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### Citation

Borg, M. B. ter. (1995). Fundamentals and Civil Religiosity. In . Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht/Boston/London. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/10407>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## Fundamentals and Civil Religiosity

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### Introduction

What is the point in combining the concept of fundamentals with that of civil religiosity? I think that religiosity in general, and also civil religiosity, gives us the opportunity to see that fundamentals not only give a foundation to our rules and meanings in a metaphysical sense, but also in an emotional way. I will try to demonstrate this in the present contribution, in which the civil religiosity of my own country, the Netherlands, will serve as an example.

### Charisma and Belonging

What is real and what is not? What is appropriate and what is not? What is desirable and what is not? The answers to these questions are not primarily given in our DNA, but are socially constructed (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 47; Geertz, 1973: 92).

We need our community<sup>1</sup> in order to survive. It gives us security and food. Surviving presupposes that we have a sense of reality. This is one of the main reasons why we need a community: to maintain our means of orientation, that is to say, our reality. Contrary to what materialistic theories of the social bond want us to believe, this aspect is no less important than the economic one.

Our means of orientation consist of rules and meanings. In our everyday interactions, we check, confirm and reinforce them. When I tell the milkman that the weather is fine, I do a lot of different things: I show him that I share the ideas and feelings (however obvious they may be) with everybody else, and when he agrees, he confirms that he is in the same symbolic order as I am, in which a certain kind of weather is considered as fine. If the milkman does not agree with me, he has to explain why. If I do not find his explanation plausible, I begin to feel a little bit uneasy. Suddenly I realise that what I have taken for granted is not so self-evident.

This uneasiness is the beginning of what might be called, with Durkheim, *anomie*. In an anomic situation, rules and meanings no longer seem to apply. They are not shared or sanctioned any more. My world seems to be shaken. Who am I, where am I? Anomie causes the emotion of anxiety<sup>2</sup>. This is a fundamental uncertainty. That is to say: it does not concern some facts within reality, but reality, that is to say our worldview, as such.

Anxiety, that may even turn into dread, is fear without an object. Not any one object is concerned, but reality as a whole; what is true, what is real, what is done and what is not are no longer confirmed in interactions with others. So the whole meaning system is at stake.

What do we do when we fear something? We attack it, or we take refuge with something or somebody appropriate. But what if there is nothing real that we can identify as danger or as refuge? Then we are perplexed indeed. We feel anxious and uncertain, but we do not know what to do. That is the moment to use our imagination in accordance with the culture we live in, in order to define what we are afraid of, and where salvation lies.

As we succeed in doing this, anxiety becomes fear. This causes an enormous relief: at least we are saved from the fundamental uncertainty. Our worldview is salvaged, our perplexity is gone. These feelings - fear and relief - are a strange mixture. They are projected or ascribed to the object that we found. He or it must be more than just human, for he restored what we, as human beings, had lost: reality. He has a mysterious extra that we do not understand. These ascriptions are well known in the social sciences. They are called: *charisma*<sup>3</sup>. There are two kinds of charisma: positive charisma, where feelings of relief and surrender are projected onto a saviour; and negative charisma, where the feelings of relief and hostility are projected onto a scapegoat.

It is not hard to find examples of both kinds. For many God has a positive charisma, and the devil a negative one. Negative charismatic projections have often been directed onto the Jews in Western tradition. Interesting in this respect is that there is often a fluctuation between negative and positive. Girard (1982), for instance, points out that in the Middle Ages the Jews were alternately seen as poisoners of the wells and as magical doctors. We can also see such an alternation in views of politicians like Hitler. Hitler started as the 'saviour' of Germany, only to end as the 'cause' of its destruction<sup>4</sup>. The same is true, though less dramatically, of President Carter.

The charismatic object is not completely of this world. It seems to do what normal people cannot: to reconstitute a reality when it seems lost. The emotions that are involved here might be called *religious*. Anything can be

charged with charisma; people as well as rules and meanings. Wherever charisma is involved, we might speak of *religiosity*<sup>5</sup>.

