

Seekers and Christian spiritual centers in the Netherlands

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CHAPTER III

**SEEKERS AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL
CENTERS IN THE NETHERLANDS**

KEES de GROOT and JOS PIEPER¹

INTRODUCTION

La Verna, a Franciscan center for spiritual development based in Amsterdam, advertises with the following mission statement: “La Verna is a project of the Franciscans in the Netherlands. La Verna welcomes everyone, regardless of denomination or religion. This is a spot where you can discover your spirituality and develop it further. The center is named after a mountain in Toscana, where Francis of Assisi liked to retreat for meditation.”

Although the origin of the center is Christian, its presentation is geared to contemporary spirituality. It downplays its ecclesial affiliation and uses the rhetoric of personal growth. Buddhist mandalas welcome its website visitors; courses in Enneagram and Life Coaching are on offer, next to a workshop on “Chakra Meditation and St. Francis’ Canticum of the Sun.”² La Verna exemplifies those centers with a Christian background that are trying to appeal to seekers.

This branding strategy is perfectly understandable from a marketing perspective, regardless of the theological motives behind it. For decades now, participation in parish life and identification with the Christian faith have been declining in Western society. At the same time, other religious practices and philosophies of life have appeared on the scene. Spiritual centers have been established, offering workshops,

¹ The authors would like to express their acknowledgements to the other members of the research team – Anke Bisschops, Willem Putman, and Suzette van IJssel – for their part in the research design, data collection, and analysis. Parts of this chapter appeared earlier in Kees de Groot, Jos Pieper, and Willem Putman, “New Spirituality in Old Monasteries?,” *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion* 4 (2014). Grants for this research have been provided by the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, the Dutch Religious Conference (Commission Projects in the Netherlands), Stichting Nicolette Bruining Fonds, and the Order of Friars Minor (Franciscan) in the Netherlands. The results of the complete survey have been published in Dutch (Kees de Groot, Jos Pieper, and Willem Putman (eds.), *Zelf Zorgen Voor Je Ziel. Over De Actualiteit Van Christelijke Spirituele Centra* (Almere: Parthenon, 2013).

² www.laverna.nl [accessed 5-11-2012 and 29-4-2014].

events, and courses focusing on Eastern religious traditions, psychology, and the body. Present-day spiritual authors, trends, and movements exert a notable attraction. People both outside and inside the Church have responded to this appeal. To some extent, this new movement even originates in religious orders, unorthodox Christian movements, and the readership of mystics.

Our question is: How do Christian spiritual centers, especially Roman Catholic ones, handle the phenomenon of ‘new spirituality’ on the one hand, and the Christian tradition on the other? In pursuing an answer to this question, we included only centers that explicitly express this double affiliation. We did not study New Age or Buddhist centers, nor did we take into account those centers, either Roman Catholic or Protestant, that do not focus on spiritual seekers.

A preliminary remark should be made, though. A commitment to the future of the Catholic Church might mislead us in understanding how fundamental the present transformations are. The question about ‘the appeal of a Catholic minority church in a world of seekers’ focusses on two marginal phenomena in Dutch society: the waning Roman Catholic Church and – taking the word ‘seekers’ in a strict sense – the active, individualistic interest in spirituality of some *virtuosi*. It asks under which conditions this church can be attractive to them. It is important to realize that the national context of the Netherlands is one of a dominating indifference to participation in any religious organization, and mistrust of any religious system whatsoever.³ The term “non-active seekers” may obscure this. People are, at times, and some more than others, interested in reading about religion, spirituality, and philosophy. They have experiences of guidance, grace, and abandonment. They ritualize life events. They have moral principles. This is all part of their lives. But the idea that one should be part of a religious community is only present among a shrinking minority of the population.

In the Netherlands, the involvement with the Catholic Church, or with any church, was particularly high in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Since the 1950s and 1960s, the interest in any church-based religion has dwindled. However, people keep asking for rituals and continue to believe in miracles and in an afterlife; some even believe in a pre-life before birth. During the period 1966-2006, the support for the belief that ‘there is a God who is concerned with each person individually’ decreased significantly and was held by only a quarter of the population. Faith in ‘some higher power’ gained support, as did doubt about and denial of the existence of God or a higher

³ Joep de Hart, *Geloven Binnen en Buiten Verband. Godsdienstige Ontwikkelingen in Nederland* (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2014).

power. Yet, atheists are still a small minority.⁴ Likewise, followers of the Christian faith are also a minority, though a larger one.⁵ The Christian faith co-exists with other types of faith, and with the abstinence of faith and uncertainty.

In the next sections, we will (2) introduce the central theoretical issues on Christian religion and spirituality that informed our study; (3) explore the content these centers supply; (4) report on the methods used in the subsequent survey; and (5) present those results that are relevant with respect to the Church reaching out to seekers. In the last section (6), we will answer our initial questions and indicate ways to deal with ‘the world of seekers’ in pastoral care.

SPIRITUALITY AND CHRISTIAN RELIGION: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

A Cultural Phenomenon, not a Confession

The parallel trends of decreasing church-based religion, on the one hand, and a continuing interest in religion and spirituality, on the other, have been characterized as paradoxical.⁶ Yet, only when religion is supposed to be church-based would this coincidence appear as a contradiction in the first place. If religion is seen as a cultural phenomenon, there is no reason for surprise that the phenomenon endures after the decay of the main Christian churches.⁷ With or without churches, people tend to have faith and question their faith, especially in the face of sudden changes such as death. Screenwriters and game designers use religious and Biblical themes – even without ecclesial directions. In every society, people develop rituals in order to reach salvation or to protect themselves from evil. A person may devote her life to her family, her career, sports, or the preservation of the climate – with or without referring to the concept of God.⁸ Religion does not coincide with the identification with religious

⁴ Ton Bernts, Gerard Dekker, and Joep de Hart, *God in Nederland 1996-2006* (Kampen: Ten Have/RKK, 2007), p. 40.

⁵ Loek Halman, Inge Sieben, and Marga van Zundert, *Atlas of European Values. Trends and Traditions at the Turn of the Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p. 58.

⁶ Erik Sengers (ed.), *The Dutch and Their Gods: Secularization and Transformation of Religion in the Netherlands since 1950* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2005), p. 15.

⁷ Meerten B. ter Borg and Jan Willem van Henten (eds.), *Powers. Religion as a Social and Spiritual Force* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

⁸ Gabriël J.M. van den Brink, “Nederland in Vergelijkend Perspectief,” *De Lage Landen En Het Hogere. De Betekenis Van Geestelijke Beginselen in Het Moderne Bestaan* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), p. 114.

organizations and is certainly not restricted to those religious organizations that have been dominant in the past.

The nineteenth and the twentieth centuries have been the heyday of the concept of religious confession or denomination. Religion was not primarily a matter of believing or of practicing, but of belonging. One *was* a Protestant, Catholic, or Jew, whether orthodox, heterodox, or non-believing, whether practicing or not. Nowadays, religion is more individualized. Choice prevails in matters of faith. Still, both scholars and journalists tend to use the former frame of reference in order to localize present-day spirituality.

