
In a controversial *New York Times* editorial professor of religion at Columbia University Mark C. Taylor exposed the lumbering bureaucracy of graduate education. Graduate education today divides up study into fragmented, insular and artificial territories. He recounted one occasion when a group of political scientists studying international relations admitted that they had never considered the role of religion in society. “Given the state of the world today, this is a significant oversight.” Annemarie Houkes observes the same artificial separation in modern European historiography. This separation, she agrees, is supported by institutional arrangements but also, in the case of religious studies, by secularization theory. Secularization theory promoted the idea of a naked modern public square hostile to the interests of religion. Houkes wants to put religion and society back together. She tacitly admits that people are not just social beings, but religious ones as well. Therefore religion cannot be bracketed in the public square, and religion may be the reason that some people enter the public square in the first place. Houkes examines the social involvement of conservative Protestants in the Netherlands Reformed Church. For this group—the single biggest Protestant group in the Netherlands in the late 1800s—conservative religion and the church were the impetus for civic involvement. They were Christian citizens and Christian “fatherlanders,” but always Christians first.

Houkes’ book is arranged thematically. It covers various events in Dutch Protestant history including missions festivals, philanthropy and evangelization. The “April Movement,” for example, is a topic that has been covered several times in secondary literature but not with Houkes’ particular question in mind. The liberal constitution of 1848 allowed for the separation of church and state and freedom of assembly. As a result Catholics were able to appoint a bishop. In April 1853 Protestants erupted in protest. Previous studies interpreted these protests as conservative religious reaction to modern liberal social arrangements and an illegitimate intrusion of religion into the ostensibly naked public square. Houkes turns this argument on its head. The protesters were a group largely marginalized in Dutch public life under the old class system. They used their new freedoms such as the freedom of assembly in order to protest. Religious interests mobilized this class of citizens to a new civic engagement.

The history of enfranchisement in the Netherlands is another good illustration of her thesis. Even after the new constitution, large portions of population were still marginalized in the Dutch church and society due to their low social standing (and gender). The enfranchisement rate was only about four percent. In 1867 general male enfranchisement was first implemented, not in civil government, but in the Dutch national church. These democratic practices were pushed through
not by moderates or modernists, who benefited from elite control of the church, but by conservative Protestants. Many Dutch Protestants encountered electoral colleges, representative government, issue-based associations, and the ballot box for the first time in the church. Moreover, these practices did not easily stay contained in the church. They spurred Protestants to pursue similar rights in the political sphere as well.

In the 1880s and 1890s fissures developed among orthodox Protestants about how and whether to mix religion and politics. One group led by Abraham Kuyper pursued a policy of private religious institutions, e.g., churches, schools, and political associations. They believed that their Calvinist principles should guide political practice, and Kuyper led the formation of a Calvinist political group. Houkes, however, follows the other more socially conservative group, who instead tried to preserve the older arrangement of the national church so far as possible. This group has received much less attention than Kuyper’s faction. Whereas Kuyper established a series of niche organizations for his Calvinist band, the conservatives continued to view the church in its custodial role as the caretaker of the nation. They stressed the church’s broad mandate over the whole nation. Rather than promote separate Christian schools, for example, they promoted the teaching of Christian morals in the public schools. Ultimately however, this approach was awkward. The conservatives did not want to form the network of voluntary organizations that Kuyper’s group did, but eventually they had to in some cases. So, for example, conservatives established the Christian Historical party, but at the same time they resisted applying their Christian faith to political issues.

Houkes takes an important step toward a more serious consideration of religion in public life by showing how religion—and the church in particular—could be a powerful motivator for public involvement, yet apart from the voluntary organizations that many (especially Americans) have come to associate with civic action. Although not her primary goal, her narrative raises further questions about the nature of secularization and the decline of state/national churches in Europe in the twentieth century. The conservatives that Houkes investigates assumed and promoted a unified society and nation under the aegis of Christianity even when the rapid pluralization of society and the secularization of the state fought against this. One wonders if these conservatives were a bit insensitive to the social changes going on around them. They had to construe their Christianity as loosely as possible in order to make Christian morals palatable in broader society and in order to make the church inoffensive to the state. Christian “witnessing” and “missions” were transformed to meet this requirement. Witnessing and missions were traditionally spiritual activities focusing on religious faith; their chief aim was to make people fit for heaven. These otherwise conservative Dutch Protestants, however, reinterpreted witnessing and missions to focus on contemporary social problems. If the primary concern of missions became, for example, prohibition, anti-prostitution, or general education, what happened to the church when the