### Sacred Values and Fundamentals

The rules and meanings I will now discuss are those that cannot be violated without big problems. Violating these special rules and meanings causes perplexity, followed by anger. In sociology, the school of ethnomethodology became famous by experimenting with these so-called basic rules and meanings (Garfinkel 1967: 41). We might also call them constitutive meanings (cf. Searle, 1969: 33ff.), because denial of them is not just a mistake, but implies the denial of the whole symbolic order, and thus of the community as such. Anomie itself can be partial, vague and latent, but when these basic rules are violated, it can become acute and concrete.

Most of these basic meanings and rules are latent and can only be discovered by experiments like those that made Garfinkel famous. However, some meanings, rules etc. that constitute the symbolic order are very well known because they symbolise it as well. While symbolising the community as such, these meanings also stand for the hopes and aspirations of that community. The thought of even the slightest violation of these meanings causes anxiety and aggression. Thus these basic rules and meanings acquire a charismatic charge. To violate these rules is to violate the worldview on which this community has been built. To respect these rules is to respect this worldview.

This is a subclass of basic rules and meaning. We might call them *fundamental values*: they are *ultimate values that do not have to be legitimated by other still more general values and that are considered to be of universal validity. As such they serve as core directives for acting in all kinds of situations. Moreover these values claim to be fundamental in terms of priority as well as scope.* This is the definition that constitutes the theme of our conference, and we can see here why fundamental values are fundamental. They are fundamental, not only in the philosophical sense that the organisers of the conference seem to have in mind, as values on which a construction of rules and meanings is founded, but also in an emotional sense: this is where reason stops and anger begins. Here culture is anchored in the emotional make-up of the members of a community.

Fundamentals are those meanings or rules that are so deeply emotionally anchored and charged with charisma that they produce a deep, almost inescapable loyalty to a worldview and thus to a community. For that reason, we might call them *religious*<sup>6</sup>. This deeply-felt loyalty is the ultimate meaning, as far as a social scientist can trace it. Durkheim claimed

that God was society. Since then, sociologists have become too modest to say anything about God, but we can say something about religiosity. Combining Durkheim's terminology with that of Weber, we might say that community as a whole is not god, but that its ultimate values may be charged with charisma and thus become religious.

We might go even further and say that these values may be *sacred*, because they are both fundamental and charged with charisma. A third reason for using the term sacred is the special status these values may have, both functionally and emotionally. They are set apart: they are a condition for a discourse, in one way or another, but can never be the object of discussion?

Let me give an example. In Western democracy, freedom is a precondition for a democratic discussion, but it is itself beyond debate. The way in which this principle is implemented, or has to be guaranteed, can be discussed, but not the principle as such. It symbolises the West, its ambitions and its hopes. Where this principle is lacking, there reigns, in the words of Ronald Reagan, the "Evil Empire". This principle, and its violation, causes a thrill (negative charisma). This gives us a strong sense of belonging to the community. It inspires us. We are ready to defend it, to propagate it, and we are ready even to pay for it with our lives. More than that, we are ready to sacrifice the whole world to it. I therefore think this principle might be called "sacred", and therefore religious.

### Civil religion

Every community has its basic rules and its fundamental values. One of the characteristics of modern society is its differentiation. This means that we are members of more than one community at the same time. Some of these communities are, of course, more important than others. Some of them are highly important and have to do, ultimately, with physical or psychological survival. This certainly seems the case with the political community. When the sacred of the political community is at stake, we might speak of *civil religiosity*.

The concept of *civil religion* was coined by Rousseau (Contrat Social, IV 8) after an idea that is much older and can be traced back even to Plato: that loyalty to the state or community must have a religious foundation. The interesting point in Rousseau, however, is that he considered a religious basis for the state necessary *notwithstanding* its purely rational foundation. This idea was worked out for modern industrial society by many social thinkers in the first half of the nineteenth century, including the father of sociology, Auguste Comte. He formulated a political religion that cost him

the support of many of his positivistic friends, including J.S. Mill. The aim of this religion was to give the members of a highly specialised society a sense of oneness and purpose. Durkheim put the need of religion into the perspective of mutual interdependence, due to the division of labour, in his earlier work. Later he stressed that every community would produce its own religious ideas and practices (Durkheim, 1915: 428). The scope he had in mind certainly was the political community.