As a result, a new quasi-denomination has been constructed, consisting of people who are called “Unaffiliated Spirituals.” In the Netherlands, a research company for marketing and management (*Motivaction*) introduced this label for those who affirm that they have a (somewhat) spiritual *or* religious attitude, but who do not identify themselves as belonging to a larger religion. Respondents in this category (26% of the Dutch population, according to their estimation) showed a higher score on items about spirituality and transcendence than the average respondent. The report of this study gained an unusual amount of media attention. What probably helped was its inclusion in an exploratory report from the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy.⁹ The label ‘spiritual’ might not have hurt its popularity either; the more accurate label ‘(somewhat) religious/spiritual: others (i.e., non-Christian, non-Muslim)’ would have received less attention.

This kind of labelling creates a seemingly clear-cut religious landscape of (spiritual) seekers, (religious) dwellers, and non-believers.¹⁰ Yet, more sophisticated research shows that the population cannot be defined along these lines. 23% of the Dutch population do not identify themselves as belonging to a church, but do believe in God or some higher power. 70% of these believers without belonging’ pray once in a while; half of them believe in lucky numbers, mascots, astrology, and mediums.¹¹ Neither practices and beliefs considered as ‘traditional’, nor practices and beliefs regarded as ‘alternative’ are restricted to specific categories of people. The attention for what used to be called New Age but presently goes under the heading of New Spirituality is widespread in

⁹ Gerrit J. Kronjee and Martijn Lampert, “Leefstijlen En Zingeving,” *Geloven in Het Publieke Domein. Verkenningen Van Een Dubbele Transformatie* (Den Haag/Amsterdam: WRR/Amsterdam University Press, 2006), pp. 184; 99-201; *ibid.*

¹⁰ Ulrike Popp-Baier, “From Religion to Spirituality-Megatrend in Contemporary Society or Methodological Artefact? A Contribution to the Secularization Debate from Psychology of Religion,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 3, 1 (2010).

¹¹ Bernts, Dekker, and de Hart, *God in Nederland 1996-2006*.

contemporary culture. Those who occasionally read magazines on spiritual, alternative, or paranormal issues may be regarded as the *avant-garde* of this movement. Among this category (8% of the Dutch population) are non-believers, ex-church members, and church members. It is misleading to confine a widespread cultural phenomenon to a specific – purportedly ‘non-religious’ or ‘unaffiliated’ – portion of the population.

Apparently, ‘alternative’, ‘holistic’, or ‘esoteric’ world views are not restricted to the postmodern denomination of the ‘spiritual (non-affiliated)’. Christians and atheists, too, take an interest in spirituality. In addition, the label ‘spiritual’ contrasts with the desire to escape fixed categories, whereas the addition ‘non-affiliated’ may be premature with respect to the uncovering of new types of involvement. We are not so much interested in a postulated religious species as in the attention for religious and spiritual experience that transcends institutional and ideological boundaries. It is in this manner that we perceive the characterization of contemporary culture as ‘a world of seekers’. It seems there is some longing for religious experience both inside and outside the churches.

New and Old Spirituality

The term ‘spirituality’ originates in at least two discourses. In one case it is often referred to as ‘new’ or ‘alternative’. Although it is difficult to detect one common denominator, it seems that the quest for the inner self is often present in this discourse: an idea that was typical of the 1960s counterculture which has gone mainstream.¹² The phenomenon called *new* spirituality can be seen as the outcome of two trends in the religious landscape: pluralization and de-institutionalization.¹³ By pluralization we mean the increase in diversity of religions and world views; by de-institutionalization we mean the weakening of people’s commitment to fairly stable, binding, and authoritative religious institutes through which individual biographies are integrated into a system of religious convictions, values, and rules. These two processes – which have much in common yet can be distinguished from each other – are stimulating the current interest in spirituality. On the one hand, there is a transformation with respect to content: in the Netherlands, this is from Reformed and Catholic dominance towards greater diversity. On the other hand, we note

¹² Dick Houtman, “God in Nederland 1996-2006. Enkele Godsdienstsociologische Routines Ter Discussie,” *Religie & Samenleving* 3, 1 (2008).

¹³ Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, “New Age. Post-Christelijke Religie in Het Geseculariseerde Westen,” *Handboek Religie in Nederland* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2008).

a structural transformation from religion as collective identity (denomination) to personal interest. The interest in spirituality partly reflects diversity – in other words, the diminished dominance of the Christian religion – and partly reflects fluidity – in other words, a less binding and encompassing commitment to any institutional framework.¹⁴

However, the concept of spirituality was, of course, already known in the Christian tradition. Since the seventeenth century, spirituality has been used, following the French usage, in the religious context to denote the relationship between man and God, especially its intimate, subjective aspects.¹⁵ Since then, various devotional traditions have appeared such as Carmelite, Benedictine, Franciscan, or Ignatian *spirituality*. This was originally a pejorative term for elitist religious exercises, a usage that is not the only notable parallel with the current, more general interest in spirituality.¹⁶ The importance of dogma and orthodoxy is currently called into question: people are open to what they may learn from other traditions, and in both the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ spirituality we find attention for the mystical unity of the universe, the abolition of the separation between object and subject, and a sort of ‘holistic’ view of life.¹⁷ It is no surprise that the modern interest in spirituality makes use of traditions both inside and at the margins of the Christian tradition. Traditional spiritual authors such as Meister Eckhart and traditional monasteries now appear within the wider, post-Christian spiritual milieu.¹⁸ Thus, the question is how different is the new phenomenon of spirituality actually from spiritual traditions inside or at the margins of Christianity? There is both continuity and discontinuity. For visitors to Christian spiritual centers, the concept ‘spiritual’ may refer to the ‘old’ as much as to the ‘new’ spirituality. Quite possibly, the distinction is not even made.

¹⁴ Kees de Groot, “How the Roman Catholic Church Maneuvers through Liquid Modernity,” *Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity* (Münster: Lit, 2012).

¹⁵ Giuseppe Giordan, “Spirituality: From a Religious Concept to a Sociological Theory,” *A Sociology of Spirituality* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

¹⁶ Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture. A Hyper-Real Testament Gods (Humans and Religions)* (Brussel: Peter Lang, 2007; repr., 2007), p. 36.

¹⁷ Bernts, Dekker, and de Hart, *God in Nederland 1996-2006*, p. 120; Joep de Hart, *Zwevende Gelovigen. Oude Religie en Nieuwe Spiritualiteit* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2011); John Burgess, “Detecting the Presence of God: Spirituality in a Birmingham Church,” *God at Ground Level. Reappraising Church Decline in the UK through the Experience of Grassroots Communities and Situations* (Frankfurt am Main etc.: Peter Lang, 2008).

¹⁸ Peter G.A. Versteeg, “Marginal Christian Spirituality: An Example from a Dutch Meditation Group,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21, 1 (2006).

Issue 1: Spirituality instead of religion? One issue in spirituality research is the question of whether religion is giving way to spirituality, the revolution thesis as put forward by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead.¹⁹ They expect religion – interpreted as an institution issuing rules about how to live from an assumed other world – to steadily lose ground to spirituality, which focuses, instead, on the subjective experience of one’s own life. ‘Life-as-religion’ is here contrasted with ‘subjective-life spirituality’. Many journalists and theologians have consented to this theory, even though it is little more than a hypothetical extrapolation of the results of a local British case study.

