidarity with other viewers and churchgoers on the screen; others use the broadcasting for their private ritual. Both categories are part of the same virtual faith community (De Groot 2007).

From the perspective of solid church, this type of soul care would be categorized under the label of special chaplaincies, such as the hospital, military, student, or industrial chaplaincy. The perspective of liquid modernity draws attention to these religious services as celebrations of a particular (for some permanent, for others momentary) community, and to pastoral

counselling as a practice that serves the individuals in this community. The distinctions between believers and non-believers, various religions and various denominations lose their all-determining status. In those pluralistic and/or secularized cases where ministers can hardly maintain a strictly denominational orientation, a post-denominational, or even post-Christian, orientation may turn out to unite diverse (religious and non-religious) definitions of the situation.

In these cases, physical and virtual ecclesial initiatives contribute to the (communal) lives of individuals, partly by supporting these individuals in their various contexts, partly by constituting a sense of community among people who happen to share a common (virtual) space. Whereas Bauman identifies religion with segregated communities, delivered from the constraint of choice, religion also involves the actual social lives of individuals and religion may be involved in the constitution of communities "lite." From Bauman's perspective, activities by organized religion in "total institutions" such as hospitals, prisons and the army, may even provide the better opportunities for a "community of individuals."

### **Secular-religious phenomena**

The third type of liquid religion would be presented by those communities and meetings in a secular setting without involvement of organized religion, that resemble religious meetings and communities. Examples can be found in rock concerts, theatre plays, management courses and all sorts of events.

The first event I would like to present takes us back to the spring of 2002 in the Netherlands. The political climate in those days was dominated by the rapid political rise of columnist and debater Pim Fortuyn, who shocked the political establishment with his unconventional, theatrical approach to political debate. After a career as a troublemaker in Dutch sociology, Fortuyn took on a career as a "dandy in politics" (Pels 2003). In columns, speeches, and interviews he not only articulated an aversion against the role of Islam (as "culturally backward") in Dutch society, but more generally, put into words the ambivalent wish of late modern individuals for both a communal life and an individual one. Moreover, he embodied this ambivalence, combining stories about his dark room experiences with the propagation of traditional family values. He detected the need for a parental figure to lead the Dutch nation to the Promised Land, and subsumed this role himself (Fortuyn 2002, 237–238).

His attempt to become the prime minister of the country promised to

turn out successful. Near the end of a tumultuous election campaign, Fortuyn and the civilians who had been gathered to support him had a good chance of becoming the second largest political party in the Netherlands. The shock that followed his assassination on 6 May 2002, at the premises of the broadcasting studios, was only slightly tempered when it appeared that the offender was not a militant Muslim, but a militant ecological activist. His death generated a general sense of danger, and was followed by a series of smaller and larger ceremonies. Within hours, websites of condolence appeared on the Internet, which received some hundreds of thousands of visitors. At several places in the country, spontaneous commemorations took place; mourning people brought flowers, teddy bears and written messages. A huge audience witnessed his body being transported to the cathedral of Rotterdam, where people gathered to pay respect.

The funeral ceremony was broadcast live on television, although the camera was put at a distance during the Eucharist. The cathedral was filled with family, (political) friends, members of the provisional political party that Pim Fortuyn had formed in the preceding months, members of the cabinet and Dutch celebrities. An election poster displaying his photograph served as the usual picture of the deceased. Outside the church, large groups of people gathered, shouting slogans (“Lefties go home”) and singing songs (“You’ll never walk alone”) that could be heard inside. Contrary to expectations, the bishop of Rotterdam hardly spoke about the person and the ideas of the deceased. His sermon—on the Good Samaritan—explained in general terms what it means to love your neighbour (Luke 10, 25–37). Only the careful listener could detect his critical reference to Fortuyn’s political program, in proclaiming the message that love for one’s neighbour is not restricted to people sharing the same nationality. In a more personal speech, a brother of the deceased did reflect on his brother’s political ideas, stating that he did not belong to the extreme right. His speech was responded to with applause and functioned as a bridge to the informal rituals outside. These rituals took over after the service had ended. Outside, the coffin was welcomed with applause. This invented ritual was continued during the transportation to the cemetery in Fortuyn’s hometown.

The event was characterized by popular devotion overshadowing the central role of the church. A more or less temporary community was formed that was united in its grief and opposition against the left-wing Dutch establishment. Stimulated by the media-attention and initiatives of Fortuyn’s supporters, a personality cult that had already started during his

life grew to national proportions. People dramatically expressed a range of emotions, such as fear of more violence and anger at the authorities (labelled as “the left wing *church*”) for “demonizing” him in the political debate and not providing him with the necessary protection. Besides and through all that, people mourned for his death and expressed their determination to continue his mission. Probably, this collective ritual provided people with the opportunity as well to venture their personal emotions of dissatisfaction, hope and despair.

The salience of this event for people’s everyday life was probably limited. The event did, however, have a large impact on the following elections, bringing 26 members of Fortuyn’s party into Dutch parliament. A coalition was formed with the Christian Democrats and the Conservative Liberals. It appeared, however, that “the spirit of Pim” was not a solid basis for governing the country, nor for party politics. The cabinet lasted only 10 months and Fortuyn’s party broke up into fragments.