Under the influence of purely materialistic theories, these ideas have become obsolete. They have been reintroduced in modern social thought by Bellah<sup>8</sup>, thus explicating and elaborating a central notion of the Parsonian way of thinking, while borrowing many ideas from Will Herberg with his idea of cultural religion. Bellah's general idea is that a political community cannot exist without some religious foundation. Unlike Rousseau and Comte, however, he is not so much interested in what civil religion *should* be, but in what it *is*. Bellah restricted his analysis to "civil religion in America". It inspired many other studies, all mostly confined to the level of the nation. This has become more or less the trend, but, of course, there are more political communities, both at regional or local and at a multinational level. All these communities have their civil religiosity in a stronger or weaker form. The idea of freedom, that I just took as an example, is clearly supranational. It shapes the identity of the West, despite many national modalities, and as such it is important.

#### **A case study: civil religiosity in the Dutch State**

I will now illustrate how civil religion develops in a modern state with the example of my own political community: the Dutch state in the twentieth century.

The foundations of Dutch civil religion were laid in the early seventeenth century when a political unity, propped up by patriotism, had to be shaped after the revolt against Spanish rule (Laeyendecker, 1982; Schama, 1988: 51f.). The rhetoric was in the style of the Old Testament and was anti-Catholic. A common history was constructed by important national scholars, following the models of Livy and Tacitus.

The anti-Catholic rhetoric became problematic two centuries later when the Dutch provinces were reunited with the Belgian ones. At the coronation of King William I, the rhetoric had to be adapted to a new, predominantly Catholic audience, and acquired a general Christian character (Wierdsma, 1986: 294). We cannot be very optimistic about the plausibility of this move. Anyway, the union between the northern and the southern part of the Netherlands did not last.

Later on, the civil religion, as far as it is expressed in the inaugural speeches of the successive monarchs, became more and more generalised, due to the accentuated separation of church and state and the ongoing process of secularisation (Wierdsma, op. cit.). This is an interesting example of value-generalisation. The core of the values that remained were the values of the French Revolution: *freedom, equality and solidarity*. These are basic values, which still constitute our democracy today.

Until the twentieth century, however, the local community and the church seem to have been much more important for most people than the national political community. When modernisation made national society more important, the local and clerical authorities tried to resist modern trends by organising themselves at the national level in what were later called *pillars*, but what was meant as a means of resistance to modernisation proved in the long run to be a vehicle of adaptation.

The development of our civil religion was both complicated and reinforced by this so-called *pillarisation*. Society was split into at least three pillars or sub-societies on the basis of religion or a metaphysical worldview: a Catholic, a Calvinist, and a so-called "general" pillar. The cleavage went deep, as trade unions, political parties, broadcasting organisations and even sport were organised along these lines. Both David Martin and Roland Robertson hold that this cleavage made a Dutch civil religion impossible (Martin, 1978: 117f.; Robertson, 1978: 81). In my opinion, the contrary is the case. It was, paradoxically, the cause of quite a strong civil religiosity.

What has to be explained is the fact that, despite the deep cleavages, the Netherlands was a unity and a stable democracy. It was spared the hard fate of the Lebanon, the Balkans or Northern Ireland. Lijphart's well-known explanation for this was the consensus of the pragmatic leaders at the top of the pillars (Lijphart, 1979: 191), but this explanation is not enough, and it is hardly sociological. What Lijphart does not tell us is how this pragmatic attitude and this consensus were possible.