Dutch sociologists Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers, too, have characterized new spirituality “as standing on its two feet and broken from the moorings of religious tradition.”²⁰ In this approach, (new) spirituality is contrasted with (traditional Christian) religion.²¹ Yet, a prognosis would require support from historical comparison. The options for this are scarce: the content behind the label ‘new’ and ‘alternative’ is shifting. A combined analysis of several surveys does show a decrease in Christian faith and a growing acquaintance with yoga, homeopathy, paranormal psychology, and astrology among the Dutch population.²² ‘Believing’ in these phenomena has not increased, but that may be something that is asked too much for the supposedly undogmatic sphere of life affirming spirituality.

The British researchers Steve Bruce and David Voas also tried to test the revolution hypothesis via large-scale research on the individual level, and have rejected it in favor of the secularization thesis.²³ Their findings show that the crumbling of religious regimes continues; the so-called ‘new spirituality’ is a marginal phenomenon, not particularly relevant to society at large; and it is doubtful whether the many phenomena grouped under this label (a Christian Taizé group on the one hand, a yoga course on the other) are correctly placed.

¹⁹ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Malden [etc.]: Blackwell, 2005).

²⁰ Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers, “The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition: The Spread of Post-Christian Spirituality in 14 Western Countries, 1981-2000,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, 3 (2007): p. 305.

²¹ Eileen Barker, “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* (Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2008).

²² Jos Becker and Joep de Hart, *Godsdienstige Veranderingen in Nederland. Verschuivingen in de Binding met de Kerken en de Christelijke Traditie* (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2006); de Hart, *Zwevende Gelovigen. Oude Religie en Nieuwe Spiritualiteit*.

²³ David Voas and Steve Bruce, “The Spiritual Revolution: Another False Dawn for the Sacred,” *A Sociology of Spirituality* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

A variation on the revolution thesis is the hypothesis that the interest in new spirituality is not a separate phenomenon, but depends on the religiosity traditionally present.²⁴ The results of a small-scale Dutch study seem to support this *compensation hypothesis*: interest in ‘alternative religion’ is said to be especially strong among former church members.²⁵ If this were the case, alternative religion would exist on the basis of church religion, and therefore the interest in alternative religion would diminish along with the process of secularization. Yet, findings of more recent surveys contradict the hypothesis that an individual’s interest in spirituality compensates the loss of previous religious ties. Courses in spirituality are as popular among church members as they are among non-church members. The highest popularity is among both church-goers and non-church members believing in a non-empirical reality.²⁶ For the compensation hypothesis to hold, the whole range of holistic spirituality would have to be more popular among ex-Protestants and ex-Catholics than among other non-church members or the population as whole. This is not the case.²⁷ The compensation hypothesis does not have an impressive record.²⁸

Our research was not intended to test these hypotheses – that would require a different study – but they did provide a heuristic framework. What light do our results throw on this issue?

Issue 2: How different are religion and spirituality? Let us return to the question of the differences between religion and spirituality. In previous research, new spirituality, as opposed to traditional Christian spirituality, has often been characterized by a lack of structure, an orientation towards an internal rather than an external authority, and a low level of organization.²⁹ Characteristics such as self-determination and autonomy versus heteronomy, and individualism versus a focus on community and

²⁴ Sergej Flere and Andrej Kirbiš, “New Age, Religiosity, and Traditionalism: A Cross-Cultural Comparison,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, 1 (2009).

²⁵ Ton Bernts and H. van der Hoeven, “Tussen Rooms en Redfield De Belangstelling voor Traditionele en Alternatieve Religie,” *Sociale wetenschappen* 41, 2 (1998).

²⁶ Bernts, Dekker, and de Hart, *God in Nederland 1996-2006*, pp. 151; 71.

²⁷ de Hart, *Zwevende Gelovigen. Oude Religie En Nieuwe Spiritualiteit*.

²⁸ Cf. Becker and de Hart, *Godsdienstige Veranderingen in Nederland*, pp. 106-07.

²⁹ Peter Versteeg, “Spirituality on the Margin of the Church: Christian Spiritual Centres in the Netherlands,” *A Sociology of Spirituality* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007); Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*; Adam Possamai, “A Profile of New Agers: Social and Spiritual Aspects,” *Journal of Sociology* 36, 3 (2000).

communality also repeatedly come up.³⁰ Heelas and Woodhead contrast normative, collectivizing religion with subjective, individualistic spirituality. Yet – how individualistic is the new spirituality? And, how collectivist is old-fashioned religion?

As to the first question: Woodhead notes a striking absence of doctrinal authority in the spiritual milieu. She perceives a great freedom of belief, which she links to less male dominance.³¹ In the Dutch study on non-affiliated spirituality mentioned above, we also find the suggestion of ‘non-obligation’. However, in his field work in Nottinghamshire, Matthew Wood saw the mechanisms at work that had earlier been described by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu: in this milieu power is exercised differently, namely, by positing and propagating the Self.³² In this way no detailed doctrine is imposed, but a service-receptive soul is implanted. It is true that, unlike what is usual in the religious field, there is a notably low degree of long-term ‘formativeness’ (religious socialization), Wood says. But it would be wrong to simply copy the participants’ statement that in the spiritual milieu ‘everything is so individualistic’. Rather, the situation is that several sources of authority compete with each other on a more or less fraternal level, which results in people being socialized into the holistic spirituality.

There is a parallel with monasteries in this respect since, in their case too, religious *virtuosi* exercise a diverse and/or weak organized influence on their environment. A high degree of formativeness would correspond with the model of the modern parish, in which the faithful are initiated into a regulated way of behaving and believing.

This observation already forms part of the answer to the second of the two questions above: religious believers are not as ‘collectivist’ as the ideal type – and moreover judged by a specific orthodox norm – would have it. Qualitative research among Dutch Roman Catholics who make little or no use of the services of the parish (a growing segment) clearly shows “the loss or lack of a conservative–traditional church image, combined with an experimental quest for a modern-traditional attitude”

³⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA [etc.]: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); Kronjee and Lampert, “Leefstijlen en Zingeving”; Mariët Meester, *Nieuwe Spiritualiteit* (Kampen: Kok Ten Have, 2008).

³¹ Linda Woodhead, “Why So Many Women in Holistic Spirituality?,” *A Sociology of Spirituality* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

³² Matthew Wood, “The Nonformative Elements of Religious Life: Questioning the ‘Sociology of Spirituality’ Paradigm,” *Social Compass* 56, 2 (2009); Michel Foucault, “Why Study Power. The Question of the Subject,” *Michel Foucault. Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); P. Bourdieu, “Le Champ Religieux Dans Le Champ De Manipulation Symbolique,” *Les Nouveaux Clercs* (Genève: Labor et fides, 1985).

[our translation].³³ For at least 30 years, since the 1980s, 25% of all church members have no longer subscribed to traditional Christian statements.³⁴ On the individual level, one finds that religious believers, too, are engaged in *bricolage*; or, rather, even people who feel connected to a specific tradition are attracted to certain aspects of other traditions, and sometimes the origins of ideas and rituals are unclear or irrelevant.³⁵

Thus, for the sake of a clear analysis it would be better if we abandoned the distinction (both substantive and formal) between objective Christian religion on the one hand and subjective non-Christian spirituality on the other, and adopted, instead, a formal perspective on subjectivization processes (defining authenticity as correspondence with subjective experience, taking the self as authority) throughout the entire spiritual-religious spectrum, while not losing sight of the emergence of any new patterns that shape experience.

What indications do our research results provide about the relation between Christian traditions and new spirituality? What perceptions of ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’ do we find?