As with the World Youth Days, we recognize elements that are familiar from ritual studies: huge numbers of people coming together and moving from one place to the other; shouting slogans and names; applauding and, more general, the expression of emotional commitment with one person in particular. In the case of Fortuyn’s funeral, grief and discontent; in the case of the World Youth Days: joy and devotion.

Looking more closely at Fortuyn’s funeral, we see a mosaic of rituals. Official and informal rituals take their places in a configuration that is not free of tensions. Yet together they present a picture, of which the pattern could be described. The official part had a small yet central place in the course of events. The church fulfilled its function in Dutch civil religion. Emotions and political opinions were largely absent here, apart from minor concessions and a subtle pinprick. Although the Mass appeared live on TV, the message it transmitted was that this was a ceremony for **the** invited only. The popular rituals were grouped around this official ritual and were partly a reaction to this. Here, emotions and political opinions were fully present. The church occupied an isolated position at, nonetheless, the centre of Fortuyn’s funeral, which was largely dominated by popular rituals. These rituals were drawn from various repertoires (e.g. football matches) and partly linked with political ideologies, such as fervent nationalism.

In the World Youth Days, on the other hand, we observed an event that is facilitated by the church. Here, the highest person in the church hierarchy is presented as a performer and a media personality. The central official

ritual (the Eucharist) held an isolated position within the whole event as well. Yet, in this case, the whole event was framed within the defining boundaries of the Roman Catholic Church. The World Youth Days are characterized by the ambivalence between doctrine and hierarchy on the one hand and experience and egalitarian participation on the other.

In both cases, the interest and approach of the institutional church at the same time contributed to and tended to conflict with the dynamics of the event. Apparently, the church seeks to play a role in both civil religion and contemporary youth culture, and succeeds, to different degrees, in doing so, depending on the appreciation of this involvement by the participating audience. Church based religion seems to be of continuing importance in liquid modernity.

Pim Fortuyn's funeral is a secular event commemorating the death of a national celebrity. His death is not put under taboo, but an object of ritualizing. In this process, there is a central, though isolated, role for the church. The words and rituals of its liturgy express human contingency and belief in eternal life. This official religious ritual is accompanied critically by the invented rituals of the people.

A second example, which in a way is a reaction to events like these, is constituted by a multi-cultural project in the Dutch suburb of Zoetermeer, near The Hague (Van der Ploeg and De Groot 2006). The core of the project was an exposition about more than 50 residents from various religious and atheist backgrounds. Other activities were lectures, inter-religious meetings, and touring the sacred sites of the town.

This project was initiated by the staff of the Zoetermeer City Museum and a journalist of the local newspaper (*Haagsche Courant*). They were strongly motivated not only to pay attention to religion in Zoetermeer as an interesting theme, but also to encourage people from various cultures and religions to meet and to get to know each other.

"What do our city dwellers believe?" This is the intriguing question which staff at the Zoetermeer<sup>3</sup> City Museum asked itself. Intriguing not only because it is only recently that modern times have become a topic in museums, but also because Dutch public institutions used to leave matters of religion to others (Kennedy 1995). Encouraged, but not caused, by the religiously motivated attacks on the Twin Towers (9/11/2001), these communities were more and more defined along religious lines. At the 2002 New Year reception, the mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen, addressed this re-introduction of religion in supposedly secular Dutch society.<sup>4</sup> Surprising many supporters of the "Clash of civilizations" thesis, he suggested



involving religious, in particular Islamic, communities, in his mission to “keep the citizens of Amsterdam together.”

The political climate in those days was dominated by the rapid political rise of Pim Fortuyn. His violent death did not diminish the popularity of his ideas. The pragmatic approach of Job Cohen, in line with the so-called Dutch tradition of religious tolerance, had to stand up against the growing conviction that Islamic religion was an obstacle to the integration of immigrants from Turkey and Morocco. The view of Job Cohen, however, did appeal to the staff of the museum, and a journalist of the local newspaper (*Haagsche Courant*). Soon, a third party joined them, a minister from the local Dutch Reformed Church. He perceived the opportunity to make use of the secular space of the museum to organize the inter-religious meetings that he had long wanted.

Together they planned a half-year programme centred around a portrait gallery of inhabitants from various religious backgrounds, photographed with an object that symbolized their devotion, and accompanied by a quote that expresses their personal faith. After the opening event, a series of activities were to follow: World Cycle Tours in your own Home Town (visiting various places of worship), Foreign Food (having a meal in an ethnic environment), weekly lectures and inter-faith meetings, two projects for religious education (primary and secondary school), and a concluding manifestation in the City Hall.

The opening of the exposition (9 September 2004) took place within a tense national context. Fear of Islamist terrorism and street crime by Moroccan youngsters was prominent in the media. The exposition received an extraordinary amount of national media attention (the major newspapers, the Netherlands national news agency, magazines, radio), not only because it provided a fascinating glimpse of plural religious Dutch society from the inside, but also as a sign of hope.