In my opinion, the explanation should be sought in social history. The oldest pillars were Christian. They came into being in order to defend traditional Christianity against the godless modernity of socialism and liberalism<sup>9</sup>. Modernisation could not be stopped. Modern political movements were attractive and the Christian pillars had to accommodate. Modern institutions came into being inside the pillars, such as Catholic or Calvinist political parties, schools, broadcasting companies, trade unions, employers' associations, etc. In order for the pillars to survive, the leaders had to make compromises between the several interest groups time and again. Since the basis of the pillars was religious, these compromises were legitimated by

Christian values. After the Second World War, that meant in terms of the Sermon on the Mount in a quite abstract way.

In the socialist pillar the reverse happened. In order to compete with the Christian pillars, it developed

a kind of secular religion, somewhere in between humanism and liberal Protestantism. This made it possible to escape the reproach of being purely materialistic. The same was true for other groups that did not explicitly belong to a church, such as the bourgeoisie.

So the pillars had three important things more or less in common:

1. the socio-economic make-up;
2. some kind of Christian humanistic background, that could be formulated, as far as practical issues were concerned, in terms like brotherhood, freedom and equality; values that could be taken from the Sermon on the Mount as well as from revolutionary theories;
3. the importance attached to a religious or metaphysical legitimation of interests.

As a result of this socio-economic make-up, the leaders of the pillars all had to make the same middle-of-the-road compromises inside their pillars. They all had to satisfy their left wing and their right wing, their workers and their upper middle class, in order to keep their pillar together. They all had to legitimise this compromise (in terms of religious or metaphysical values), and they all did so in the same way. It was therefore not hard for them to understand each other. At the moment they met to take decisions at the national level, they had all gone through the same negotiations in their own circle. The results were more or less the same, and thus it was relatively easy to achieve consensus on practical issues. So the organisation of dissension made possible a national consensus in a miraculous way. This consensus had a religious basis, and this became the rather implicit civil religion of the Dutch state.

Its importance became clear after World War II, during the making of the welfare state. Solidarity, Equality and Freedom were the basic values that were used to legitimate it and with growing enthusiasm. The consensus was very broad, with the exception of some very small, extremist political parties (the Communists and the Christian fundamentalists). In fact, by their dissension, these small parties excluded themselves from the political discourse. Gradually, the welfare state and its moral foundations became a source of national feeling. New laws of the welfare state were accepted in parliament in an atmosphere of national euphoria: "We have a system of social security that is not equalled in the world!"

A picture was confirmed, in a secularised way, of a country, that, however small it might be, had its role to play in the big world. Having thrown out the Spaniards in the sixteenth century, it became a refuge for anyone who was persecuted, and now it had the most elaborate system in the world, in which solidarity, freedom and equality were guaranteed.

This self-image of the Dutch, charged with positive charisma, was, after the completion of the welfare state in the 1970s, more and more complemented by what was charged with negative charisma: nazism, fascism, racism. The mythology for this was taken from the German Occupation during the Second World War, when the sacred values had been totally violated, and that meant hell. This must never happen again. The more the memory of this period blurred, the more important this mythology became. It is kept alive by an ever growing literature and history, both fictional and non-fictional; of works of non-fiction, the Diary of Anne Frank achieved worldwide fame. This is the mythology of Dutch civil religiosity.

The values of Dutch civil religiosity are celebrated in various rituals. There is, to begin with, the annual Remembrance Day on Dam Square in Amsterdam. The whole political community is there. The Mayor of Amsterdam or the Prime Minister make a short speech, in which the past, the present and the future are connected. "We should always remember, because it must never happen again, but it happens now, in many countries that are less well off than we are, and therefore we should fight for freedom and justice all over the world. This is our duty and the dead we commemorate today should be our models of courage." This is the message, and, no matter who makes the speech, it is always the same. After this, members of the political community, led by the Queen with her German husband, lay wreaths on the national monument.