THE CENTERS

The first part of our research was an inventory of those Christian spiritual centers that deliberately gear their programs to those who are interested in new forms of spirituality.³⁶ We analyzed the websites of 40 Catholic, 10 (Liberal) Protestant, and 7 mixed Christian centers and/or interviewed those responsible for the program. The majority of the centers were related to monasteries (30 to traditional monasteries and 3 to recently founded monasteries). 15 centers, although rooted in the Roman Catholic Church or in a Protestant church, now operate independently. 6 centers were independent branches of local parishes and 3 centers were related to parishes providing town chaplaincy. There are mostly no exact figures available about the social and religious characteristics of the visitors, but our informants did provide some estimates. There are small (about 40 visitors a year) and large (about 4000 visitors a year) centers. The average gender distribution is 70% woman versus 30% man. The age of the

³³ Ton Bernts, “‘De Priester Is Geen Druide.’ De Nederlandse Katholieke Kerk in de Posttraditionele Samenleving,” *Sociologische Gids* 50, 2 (2003).

³⁴ Gerard Dekker, “Belonging without Believing,” *Religie & Samenleving* 4, 1 (2009).

³⁵ Kees de Groot, “For Love of Faith: Patterns of Religious Engagement in a New Town,” *Conversion in the Age of Pluralism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

³⁶ Willem Putman et al., “Christelijk Geïnspireerde Spirituele Centra,” *Zelf Zorgen Voor Je Ziel. Over De Actualiteit Van Christelijke Spirituele Centra* (Almere: Parthenon, 2013).

visitors is rather high, between 55 and 70 years.³⁷ In general, the religious background of the visitors can be divided into one-third non-Christian, one-third Christian but not belonging to a congregation, and one-third Christian belonging to a congregation.

Next, we analyzed the mission statements and objectives of the centers. The main objective we discern is 'stimulating spiritual growth of the visitor'. The centers support the visitors' quest for meaning, in particular by facilitating the exchange of opinions and experiences. A good example of this objective is the mission statement of the Thomas-Center in Zwolle:

At the Thomas House, the door is open for anyone who dares to share his dreams with others; who wishes to explore with others his questions on faith and worldviews against the background of developments in society; and who seeks for forms of spirituality. Coming from the Christian tradition, the Thomas House opens its windows and doors for stories and inspiration from other traditions.... Your story next to the Bible story, next to the story of.... Being addressed in mind, heart, and soul.³⁸ [our translation]

The website of Thomas Faith and Culture in Oosterhout provides another telling example:

Our programs reach out to those who seek contemplation or deepening of insight in their lives. For anyone interested in activities at the crossroads of faith and spirituality and culture, arts, and music. Everyone is invited to join in. The program is flavored by the Christian tradition, but is not affiliated to a particular denomination or a religious ideology. It is not important whether you belong to a church. Our hope is that we offer a good program for all who are seeking sense in their lives from whatever perspective.³⁹ [our translation]

The principal aim of all centers is the spiritual development of the individual, not from the perspective of solving personal problems, but from the perspective of personal growth. Although the centers may be critical towards 'spiritual consumerism', they do relate to a 'new spiritual'

³⁷ At the (six) centers that focus on youth, the range of age is between 18 and 35 year.

³⁸ www.kloosterszwolle.nl/thomashuis

³⁹ www.thomasoosterhout.nl

characteristic of the visitors: their appreciation of personal quest and experience.

In classical terms, the method of these centers may be characterized as *mystagogical*.⁴⁰ The Christian tradition is considered as relevant for contemporary seekers. Rather than pressing visitors with this tradition, the teachers wish to open up this tradition to them. The tradition is used to foster the personal and spiritual growth of the visitors: people are guided on their way to the mystery of God.

This approach transcends a binary opposition between an objective religious tradition and a subjective spiritual experience. The centers seek to connect with subjective experience, to facilitate spiritual experience and to promote the sharing of these experiences. Their goal is not the replacement of tradition by subjective experience, but the fertile use of the religious tradition for the personal quest. Whatever the welcoming attitude of these centers, it is inspired by the spirituality rooted in their own religious tradition.

The activities of the centers may illustrate this. We analyzed the goals and the programs of 40 Catholic, 10 (Liberal) Protestant, and 7 mixed Christian centers. The content of the proposed activities can be divided into six themes: the Judeo-Christian tradition, other religious traditions, esoteric traditions, philosophy, (alternative) psychology, and diaconal/social orientation.

1: Judeo-Christian tradition. Examples of titles are: *Lectio Divina*; *Brother Sun and the Star*; *Christmas in the light of Francis*; a workshop on angels; *Advent Labyrinth*; the tradition of the Sisters of St. Clare; *Jesus and the Gnosis*; the celebration of Holy Week and Easter; *Christian meditation*; ‘*On the Road with a Psalm*’; and ‘*Jesus of Nazareth: a Window on Jesus*’. This theme is found in all 57 centers.

2: Other religious traditions. Here, we find for instance: Islam and Sufism; Hinduism; (Zen) Buddhism; Taoism; and nature religions. This theme is found in 27 centers.

3: Esoteric traditions. These could include: Chinese kinematics; Indian medicine; Etruscan wisdom; Tarot; Gurdjieff; Ouspensky; Gnosticism. This theme is found in 14 centers.

4: Philosophy. 14 centers offered programs on philosophers, for example: Plato, Spinoza, Derrida, and Foucault.

5: (Alternative) psychology: dream symbolism; Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP); Psychosynthesis; aggression control; inspiration in career; Family Constellations; dementia and spirituality; aging,

⁴⁰ Henk Witte, “Pastoraat En De Vraag Om Spiritualiteit,” *Redden Pastores Het? Religieus Leiderschap Aan Het Begin Van De Eenentwintigste Eeuw* (Budel: Damon, 2001), pp. 181-82.

bereavement; near-death experiences; nonviolent communication, etc. Found in 29 centers.

6: Diaconal/social orientation. Under this heading, activities aimed at reflection on or addressing social problems include: a program for caregivers; globalization and economics; meeting and holidays for guests with cancer; and 'From survival to life: for fellow sufferers of sexual abuse'. Found in 17 centers.

In these programs, the Christian tradition and the offer for the seekers coincide. The Christian tradition is paramount, but some themes might as well be seen in brochures of the alternative spiritual centers. The liberal Protestant centers, in particular, tend to pay attention to other religious and esoteric traditions, philosophy, and (alternative) psychology.

VISITORS

Method

The second and main part of our research was a survey among the visitors of these centers. The central question was: To what extent are visitors to Christian spiritual centers related to the new spirituality and to what extent to the Christian tradition? We asked about their religious affiliation and about their beliefs, experiences, and practices. 39 of the above-mentioned 57 centers participated in the research: 23 Roman Catholic, 9 Protestant, and 7 mixed Christian centers.⁴¹ In many aspects, Catholic centers are like the others. Yet, Protestant centers have a stronger denominational identity; Catholic centers are more open to non-Catholics than Protestant centers are to non-Protestants. In this chapter, we take all centers and their visitors together. We studied the programs and selected those activities that started in the Autumn of 2010 and were attended for at least a weekend.

Respondents

Almost 2,000 questionnaires were distributed to participants in the selected range of activities. Of these, we received 795 usable questionnaires back, a response of approximately 40%. The average age of the participants was 61.1 (range 23-90), with a standard deviation of 11.8. The age represented most was 65 years. 24% of the visitors were male, 76% female. 43% lived alone, 57% were married or living with someone.

