

Religion in Political Polarization: Currents in the Netherlands and Indonesia.

Populism is a narrative

What is the power of the narrative of religion and how should it be told?

Introduction

When I, end of December 2023, returned to the Netherlands after a five-months-stay in Indonesia¹, I was wondering what kind of country or society I was returning to. The general elections of November 22 had resulted in a huge victory for the PVV (Party for the Freedom). The PVV is the radical-right party headed by Geert Wilders, who, by the way, is the only member of that party. The slogans of his campaign had been: The Netherlands First, the Netherlands on number 1 again, the Netherlands for the people from the Netherlands... I was not convinced at all whether those Netherlands were still 'my' Netherlands and whether I wanted to be one of those people from the Netherlands who were opposed by the PVV to other people in the Netherlands, who were considered not to belong to 'the people of the Netherlands' anymore.

I remembered Wilders shouting as a people's demagogue: do you want more Moroccan people here or do you want less of them? And the people shouted back: we want less, less, less.

Wilders wanted to prohibit the Qur'an in the Netherlands, to kick all Muslims out and close the borders of the Netherlands for asylum seekers. The influx of asylum seekers was the issue over which the last cabinet under prime-minister Mark Rutte had fallen in May 2023. Wilders took up that issue, which had been 'his' issue for already many years. He transformed it into an 'asylum seekers crisis' or an 'immigration crisis', presented with a toxic mix of xenophobia and islamophobia. As a result, he succeeded in creating that much fear for 'the crisis' that he won 37 (+20) out of 150 seats in the second chamber of the Dutch parliament.

The party of the Christian Democrats, which once had a stable and stabilizing position in the middle of the political spectrum, between the Liberal Party (right wing) and the Socialist party (left wing), was diminished to one of the small parties having only 5 (-10) seats left. The Socialist party, for the elections combined with the Green party, succeeded in gaining 25 (+8) seats but did not qualify for formation of a new cabinet. The Liberal party (24, -10), which since 2012 until 2023 excluded the possibility of participating in a cabinet with Wilders' party, had changed this position during the campaign for the elections. Two new political parties, in fact split offs from the Christian Democrats, with a more right-wing signature, won also a considerable number of seats (NSC 20, +20 and BBB 7, +6). The general opinion was that the people of the Netherlands choose for a right-wing government. The populist Wilders, leader of the now biggest party in parliament, had to take the lead in the formation of a new cabinet.

What had happened in the Netherlands and to 'the people of the Netherlands' that a populist party could win the elections and a person who had been seen as a political outcast could raise to power?

¹ I had been invited by the Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Theologi Jakarta, to co-lecture in the field of Pastoral Care and Congregational Transformation

That brings me to the statement and the two questions in the title of my contribution for this Open Dialogue. The statement is: Populism is a narrative. And the questions are: what is the power of the narrative of religion and how should that narrative be told today?

Populism is a narrative

Rob Wijnberg, the chief editor of The Correspondent, an independent online platform for journalism in the Netherlands, explained in his yearly letter to the readers how the platform tries to deal with populism². His starting point is the conviction that basically every political direction consists of a narrative. That also counts for the populist or radical-right politics. And even more fundamental is that those narratives do not have to be true, logic or coherent in order to be convincing, attractive or credible.

Throughout history people always tried to make sense of their lives and life experiences by developing a worldview, a philosophy (including religion) to give meaning to life. When people adopt a certain worldview collectively, this view becomes real and true. People feel that this view or interpretation matches with how they experience life and therefore this view becomes true or 'the truth'.

Not the facts define reality but the perception of life defines what is real and reality.

Wijnberg pictures the narrative of populist and radical-right politicians as follows: the world is governed by a corrupt, leftish, liberal, globally oriented elite that is after your freedom, your money and your way of life. This elite aims at forbidding what you want to do (regulations), at taking what is yours (property, lifestyle, comfort) and disapprove of who you are (traditions, gender, culture and convictions). They do that based on so called facts 'invented' by scientists, journalists and want to favor minorities who are fundamentally different from you.

When they get to power, they will take away meat from your traditional menu, forbid you to fly, limit your mobility, take your houses, disapprove of your identity and favor people who are different from you, such as asylum seekers, Muslims, immigrants or 'other' elites.

Of course, the narrative also offers a solution.

You need a strong man (!) who is able to resist this corrupt elite. When he comes to power he will give you a future that is designed according to the past that you remember. This remembered past is the nostalgic picture you have of how life was before all kind of crises troubled it.

Farmers were just producing food to feed the people and did not have to feel guilty of producing too much of nitrogen or dung, housing was no problem because only we, who belonged here, lived here, climate was stable and predictable, biodiversity was just given, and we lived peacefully in a safe environment without criminals and rapists.

Populism consists for a considerable part of nostalgic nationalism: Make America Great again, Take our country back, the Netherlands First, again on number 1.