There are also the more spontaneous rituals, for instance in parliament, when there is something on the agenda that has an immediate connection with the basic values, or with the German Occupation. At such times, the politicians do not debate and argue, but they confess in a highly emotional atmosphere that contrasts sharply with the normal routine. The last time this happened in the Dutch parliament was two years ago, when the last two German war criminals were released. On such occasions the charismatic charge of the fundamental values becomes tangible.

When we look at Dutch civil religiosity, several things strike us. To begin with, it was clearly a social construction. Sometimes it was very deliberately made, sometimes it was the outcome of a social mechanism, but it was always the product of a well-understood self interest of the different categories of the Dutch population. Time and again, these values seem important for the Dutch, both in themselves and as a means to structure

community. Confessing belief in these values gives the Dutch a we-feeling. Thus, it is important for the making of the Dutch nation.

The Dutch nation as such is based on it, as is the making of important social institutions within Dutch society, such as the elaborate welfare state. Its responses to crises are influenced by it. For instance, during the period of high unemployment in the 1980s, it proved impossible to propose to send the migrant workers (Turks, Moroccans, and South Americans) back home.

Without adhering to these values, it is very hard to participate in political discussion in the Netherlands, as the members of small racist parties experienced when they were boycotted by all the other parties. Whoever wants to play a role, however small, in any political arena, has to subscribe to the central values of Dutch civil religion. The sanction is exclusion from political discussion. A Dutch politician, Janmaat, who violated one of these values by labelling the immigrants as inferior, caused a commotion that is in no way proportional to his actual power. He placed himself outside the political order. He is boycotted by all his colleagues in parliament, as if he were unclean.

The fundamental values I mentioned are beyond doubt or discussion, and in this sense the values are set apart: socialists, conservatives and Christian Democrats differ about the interpretation of these values, but not about the values as such.

This is, in outline, Dutch civil religiosity. It consists of some fundamental sacred values, which both constitute and symbolise the political order. They are beyond discussion and are charged with charisma. Does this mean that every member of the political community believes in these values? Not necessarily. It only means that every participant in the political process must confess that he believes in them, whether he does or not. But a majority certainly does.

Nor does it mean that the state always tries to realise the values which are central in the civil religiosity. No religion tries or is able to fulfil its ideals. For instance, the right of inheritance, clearly at odds with any idea of socio-economic equality, is still maintained. Negation is the strategy to cope with a problem like this. It is simply not on the political agenda. Nobody talks about it. It seems to be forgotten. Meanwhile, the members of the political community believe that they have realised the value of equality as far as possible.

### **Dynamics of political religiosity**

This is what Dutch civil religiosity is like. It is a social construction, forced by circumstances and pragmatically adopted. Equally adhered to by

almost all groups in the political arena, it developed without attracting much notice, together with the making of the welfare state. It is unwritten, implicit and not systematic. People are not aware that they have an implicit civil religiosity, which is why I prefer to speak of religiosity rather than of religion. The term religion suggests more coherence and systematic elaboration than is present in Dutch civil religiosity.

There are more fully-fledged civil religions. American civil religiosity is more elaborated than the Dutch, but here too, civil religiosity came into being unintentionally. Until recently, Marxism-Leninism was a complete state religion in the USSR, with a central saint, Lenin, whose grave became a place of pilgrimage, etc. It was implicit, in that it was not seen as a religion, but as the result scientific analysis. Unlike American or Dutch civil religiosity, it was enforced. It was also total: it covered not only the political community but every aspect of life and it promised salvation for everyone. As such it replaced the old suppressed orthodox state religion. Nazism seems, as an implicit civil religion, to have been less fully-fledged and more voluntarily accepted by the population for quite a long time. It was less totalitarian, leaving some room for other religions. Nevertheless, Nazism pretended to bring salvation to the people and greatness to the German state. Both Nazism and Communism disappeared with the forms of government that they supported.

Whatever the level of elaboration may be, civil religiosity is always very dynamic. It comes into being together with the formation of a political community and is the foundation and the core of the political culture. As such it consists of fundamental values, but as a product of social circumstances, it varies with the social and political process. Fundamental values may be absolute and even sacred, but this does not mean that they do not change.