⁴¹ Some centers declined to participate; others had ceased to exist. The six centers that focus on youth were excluded.

The average level of education was high: 26% have a university degree, 49% a degree from higher professional education, 9% finished pre-university secondary education, 10% have intermediate vocational education, 4% lower vocational education, and 1% primary education. (Of the Dutch population between ages 45 and 65, roughly 28% have a degree from higher professional education or university (Statistics Netherlands Statline)). 40% are still working, 60% are not, or no longer. The latter category is divided into 45% retired, 6% unemployed, and 9% home makers. Thus, the response group in our survey is exceptional, especially as regards age, gender, and education.⁴² Age and gender distribution resemble the data gathered from the centers. Versteeg,⁴³ who investigated a specific center in the Netherlands, also found this over representation of the elderly, women, and highly educated.

Measuring Instruments

The questionnaire was divided into four parts and consisted of a number of standard instruments, plus some questions formulated by ourselves on the basis of the literature and discussions with the centers. Part I contained questions about the visitors' social characteristics such as age, education, gender, and their situations regarding life and work. Questions in part II were on the institutional embedding of faith and spirituality. We asked about religious socialization and commitment to the local and to the universal Church. Part III addressed the content of faith/spirituality. In order to include as wide a content area as possible, we used Glock and Stark's five dimensions of religiosity.⁴⁴ In short, religious views relate to the central tenets of a tradition; religious knowledge refers to the knowledge of the main documents of a tradition; religious experiences can range from profound mystical experiences to a simple faith in God; religious practices can have a private character (praying in bed), but can also be a communal event (attending services); ethical prescriptions relate to directives from the belief system about how to behave towards other people.

⁴² Hessel Zondag and Michiel Maassen, "Meer dan de kerk. Een onderzoek naar motieven van weekeindkloosterlingen," *Jaarboek voor liturgieonderzoek* 26 (2010), pp. 201-220.

⁴³ Peter Versteeg, *Spirituality on the Margin of the Church: Christian Spiritual Centres in The Netherlands* (Burlington, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2007), pp. 101-114; Peter Versteeg, "Marginal Christian Spirituality: An example from a Dutch Meditation Group," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21 (2006), pp. 83-97.

⁴⁴ Charles Y. Glock, "On the study of religious commitment," *Research supplement of religious education* 57 (1962), pp. 98-110; Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark, *Religion and society in tension* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965).

These dimensions can also be used to describe spirituality. In this part of the questionnaire we were able to use a number of standard instruments. The Spiritual Attitude and Involvement List (SAIL) is a questionnaire developed in research on coping, intended to measure spirituality along broad criteria.⁴⁵ It is suitable for religious as well as non-religious respondents and contains 26 statements on religious/spiritual views, experiences, and activities. Agreement was to be indicated on a 6-point Likert scale ('Not at all', 'Hardly', 'Somewhat', 'To a certain extent', 'To a high degree', 'To a very high degree'). A higher score indicates more agreement. The SAIL is constructed along seven subscales: Meaningfulness; Trust; Acceptance; Caring for Others; Connectedness with Nature; Transcendent Experiences, and Spiritual Activities. Three items of the Duke Religion Index⁴⁶ were used to measure intrinsic religiosity (saliency of religion for daily life). In order to measure ethical attitude, we presented the respondents with 13 statements measuring social engagement, largely derived from Schuyt's Philanthropy Scale.⁴⁷ For every statement, a 'yes' or 'no' answer was required. The Philanthropy Scale measures to what extent people feel responsible for their fellow humans and for society. Finally, we formulated a number of items ourselves gauging the level of pluralism of participants' faith or spirituality, their value-orientation, and the level of transcendence versus immanence.

Part IV addressed the effects of participating in the activities offered by the centers. On the basis of an earlier analysis of the centers' programs, we expected effects on the body, the self, the other, and faith/spirituality.

Results

We start with presenting the results regarding the interrelationship of Christian tradition and new spirituality, using the distinction between

⁴⁵ Eltica de Jager Meezenbroek and B. Garssen, *Informatie over de spirituele attitude en interesse lijst (SAIL)* (Utrecht: Helen Dowling Instituut, 2007); Eltica de Jager Meezenbroek et al., "Measuring spirituality as a Universal Human Experience: Development of the Spiritual Attitude and Involvement List (SAIL)," *Journal of Psychosocial Oncology* 30, 2 (2012), pp. 141-167.

⁴⁶ Harald Koenig, G.R. Parkerson, Jr., and K.G. Meador, "Religion Index for Psychiatric Research," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 154, 6 (1997), pp. 885-886.

⁴⁷ Theo N.M. Schuyt, *Het ontwikkelen van een filantropieschaal* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2006); Theo Schuyt, René Bekkers, and Jan Smit, "The Philanthropy Scale: a sociological perspective in measuring new forms of Pro Social Behavior," *Social Work & Society* 8, 1 (2010), pp. 121-135.

seekers and dwellers. To this, we add a presentation using the perspective of religious pluralism.

Outside seekers, inside seekers, and dwellers The vast majority of visitors (85%) were socialized as Christians. The next question then is of course: what about the participants' *current* commitment to a church in general, and a local religious community in particular? 51% of the participants affirmed that they 'belong to a church or to a community that holds a particular spirituality or worldview'. A second question that we thought would throw some light on institutional embedding referred to the frequency with which people attend church services. Compared with the average in the Netherlands, 16% ('regularly' plus '(almost) every week'), church attendance is very high (53%) among our respondents.⁴⁸

We noted that a majority of 64% feel committed (strongly or somewhat) to a parish or congregation. Besides current commitment to a parish or congregation we also asked the participants about any earlier commitment. A reasonably large category (32%) no longer feel committed to a local religious community, but did in the past. Apart from these, the centers also attract people who have never felt such a commitment (11% of participants). The largest category (52%), however, is that of people who both then and now have been committed to a parish or congregation. If we add to these the category of 6% new arrivals, we find that 58% feel committed to a parish or congregation.

A large proportion of our respondents (54%) were disappointed in what the churches have to offer in the field of spirituality and attention to their own spiritual perceptions and experiences. It is striking, however, that the local faith community is judged less negatively. About 40% of the participants experience too little attention and space for their own personal questions and quest in their congregation. 68% regard the activities in the center a welcome addition to the spiritual activities in the local church.

These data provide insight into the proportion of dwellers and inside and outside seekers. About 60% consider themselves committed to a parish or congregation and about 40% do not. Thus, dwellers and outside-seekers meet in the centers surveyed. Dwellers can be distinguished further into those for whom the activities of the centers are a welcome addition to the parish and those for whom the centers are a compensation for a perceived deficiency in the local congregation. Thus, we discerned three categories of visitors: outside-seekers (about 40%), inside-seekers dissatisfied with the local church (about 15%), and dwellers who regard their participation as part of their participation in the local church (about 45%). These three categories obviously differ from each other, especially when it comes to structural features (affiliation with

⁴⁸ Bernts, Dekker, and de Hart, *God in Nederland 1996-2006*.

a parish and church), but there are also some interesting substantive agreements. The items about values that give meaning to life could be reduced – on the basis of a principal component analysis⁴⁹ – to three basic values: focus on a deeper reality, involvement in social relationships, and hedonism. The three groups do not differ with respect to these three values. They also share the belief in a deeper reality within the self: 84% of the outside seekers, 86% of the inside seekers, and 82% of the dwellers. The same accounts for the belief in life after death. Here the percentages are 49%, 56% and 54%, respectively.