A false narrative

² Rob Wijnberg in De Correspondent, 30 September 2024, https://decorrespondent.nl/15597/brief-van-de-hoofdredacteur-over-journalistiek-in-tijden-van-wilders-en-musk/5657b323-50ff-0a38-2690-43117f380180?pk_campaign=daily&mc_cid=880b21a040&mc_eid=ece81de746

This nostalgic nationalism is at several levels a false narrative, a lie. The past, pictured in this narrative, is mythic, has never been reality.

There have always been problems and misery, threats and challenges.

One of the new populist parties, called Farmers and Citizens Movement will not stop the industrialization of farming. On the contrary, the party is greatly supported by the food and agriculture industry with its huge international economic interests.

The climate crisis will not end when we simply deny it, nor will migration stop by building walls at our borders.

Notwithstanding the fact that these narratives are false, they are strong. They respond to a solid mix of emotions (do they voice out what I feel?), self-image (do they reflect how I see myself?) and social validation (do people whom I trust share the same opinions?). Facts (is this true?), arguments (is this logical?) and morality (is this how it ought to be?) are less relevant.

Counter narrative

Wijnberg suggests that the only power that can reduce the influence of populist and polarizing narratives is the power of alternative narratives.

A counter narrative should, of course, stick to the facts and present them in a non-polarizing tone, but the facts as such will not convince people.

It is the narrative that moves people.

The facts concerning the asylum-seekers crisis or the immigration crisis tell us that in the Netherlands only 11% of the immigrants per year consists of asylum migrants. 89% are migrant workers, needed in industries for which the Netherlands themselves cannot provide the personnel, students, partners (love-relations) and war refugees from Ukraine.³ Not the number of asylum migrants determines whether there is a crisis, but the myths about migration.⁴

Climate change, global warming, loss of biodiversity might be denied by populist parties, the facts about not achieving the climate goals as agreed upon in Paris, speak for themselves.

The claim of populist leaders that they represent a purer form of democracy, because they only listen to 'the peoples voice' should be countered by demonstrating that support for NGO's is being reduced and that regulations diminish the role of civil society (right of demonstration). Civil organizations are getting less access to democratic institutions (e.g. court of justice)⁵. The rule of law is under pressure and dialogue with civil society is being restricted.

However clear and demonstrable the facts may be, it is the narrative that determines how things are perceived. The Dutch prime minister recently stated: there is an asylum crisis because people feel that there is such a crisis.

Political parties and their narratives

The Netherlands I returned to in December 2023, my family and friends, my church, were still confused. What had happened in the recent elections, how was this possible?

³ Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, De staat van Migratie 2024

⁴ Hein de Haas, Hoe migratie echt werkt, het ware verhaal over migratie aan de hand van 22 mythen, Spectrum 2023

⁵ Margit van Wessel, Wageningen Universiteit, Sluipenderwijs wordt ruimte voor actie beperkt, Trouw 15 oktober 2024

Apparently, many church members voted for the populist parties. But the topic was not really open at the table yet. It is said that one of the differences of the current campaign for the presidential elections in the USA, compared to the campaign before Trump was chosen for the first time, is that people speak openly about their choice for Trump.

In the Netherlands I did not meet many people who openly stated that they voted for Wilders. Is that an indication of the polarization in the Dutch society? Does it indicate how deep the gap is between me as a highly educated boomer with a career in the church and its international oriented work in mission, world service and development cooperation and the practical educated people or the Generation Z?⁶

Part of the shock that was felt, is due to the fact that people had lost trust in the traditional and vested institutions. That counts for political parties, workers unions, governmental institutions such as the tax authority and the juridical system, as well as for the churches. The loss of trust is caused by scandals (transgressive behavior in power relations, arrogance, sexual abuse and discrimination based on algorithms applied in public services). The institutions appeared to be not trustworthy. And at the other hand, they had no narrative, or could not tell their own narrative in a way that could regain trust or give a clear, feasible and hopeful view for the future.

Populists master very well the exploitation of feelings of mistrust, insecurity and loss of identity by blaming and scapegoating the institutions and those who are held responsible for these feelings. When there is no 'energy-generating-view' for the future, people tend to turn to an illusory world, presented by the ever successful and shining influencers, or to a falsely remembered past.

Political parties are trying to come to terms with the big shift that took place in society since the nineties of the last century.

Two days ago, two former parliamentary journalists, who later on were spokes persons for governmental departments, published a book which tries to describe and analyze what happened in the last three decades to the political landscape.⁷

During the eighties of last century Christian Democrats and Socialists were still 'broad popular parties', where people of different layers in society met each other, based on a common worldview, the Christian-social and the socialistic narrative. Individualism and the loss of the necessity for communal effort to achieve goals in society, in combination with conflicts about leadership positions in the respective parties, caused a tremendous decline for those parties. Will they survive? And is there still a need or a role for 'broad popular parties'? The party of Wilders has no party organization, no members except Wilders himself. Now that this party gained a position in the cabinet it has to find a way to deal with the democratic separation of powers. Before Wilders had a decisive voice in all matters, and he seems to be managing to keep that position.

