The image most non-Dutch people have of the Dutch religious situation is that of a Protestant, Calvinist-dominated country. Some even know that there is a great multitude of Calvinist sects and that this seems to be typical for the country. But this image is only a fragment of reality. Most people are astonished when they hear that the Roman Catholic Church has been the biggest church in the Netherlands since the census of 1910 and is currently larger than all Protestant groups together. Then they are surprised to hear that the Christian character of the country has disappeared for the most part: the churches are rapidly losing members, their social organizations are being dissolved, church participation is in decline, and churches now play a marginal role in public and political debates. Finally they are amazed when told that around half of the population is not organizationally involved in religion at all. It has once been said that all Dutchmen are Calvinists by nature, that they—whether they believe or not, whether they are Calvinist or papist—all share characteristics like frugality, commerce, sincerity, and consistency (Van Heek 1954: 128–132). This might be true, but not as an indication of their religious preferences.

This paper gives an overview of the religious situation in the Netherlands—or Holland as most people call it. After starting with a short historical overview from the mid-19th century onwards, it will then give some detailed statistical information on the current situation. Here, attention will be paid to Christian religious praxis, the religiosity of the Dutch in general, and the situation of world religions. Then there will be some attention given to the relationship between state and religious institutions; only a short paragraph because the situation is quite liberal. In the conclusion, I will sketch an outline for the future of religion in the Netherlands.
A modern history of religion in the Netherlands should start with ‘pillarization’. This is a word used to describe the relationship between religious organizations and society in some European societies during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Pillarization means that religious organizations (quasi-religious organizations like the socialist movement also acted in this way) establish themselves in modern society through a variety of social organizations. These range from media, youth work, health care, leisure, to last but not least, political organizations. One characteristic of these organizations is that they are exclusive: they refer to organizations with the same worldview, and individuals can be members of the organizations of only one subculture, not two. Whether pillarization originated from the need to defend a group against the evils of modernity, or to emancipate a group of second-class citizens in broader society, to pacify the various groups in society while at the same time reach national unity, or whether it was functionally to accommodate modernity and religion (Helleman 1990) is a matter of discussion and perspective. The fact is that the arrangements resulting from the pillarized situation dominated the view and place of religion in the Netherlands long after it had ended.

Pillarization, and with that the modern history of Dutch religion, started when discontented groups broke with the official reformed church in 1834 and 1886. The reformed church—never the state church, but the ‘public’ church, used for public functions by the political elite that at the same time tolerated other religions—became increasingly influenced by the state and modernist theology after its reorganization in 1815 by King William I of Orange. In particular Rev. Kuyper, the leader of the second schism, fulminated against this trend and demanded sovereignty in religious circles. Paired with a vision of Christians active in society in order to bring their fellow citizens back to Christianity, he founded a university, the Vrije Universiteit (‘free from state and church’), a newspaper and a political party to attain these goals and was active as scientist, publicist, and politician himself. Within a few decades, these neo-Calvinists were a social and political factor to be reckoned with (Van Eijnatten/Van Lieburg 2005: 278–289).

This success stimulated Catholics to do the same. Catholics were second-class citizens since the installation of the Reformation (this