The effects of participation in the activities of the centers could be clustered – again, based on a principal components analysis⁵⁰ – in three basic effects. ‘Self-knowledge and self-development’ is the label for all those items that refer to an increase in self-knowledge and the development of mental and spiritual powers. ‘Deepening of faith’ subsumes all items on the deepening of the spiritual and religious life with the Christian tradition as the frame of reference. The third component, ‘the other’, is about commitment to and caring for others. The outside and inside seekers reported more effects on the self. Inside seekers and dwellers reported more impact on the deepening of faith. With respect to the latter component, there were no differences between the three categories.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the inside seekers stand out in their appreciation for the activities they participated in. They report most that the workshop, weekend, or course in which they participated contributed to their personal quest.

Religious pluralism. The number one characteristic of the new spirituality is generally considered to be a pluralist attitude,⁵¹ also referred to as syncretism, *bricolage*, or do-it-yourself religion.⁵² Below we present several results that together sketch a picture of the level of pluralism in the participants’ religious or spiritual life.

A first way to sketch the picture is using a self-definition of being religious and/or spiritual. 60% call themselves ‘religious’, and 72% ‘spiritual’. Following various studies in which attempts were made to mark the distinction between religiosity and spirituality,⁵³ we have

⁴⁹ Varimax rotation, missing pairwise, mineigen=1; loading >0.40; explained variance: 57.5% Cronbach’s alpha’s: 0.69, 0.71 and 0.74.

⁵⁰ Oblique rotation, missing pairwise, factors= 3; loading >0.40: explained variance: 60,8%. Cronbach’s alpha’s: 0.96, 0.82 and 0.89.

⁵¹ Mariët Meester, *Nieuwe spiritualiteit* (Kampen: Kok Ten Have, 2008).

⁵² Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, “Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket. The social and public significance of New Age spirituality,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21 (2006) pp. 201-222.

⁵³ Eileen Barker, “The Church without and the God within: religiosity and/or spirituality?” *The centrality of religion in social life. Essays in honour of*

distinguished four categories on the basis of the answers to the questions relating to a religious or spiritual outlook.

Table 1. Distribution ‘Spiritual’ and ‘Religious’

	‘religious’	NL Visitors		not ‘religious’	NL Visitors	
‘spiritual’	spiritual and religious	25	48	spiritual, not religious	19	24
not ‘spiritual’	religious, not spiritual	16	12	neither religious nor spiritual	40	16

The first group (+R+S) considers itself religious as well as spiritual. This group consists of 48% of the respondents. The second group (+R-S) considers itself religious, but not spiritual. This group of ‘pure’ religious people consists of 12%. The third group (+S-R) considers itself spiritual, but not religious. 24% of the respondents are included in this ‘pure’ spiritual group. The last group of non-religious and non-spiritual respondents (-R-S) consists of 16%. Research among the Dutch population has shown that in the Netherlands these four categories are distributed as follows: religious and spiritual: 25%; exclusively religious: 16%; exclusively spiritual: 19%; neither: 40% (see table: the figures below NL).⁵⁴ Thus, the visitors to our centers are both more spiritual and more religious than average, but slightly less exclusively religious.

These self-definitions from our respondents proved to be meaningful when we linked them to the other data about our participants’ religious or spiritual life. We plotted the differences and correspondences between these four categories in relation to their scores on all other

James A. Beckford (Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 187-202; Gerrit J. Kronjee and Martijn Lampert, “Leefstijlen en zingeving,” *Geloven in het publieke domein. Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie* (Den Haag/Amsterdam: WRR/Amsterdam University Press, 2006), pp. 171-208; Penny L. Marler, and C. Kirk Hadaway, “Being religious or being spiritual in America: a zero-sum proposition,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, 2 (2002), pp. 289-300; Leila Shahabi et al., “Correlates of self-perceptions of spirituality in American adults,” *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 24, 1 (2002), pp. 59-68; Brian J. Zinnbauer et al., “Religion and spirituality: unfuzzifying the fuzzy,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, 4 (1997), pp. 549-564.

⁵⁴Joantine Berghuijs, Jos Pieper, and Cok Bakker. “Being ‘Spiritual’ and being ‘Religious’ in Europe: diverging ways of life?” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 28, 1 (2013), pp. 15-32.

variables, and found that each category has its own profile. We are summarizing these profiles below.

The *religious but not spiritual* are rooted in the Christian tradition, are strongly committed to the parish, and have a strong desire to deepen their faith. Their favorite magazine is *Volzin*, a magazine about achieving a meaningful life, with origins in the Reformed and Catholic (Dominicans) tradition.

Scores from the *religious and spiritual* tend towards the average because this is the largest category of participants. Yet, a clear profile can nevertheless be discerned. These participants strongly identify with their church and religion, yet also incorporated elements of the new spirituality into their views. This category is the most religiously and spiritually 'committed', and it is this category for which religion or spirituality are most salient, judging from the respondents' excellence in transcendent experiences, religious activities, effects of participating in the programs offered, and the significance of religion/spirituality for daily life. Their favorite journal is *Tijdschrift voor Geestelijk Leven*, a journal on spirituality, mainly from a Christian perspective.

The *exclusively spiritual* are relatively young, and this category includes even less men than average. They are farthest removed from the Christian tradition and have affinity with other traditions: Buddhism, new spirituality, and humanism. This corresponds to a high level of pluralism. Commitment to a parish or congregation is the lowest among them; commitment to spiritual life is high. This commitment affects their daily life; they report a relatively great number of religious experiences and religious activities. Their main focus is self-actualization. Their favorite magazines are *mindstyle* magazines like *Happinez* and *Psychology Magazine*.

Those participants who are *neither religious nor spiritual* form a relatively 'lukewarm' category, having no strikingly high scores on any aspect. They do, however, have strikingly low scores on many aspects: they have very little belief in a transcendent reality; they have few transcendent experiences; and are not particularly active in the area of religion/spirituality.

Three conclusions are made on the basis of the profiles. First, the four categories are on a continuum. At one end, there is the commitment to parish and Christianity ('religious but not spiritual'), at the other, the adoption of new forms of spirituality ('spiritual but not religious'). In-between there is the category 'religious and spiritual'. The category 'neither religious nor spiritual' does not have a clear profile yet.

Second, *spiritual and religious* people are characterized by their lived religion. A cluster analysis underscores this finding. This cluster analysis based on all ordinal variables that could be constructed regarding beliefs, experiences, practices, values, motives, and effects divided the

respondents into three groups: high (241 respondents), middle (432), and low (131) scoring.⁵⁵ The group 'high' is characterized by more than average scores on being spiritual and on being religious, on having experiences of the transcendent, on being involved in religious activities, and on reporting effects of the activities regarding self-realization, deepening of faith, and connectedness to humanity. Our results are also supported by the data from the Religion Monitor Survey, carried out in 21 countries. Klein and Huber⁵⁶ report "that in several cultures those seeing themselves as both spiritual and religious score higher in all measured expressions of spirituality/religiosity than the groups of the exclusively spiritual or the exclusively religious. The latter two groups hold characteristic pantheistic or theistic patterns of religious expressions."