At the exposition, visitors could place prayer notes at a sort of Wailing Wall. The personal atmosphere invited people to reflect on their own religious orientation. The meetings during the week invited them to share religious convictions and experiences as well. The religious had entered the secular museum.

Then, on 2 November 2004, the second political assassination in the recent history of the Netherlands shocked the nation. The **cineaste** Theo van Gogh was slaughtered by a militant Islamist. Van Gogh had assisted a Dutch politician with a Somali origin, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, in making “Submission,” a cinematographic pamphlet attacking religiously legitimated

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violence against women in the Islamic world. Attached to his body was a public letter addressed to Ayaan Hirsi Ali accusing her of collaboration with the “Jews” (amongst whom the mayor of Amsterdam was mentioned), who purportedly dominate Dutch politics, and challenging her to wish for her own death. This astonishing incident was followed by a series of attacks on mosques, Islamic schools and churches. The media reported several cases of arson and insulting and threatening graffiti.

The very next day, an inter-religious meeting on education had been scheduled in the Zoetermeer City Museum. Before the programme started, interviewee Mohamed Chhayra delivered a statement in the name of the Moroccan community in Zoetermeer expressing their horror at the murder, and their fear of being held responsible as Muslims. The worrying suspicion (which was later confirmed) that the murder attack was religiously motivated, hampered the discussion. Was it possible to maintain the implicit conviction that religions are fundamentally peaceful? In that case, militant Islamism should be denied its claim of being religious—and this is actually what happened in the days that followed. Religion continued to be presented as something that primarily concerns the individual believer, and that motivates him or her to participate peacefully in the local community. This approach furthered an apologetic use of the project.

At the closing event, a new project was kicked off, entitled *Believing in Zoetermeer*. This project, which received a generous subsidy from the municipality, continued the inter-religious dialogue in the City Museum. A main project was the preparation and undertaking of a “peace mission” to Morocco in fall 2006, officially in order “to learn from the Moroccan tradition of religious tolerance.” In fact, however, the participants discovered that in Morocco Christian and Jewish communities are evaporating, and that Islamic fundamentalism is radically suppressed. The usual political issues (How to deal with criminalizing Moroccan-Dutch boys? How to endorse the integration of immigrant Moroccan women in Dutch society?) took over the programme. Indeed, after the trip the organizing minister left to go to a congregation elsewhere. At the end of 2007, a short experiment in inter-religious community-building within a secular environment seems to have run down.

A plurality of believers brought together within the neutral setting of a museum stimulated the definition of religion as a personal matter. By defining religion as a personal matter in a neutral public space, filled with various religions, people of different faiths are encouraged to getting to know each other, including their religious orientations. This definition of

the situation is threatened, on the one hand by a tendency to transform this neutrality into an ideology of syncretism (supported, for example, by the Bahá'í community), and on the other hand by defining particular believers as representatives of a (religious) community. A third threat is incorporation by other fields, such as the political. In other words: the experience of religious community is threatened by re-embedding in a new structure, and by existing structures that tend to close off or incorporate this liquid phenomenon.

In both examples, instances of religious community receive a place in the public sphere. In the background, religious organizations are involved, but they do not dominate the event. The first example conforms, largely, to the concept of "instant-community;" the second, however, could in Bauman's terms be regarded as a grass-roots impulse to form a community of individuals. However, this example makes clear that experiments such as this are vulnerable.

### **In conclusion**

According to Bauman, religious community is incompatible with liquid modernity. Liquid modernity only produces events, superficial look-alikes of religious ceremonies. The one exception is fundamentalism, reflecting a "false consciousness" concerning the state of the individual, namely that he can escape the constraint of individual autonomy.

So it appears that, despite and within the process of secularization, religion is still present in liquid modernity, both in its explicit and implicit forms. Apparently, religion is capable of transforming itself into a liquid modern phenomenon, just as it transformed itself into a modern phenomenon. The concept of liquid modernity does have great value as a sensitizing concept for highlighting important aspects of contemporary culture, but the writings of Bauman himself surely underestimate the position of religion. The interplay of solid and liquid religion, or institutional and non-institutional forms of religion, deserves our attention. The varieties of community-building should be acknowledged. Observers of religion should note the presence of religious activities, themes and rituals in other social spheres. Liquid modernity presents us with new currents, some of which have their origin in old beds. Some rivers have burst their banks; new beds will be formed.

## Notes

1. This section resumes my discussion of Pete Ward and Zygmunt Bauman in De Groot (2006).
2. In this context, the resemblance between Ratzinger's position and Bauman's view on cloakroom communities is striking, just as the opposition with Ward's positive evaluation of the commodification of the gospel is.
3. Zoetermeer is a medium-sized city close to The Hague. While the residents of Zoetermeer may boast a history that goes back to the eleventh century, the city as we know it today was created over an extremely short period of time after the village of Zoetermeer was officially designated a so-called "new town" in 1961. New towns are inhabited by people from a wide variety of backgrounds.
4. Job Cohen elaborated his viewpoint in the Cleveringa Lecture (26/11/2002) and the Willem van Oranje Lecture (1/6/2004).

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