This becomes very clear in the Dutch situation. In the first place, the emancipation of the Catholics, the separation of Church and State, and the secularisation of society as a whole caused a *generalisation* of the fundamental values which were at first linked to Protestant theology. Secondly, the *interpretation* of the fundamental values is different in every pillar or party programme. For instance, equality is a fundamental, sacred value, but for the conservatives (in the Netherlands, the liberal party VVD) this means equality in (socio-economic) opportunities, while for the social democrats it means equality in circumstances. Thirdly, *priorities* change. In the sixties and early seventies, equality (more or less in the social democratic interpretation) had a priority over freedom. This applied to the whole political spectrum. Equality was seen as a condition of freedom. In the eighties, the reverse has been the case. Freedom (in the conservative

interpretation) is now seen as a precondition for equality. This is clearly an effect of the economic recession.

### **The Scope of Civil Religiosity**

If we ask what the importance of this civil religiosity is, we must take its scope into consideration. This is the political community. Without it, the Dutch state, i.e. the most important institution in Dutch society, would lack any spiritual basis. It would not have a last criterium of the absolute truth, and, what is more important, the ultimate significance of this truth would not be felt. However, the Dutch case also clearly demonstrates that this spiritual basis is not purely spiritual. In its origin as well as in its existence, it is in interaction with economic interests and power constellations. The making of civil religiosity thus is less a matter of revelation than of the necessity to cope with one another in order to survive. During and after its construction, it gives people charismatic feelings. In retrospect they reconstruct their values and then they seem to be revealed.

Dutch civil religiosity provides the standards for political and much public debate. This makes it very important. All the same, since society is differentiated, its scope is limited. It may be impossible, for instance, to make a joke about blacks in the public debate (this would be discrimination and thus against the rule of equality), but in many private communities, this may be no problem at all. Here, other emotions and other interests are important, and, accordingly, other fundamental values.

Though the scope of civil religiosity may be limited to the political community, it may have a much wider relevance as an example of how fundamental values form the foundation of the meaning system of communities as such. What is true of the making of political fundamentals must be true of the fundamentals in most other communities as well.

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## Notes

1. I refer here to Nisbet's definition of community: "By *community* I refer to much more than what is denoted by mere local community. I use the word [...] in its oldest and lasting sense of relationships among individuals that are characterised by a high degree of personal intimacy, of social cohesion or moral commitment, and of continuity in time" (Nisbet, 1974: 1).
2. Here I am combining Durkheim with notions from both the symbolic-interactionist and the existentialist tradition. What I call anxiety is meant to be a translation of the German 'Angst'. This word is often translated as 'dread'. I have chosen 'anxiety' because this seems to have less heavy and dramatic connotation.
3. What I have in mind is the normal Weberian idea of charisma, but here it is combined with the ideas of anomie, anxiety and reality maintenance. It would go too far in this context to elaborate the theoretical problems involved in this eclectic combination.
4. We see this kind of alternation quite often in different forms with a changing charismatic charge. We see this in the US, for instance in the discussions on the merits of various presidents, especially Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. And in the American mind, the USSR turned from an evil empire into the country where the peacemaker Gorbachev came from.
5. The idea that charisma is a good criterium of what religion is is completely in tune with Weber (1972: 245). The reasoning I put forward here is elaborated (in Dutch) in Ter Borg (1991).
6. The concept of religiosity developed here is not far from Geertz's well-known definitions and purposes. Geertz's definition is as follows: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz, 1973: 90).
7. Thus Durkheim's famous definition would be applicable: *A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them* (Durkheim, 1915: 47). The mixture of emotions that I describe here is in line with the way in which Rudolf Otto defined the sacred (Otto, 1922; Eliade, 1959: 8).
8. Unfortunately, these ideas have not received much influence outside the sociology of religion (Mathisen, 1989).

9. This is what the genius behind the Christian pillars, Abraham Kuyper, called "the antithesis".