Finally, it seems that our respondents associate the term 'religious' with faith and commitment to a religion, especially Christianity, while the term 'spiritual' is apparently connected to both the experiential dimension of religion, and with a focus on the self. Spirituality can refer to both the Christian and other traditions. However, the semantic fields can vary by country.⁵⁷ In the southern countries of Europe, spirituality is seen as more compatible with religiosity; in the northern countries, it is seen as more exclusive. Palmisano⁵⁸ supports the idea of proximity between new spirituality and Christianity in the Catholic south of Europe. Italian research seems to show that the emerging new spirituality in Italy may be incorporated into Catholicism. Italians are religious and spiritual. This close relation is apparent especially in popular religiosity and the charismatic movement. These indications resonate with our findings. Visitors of Catholic centers are more prone to call themselves 'spiritual' than visitors of Protestant centers. Visitors of Catholic centers are more interested in motives and effects related to the self than visitors of Protestant centers. They also practice yoga and breathing exercises more often.

A second approach to pluralism is provided by the relationship between transcendence and immanence. Versteeg⁵⁹ points out that in the

⁵⁵ See appendix.

⁵⁶ C. Klein, S. Huber, *What does it mean to be spiritual, what to be religious? Comparing self-identifications, proportions, and correlates crossnationally*. Paper read at IAPR-conference. Bari, Italy, 2011.

⁵⁷ Philip Hughes, "Spirituality and Religion in Europe," *Vista. Quarterly bulletin of research-based information on mission in Europe*, 16 (2014), pp. 1-3.

⁵⁸ Stefania Palmisano, "Challenging Catholicism: The significance of spirituality in Italy," *Journal for the study of spirituality* 3, 1 (2013), pp. 18-23.

⁵⁹ Peter Versteeg, "Spirituality on the margin of the Church: Christian spiritual centres in The Netherlands," *A sociology of spirituality* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 101-114.

new spirituality, God is sought within the self, not outside it. Heelas⁶⁰ also argues that in the new spirituality the experience of the self – felt to be divine, spiritual, and sacral – is the starting point from which to attain an authentic life. Heelas and Woodhead⁶¹ speak of a divine core (the Self), which is linked to a universal spirit, energy, or life force. We measured *belief in a transcendent reality* by asking: ‘Do you believe in God or a supernatural reality?’ We measured *the experience of an immanent transcendence* by asking: ‘Do you believe in a deeper reality within yourself?’ Many (67%) of the participants in our study believe both in the transcendent God and in the ‘God within’ (immanent transcendence). Apparently, the two concepts combine perfectly well, and people see no distinction between theistic and holistic spirituality. The majority have neither a theistic nor a pantheistic, but a panentheistic conception of the divine.⁶² The divine is both transcendent and immanent. Both visitors who are committed to a parish or congregation and those who are not believe in a deeper reality within them. 80% of those who have never been committed to a local community believe this ‘definitely’, as well as 83% of those who are no longer committed. We find similar figures for those who have always been (82%) and those who are now (80%) committed to their local congregation. There is a distinction, however, with respect to belief in a transcendent God. Those who are more committed to the local congregation tend to believe more firmly in God or a supernatural reality. Of those who were never committed, 51% believe this firmly; 67% of those who no longer are; 80% of those who are now or have always been. Inside seekers and dwellers believe both in a deeper reality within them and, firmly, in God or a supernatural reality. In this particular way, they excel in a pluralist attitude.

A third instrument is the Pluralism Scale. We used three statements to measure a pluralist attitude: ‘It is good to experiment with insights and practices from different traditions’; ‘There are many sources of wisdom we can draw on’; ‘You can combine different insights and practices into a philosophy that suits you’.

The answers to these three questions ranged from ‘completely disagree’ to ‘completely agree’. By means of component analysis we were

⁶⁰ Paul Heelas, *The New Age movement. The celebration of the self and the sacralisation of modernity*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

⁶¹ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The spiritual revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality* (Malden [etc.]: Blackwell, 2005).

⁶² Joseph Pieper and Hans van der Ven, “The inexpressible God. God Images among Students of Dutch Catholic Secondary Schools,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 11, 2 (1998), pp. 63-79.

able to combine the three into one component.⁶³ This component had a high average score of 4.2 (on a scale of 1-5). 82% agree with these statements. Although this figure is very high, there is still some differentiation. Those who consider themselves spiritual but not religious (90%) excel as do the outside seekers (87%). Those who consider themselves as religious but not spiritual (74%) and the dwellers (75%) present the lowest scores.

A fourth indication of a pluralistic orientation is provided by the answers to the question: ‘Have you ever participated in an activity in a spiritual center with a non-Christian signature?’ 40% of the respondents never did; 60% did. Of those who define themselves as spiritual but not religious, 88% reflected this desire to widen the scope, whereas of those who call themselves religious but not spiritual, 40% did. Outside seekers (75%) confirmed they participated in those centers more than inside seekers (48%) and dwellers (50%).

A final, unintended, indicator of a pluralist attitude was provided by the answers to the question on the *preference in religious or secular movements* (‘My closest affinity is with...’). Only 66.9% of the participants answered this question as intended, namely, by choosing only one option. A large category of respondents checked two or more options. Christianity and Buddhism is an often-mentioned combination. This may indicate that a certain amount of *multiple religious belonging*⁶⁴ is not unusual.

These five indicators suggest a pluralist attitude: a high average score on the pluralism scale, participating in activities of non-Christian spiritual centers, and a panentheistic conception of the divine. Three categories could be discerned. A first group constructs their religious identity more orientated to new spirituality, a second group combines elements of new spirituality with the Christian tradition, and a third group is more oriented to the Christian tradition. But this group is not exclusively oriented to Christianity. Their score on the pluralism scale is rather high.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The centers we studied are deliberately reaching out to a world of seekers. The Christian tradition prevails in the programs offered, but the centers

⁶³ Principal component analysis with varimax rotation; missing pairwise; minimal eigenvalue = 1; loading > 0.40; explained variance = 70.6%. Cronbach’s alpha = 0.80.

⁶⁴ Manuela Kalsky, ‘Het flexibele geloof van Pi. Meervoudige religieuze identiteiten als toekomstvisioen,’ *Buigzame gelovigen. Essays over religieuze flexibiliteit* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2008), pp. 64-73.

pay attention to other religions, esoteric traditions, psychology, and philosophy as well. The dominant concept of spirituality seems to be something that refers to the 'inside' of religion. Apparently, knowledge of and experience in other traditions is supposed to foster spiritual and personal growth. Spirituality is not regarded in opposition to religion.

Those participating in the programs offered make up a specific category. Their education level is high, they were often socialized within the Christian tradition, and they are usually involved in a local religious community. Among them, three categories of belonging can be discerned: outside seekers, inside seekers, and dwellers. These categories of belonging correspond with three categories of believing: new spirituality, new spirituality and Christian, Christian.⁶⁵

Against the background of the three hypotheses formulated earlier in this chapter, we can't conclude that spirituality is taking the place of religion, but we do see that spirituality is significant for our respondents. It resonates with religious faith – although the respondents distance themselves from the church of their childhood – and it relates to the exploration of the Self. Our finding that the participants largely belong to the Christian population only seemingly supports the compensation hypothesis. More detailed analysis of our data shows that interest in the new spirituality does not depend on earlier religious socialization. Most of the 'exclusively spiritual' participants have never been involved in a religious community. Neither do our findings sustain the revolution hypothesis: age and background of the participants do not really point to a great spiritual revival versus religious decline. It is possible that signs of such a revival can be seen elsewhere, but positive effects for the Self, for personal consciousness, and for the healing of body, spirit, and mind were mentioned alongside an enhanced acceptance of life and an intensified relation with God, their church, and other people. Effects in terms of subjective life spirituality and the reflexive project of the Self were intermingled with more traditional consequences of contemplation, such as going into retreat, formulated in terms of 'life-as-religion'.