Will other parties present new and attractive – and considering the immense challenges for our world – urgent narratives in the near future?

What is the power of the narrative of religion?

What about the narrative of religion; Christian faith, churches, Islam?

⁶ Mechteld M. Jansen, Volk en Elite, KokBoekencentrum 2021

⁷ Gijs Koorevaar en Ruud Slotboom, Het Haagse ravijn, Prometheus 2024

Perhaps the TOR for this Open Dialogue reflects a little bit of what happened to the narrative of the Christian and Muslim faith.

The TOR says:

'The Consortium wants to contribute to a balanced relationship between states, religious communities and civil society. Intercultural and interreligious dialogue, supported by faith traditions, is central to this. Will the voice of religion navigate through and is that voice in the digital wilderness capable of consolidating and turning the tide for the better?'⁸

The formulation reflects, in my opinion, partly the narrative of the Christian faith in the Netherlands in the second half of last century. I studied theology in the seventies.

Burning questions were: is theology (church, faith) relevant in social life?

What about the role of the church in poor and deprived neighborhoods in our cities?

Shouldn't we declare Apartheid (South Africa) to be a sin?

The 'International declaration of human rights' got almost a confessional status; it reflected much of Christian-social thinking. The World Council of Churches developed a firm social frame for the role of churches and faith in this world: Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation.

The words 'balanced relationship between states, religious communities and civil society, intercultural and interreligious dialogue, civil society' in the TOR, fit very well in this frame. However, 'balanced relationship between states, religious communities and civil society' might still be relevant for the Indonesian context (cf. Marcus Mietzner⁹, mind the double meaning of the title of his book), for the Dutch context they do not carry much meaning anymore, except for diaconal work such as poverty issues and perhaps the contribution of eco-theology to the climate debate. But both issues are not undisputed in the Protestant Church, where populist influence is also part of reality.

Peoples narratives and Gods narrative

Pastoral care, the topic I am teaching at the Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Theologi (STFT) in Jakarta, deals, in this post-modern era, for a big part with the narrative of faith on an individual basis. Theologians describe individualization and biographization as the current context for faith.¹⁰ What is a person's narrative about her/his faith? And how does that influence the relation with self, other(s) and God?

Pastoral care is currently supporting and guiding people in detecting where and how Gods narrative connects with the personal faith narrative of believers, even to the state where God and humans co-author this narrative.¹¹

In a world with strong individualistic tendencies, not in the least through social media, I find this approach as respectful as it is challenging, both for individuals and religious institutions.

The aim of pastoral care is change.

'Change for the better' as the TOR for this meeting says.

⁸ NICMCR, 2 November 2024, www.nicmcr.org

⁹ Marcus Mietzner, *Coalitions that Presidents make*, Cornell University Press 2023

¹⁰ Ruurd Ganzevoort en Jan Visser, *Zorg voor het verhaal, Achtergrond, methode en inhoud van pastorale begeleiding*, Meinema, 2007

¹¹ Denise D. Hopkins and Michael S. Koppel, *Grounded in the Living Word, The Old Testament and Pastoral Care Practices*, 32, Eerdmans 2010

That takes me back to the basics of the Christian faith, to the Bible as Gods living word.¹²

Genesis 45 for me is an example of how strong the narrative of faith is in an individualized, conflictual and polarized world. It tells the story about Joseph and the reconciliation with his brothers, sons of Jacob. The story indicates how Joseph is going through all kind of emotions when he is confronted with his past and the role his brothers played in his life. There has been mistrust, denial of human dignity, betrayal, envy, hate, violence and suffering. And now Joseph had the opportunity for revenge...

But in the final part we read about reconciliation which opens a new and promising future for the brothers and the generations to come.

Joseph tells his brothers how he perceives his life now, what, in the end, has become his narrative about the significance of his life.

Genesis 45:4 – 7:

⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! ⁵ And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping.⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

That is, for me, what the faith narrative is all about; the salvation of brothers and sisters and the generations to come on this earth, to save their lives by a great salvation (deliverance).

That is what speaks to mé.

I am not claiming that this is 'the' Christian narrative, but I recognize the Christian narrative in this story.

The title of this presentation consists of a statement and two questions.

I tried to underbuild my statement that populism is a narrative; thank you for listening to me.

Concerning my two questions about the power of the (counter) narrative of religion and how to communicate it, I am eager to listen to you.

Thank you.

¹² Denise D. Hopkins and Michael S. Koppel, *Grounded in the Living Word, The Old Testament and Pastoral Care Practices*, Eerdmans 2010