SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND
STATE AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION:
LEFT TO THE GODS? AN EMPIRICAL STUDY
AMONG DUTCH YOUNG PEOPLE

Johannes A. (Hans) van der Ven

INTRODUCTION

Of late the Dutch Humanistic League (*Humanistisch Verbond*) has been advertising under the slogan: ‘Without your support humanism is left to the gods’. The ambiguity is plain. Traditionally the expression ‘left to the gods’ refers to the chaos that is said to have characterized tribal ‘pagans’ and their gods. But now it is suggested that without the Humanistic League (secularized ‘pagans’, with no gods) the Netherlands is in danger of being overrun by groups ‘with gods’, like Christians and Muslims. The irony conceals a diagnostic question: In our increasingly multicultural Western society, who carries most weight? Is it secularized ‘pagans’? Or are believers on the up and up once more? In this chapter I relate the question to two constitutional principles: the separation of church and state and religious freedom. The latter is one of the most fundamental human rights and the first functions as its necessary condition. Together they form one of the cornerstones of Western society. Perhaps Christians and Muslims are more or less against the separation of church and state, for example, because it leaves them politically powerless, and in favour of religious freedom, because it gives them autonomy. Conversely, perhaps nonreligious people are in favour of the separation of church and state and against freedom of religion. Or perhaps are both principles supported equally by religious people (Christians and Muslims) and by nonreligious people?

The question I would like to study is three-fold. The first part is descriptive of character: What are the attitudes of these three groups (Christians, Muslims and nonreligious people) toward the separation of state and the freedom of religion? The second one is descriptive of character as well: What are their religious beliefs and participation in religious rituals? The third is causal in nature: To what extent have these
groups’ beliefs and ritual participation an effect on their attitudes toward the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion?

The empirical study I conduct in order to answer both questions is based on data collected in the Netherlands in 2007–2008 among three groups in this multireligious society, comprising Christian, Muslim and nonreligious young people at the end of secondary school and the start of their tertiary education. These are the groups where the separation of church and state as well as the freedom of religion pose most problems for mutual relations and who, in the near future, will be the leaders at the micro and meso levels of society. The (continued) support for the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion depends on them.

First, I inquire theoretically into identifications processes within a multicultural society, because the attitudes in which I am interested (the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion) can be considered as indicators of the extent to which the three groups identify with these two constitutional themes, which belong to the cornerstone of any multireligious democratic society. Then I explore the function of the separation of church and state and religious freedom. Further I elaborate on the meaning of religious beliefs and rites. On this basis I posit certain expectations about the influence of religious beliefs and ritual participation on the attitudes toward the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion. Then I turn to my empirical, exploratory study, which I will do in three steps. The first step is to measure the attitudes toward the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion among the three groups of Christian, Muslim and nonreligious young people. The second step is to measure their religious beliefs and ritual participation. The third step is to measure the effects of religious beliefs and ritual participation on their attitudes toward the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion. Finally I will reflect on the empirical finding.1

Identification Processes in a Multicultural Society

In Western society the notion of tolerance is on the way down. The majority is less and less inclined to put up with the languages, cultures and religions of minorities. What will take its place is not cut and dried.

1 For an extensive elaboration on this article see van der Ven, 2010, chapters 7–9.