Our results indicate that the visitors to these centers take up, or possibly integrate, in their world view elements that are often considered typical of the new spirituality. The high scores on 'satisfaction' show that on this aspect the centers do manage to hit the target, whereas this is clearly less so with regular parishes. We did not perceive a tension between 'religion' on the one hand and '(new) spirituality' on the other. Our findings suggest, instead, a process of gradual shifts in which old and new elements are incorporated into a contemporary approach. Further research could identify this process and the direction in which it is going.

⁶⁵ See findings of de Hart and Dekker elsewhere in this volume.

This religious evolution, as this process might be called, raises several theological questions which should be addressed, and are addressed, elsewhere. One set of questions clusters around the tension between the subjective and the objective pole of religion: the relation between personal faith and doctrinal authority, between authority localized in the Self and authority localized in a church. Another set of questions clusters around the relation of Christianity with other traditions: how open is Christianity to other traditions, such as Buddhism, humanism, and alternative psychology, and how should we evaluate theologically the use of elements from the Christian tradition outside churches?

Historically, the Christian tradition has contributed to the formation of the Self. The cultivation of the Self can also be seen in types of spirituality that are not directly related to the Christian tradition. Those who are part of this tradition can listen to the voices of the various traditions, discern them, and articulate the voice of their own strand within Christian spirituality. This is at least the strategy we find in the Christian spiritual centers in the Netherlands.

Within the Roman Catholic sphere, these centers move in creative ways and allow some free space to deal with the process of individualization. Thus, these centers continue ways of operating that have been, and still are, common in religious orders and congregations. Abbeys, convents, and monasteries have often been places for the personal exploration of spirituality. In this light, the characterization of religion as subordinating life to normative directives appears as a caricature. These centers continue the monastic tradition of individual responsibility, personal experience, and exploring the Christian tradition in all its varieties.

Openness to the contemporary life-world does not imply that the Christian heritage is thrown overboard. Yet, these centers do not exclude visitors who have done this or are contemplating doing this. Roman Catholic and (orthodox) Protestant centers that do not address seekers in particular, draw a closer connection between Christian values, norms, and beliefs, on the one hand, and the expression of personal experience, on the other. Recently, individual Dutch bishops have recommended this approach to Roman Catholic parishes.⁶⁶ Both types of spiritual centers are faced with the same task to keep the quest for meaning open: to do justice to the individual person of the visitor and to treat religious and other traditions with respect. We expect that this is the fundamental approach pastoral practice may learn from these centers.

Our project challenges two competing practical-theological views on churches and secularization. According to one view, the Western world

⁶⁶ Fred van Iersel and Kees Slijkerman (eds.), *Kleine geloofsgroepen. Wegen naar een vitale parochie* (Heeswijk: Abij van Berne, 2011).

is 'totally secularized', marked by a 'total rejection of God' leading to an obsession with money, power, and pleasure.⁶⁷ In contrast with this idea of 'spiritual emptiness' and a culture of 'selfishness',⁶⁸ the enterprise of studying the 'mismatch' between Church and seekers suggests that people are in fact searching for spirituality, but are doing so outside the ecclesial premises. This view implies the possibility that the Church may be able to respond to these needs and attract significant portions of the population (again). We severely doubt the viability of this option. Neither the religious trends in Dutch society as a whole, nor the outcomes of our study among participants in courses on spirituality, suggest that a *Reconquista* of de-churched Dutch society is likely.

Both from a theological and a sociological perspective, two more specific scenarios for these centers present themselves: a 'seekers' scenario and a 'dwellers' scenario. The first scenario fits with the conviction that the world of seekers deserves a willing attitude from the part of the Church and with the expectation that the cultural phenomenon of spiritual seeking will persist. The high and increasing appreciation for what these centers and other abbeys, convents, and monasteries have to offer may sustain this outlook. The viability of these centers is, however, precarious. This will depend on the extent to which these centers succeed in surviving a period in which religious communities (the supply side) are threatened with extinction, and in which the number of church members (the demand side) continues to drop. In this situation, potentials for growth are probably in addressing those outside the Church.

The second scenario expects an ongoing process of secularization. Christian spiritual centers might, paradoxically, benefit from this trend, since a minority position could foster the remaining believers to invest in their faith.⁶⁹ Secularity, in this sense, might produce religion: a critical attitude towards modern culture can promote the wish to deepen one's faith. Theological positions with a more pessimistic outlook on today's world will support this perspective. Yet, in this case, the expectations for these centers will not be higher.

In short, the spiritual centers we studied offer the opportunity for inside and outside seekers to deepen their faith. A threat is that the focus on personal choice and the broad spectrum of traditions on offer may

⁶⁷ Cardinal Godfried Danneels, "At the Crossroads of Faith and Culture. Challenges Facing the Catholic Church Today," *Annual Lecture Christianity and Society 2012* (Tilburg: Tilburg University, 2012).

⁶⁸ Everard de Jong, "Inleiding," *Kleine Geloofsgroepen. Wegen Naar Een Vitale Parochie* (Heeswijk: Abdij van Berne, 2011).

⁶⁹ Peter Achterberg et al., "Dialectiek van secularisering: Hoe de afname van Christelijke religiositeit samengaat met een sterkere nadruk op haar publieke belang in achttien westerse landen," *Sociologie* 5 (2009), 324-342.

hinder an essential element in the spiritual process: the openness towards an external voice, God.⁷⁰ The challenge for these centers is to accompany seekers using all the resources the Christian tradition has to offer. The centers we studied radiate a positive attitude towards seeking but may risk the connection with the institutional Church. An alternative attitude can be found in centers which have a more specific Catholic profile. Within the context of radical pluralism, this position would be an alternative niche strategy for a minority church promoting an intensification of the personal faith of dwellers and inside seekers.

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APPENDIX: k-means cluster analysis

Final Cluster Centers

Variable (scale)	Cluster		
	1 (middle)	2 (high)	3 (low)
antiparochie	15,24	15,87	14,24
intrinsiek	12,02	13,31	12,05
sailtranscerva	13,68	19,72	13,47
sailvertrzin	24,41	27,26	23,93
sailzorg	18,54	20,30	18,21
sailaanv	18,40	19,68	18,23
sailspiract	15,78	19,04	15,34
sailnatuur	10,01	10,98	9,74
pluralisme	12,24	12,97	11,69
actoosters	7,05	7,91	6,49
actchristelijk	5,14	5,83	5,52
actpara	3,39	3,68	3,44
waardensociaal	16,58	17,62	16,41
waardenhedonisme	10,83	11,66	10,54
waardendieper	4,15	5,89	3,81
personalisering	15,36	17,19	13,21
motivatiezelf	18,88	16,93	20,38
motivatieander	14,01	13,41	14,22
religieus	1,43	1,33	1,44
spiritueel	1,30	1,15	1,44
effectzelf	69,62	85,16	42,64
effectgeloof	15,08	18,04	11,22
effectander	19,23	22,84	12,90