The Religious Contribution of Dutch Migrants to Multicultural Australia[1]

Gary D Bouma

The religious consequences of Dutch migration to Australia have been noticeable and enriching. Dutch migrants introduced a new religious group to Australia, The Reformed Churches in Australia; strengthened a number of Catholic Parishes and Presbyterian congregations, and swelled the ranks of those claiming to have 'no religion'. The settlement of Dutch migrants has involved the settlement of Dutch religious orientations and expectations some of which fit easily into the Australian relaxed attitude toward religion while others do not. Dutch migrants have also brought orientations to the ways religious groups relate to each other which may contribute to current issues of religious diversity facing Australian society. This chapter will reflect on the religious institution of the Netherlands as a backdrop to understanding some of the features of the religious settlement of Dutch migrants to Australia.

Religious settlement refers among other things to the processes involved in the movement of a religion and norms about religious practice from one socio-cultural location to another (See Bouma 1994, 1995a, 1995b and 1997). This process has become more obvious in Australia as post-War migration has brought a wide range of religions to Australia. Examples include Islam, various strains of Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. Each of these 'new-to-Australia' religions, and especially those with more than 100 000 adherents have made an impact on Australian religious life and on the interaction of religious groups in Australia. While each of these religious groups had a small number of adherents in Australia prior to 1947, they have grown to significant minority religious communities as a result of post-War migration.

Religious Institution and Religious Settlement

One aspect of the examination of the process of religious settlement is to study the contribution made by the religious institution[2] from which a group of migrants has come. Each society can be said to have a religious institution. Not to be confused with religious organisations, a society's religious institution is that set of norms governing the ways religious groups interact, specifying the levels of appropriate religious activity, and setting the range of religious practice and belief considered acceptable. Religious institutions are distinct from such religious organisational structures as churches, schools, convents, denominational or congregational structures. A society's religious institution shapes and directs the interactions of religious groups and religious activity found in or introduced to the society by immigration or by conversion.

The norms of the religious institution of the society from which migrants have come are likely to influence the way in which they settle religiously in a society. In the case of Dutch migrants an examination of the role of these norms in settlement involves an identification of those social norms about religion in the Netherlands which have had an influence on the religious settlement of these Dutch migrants in Australia. Among those norms are expected patterns of religious belief and practice as well as patterns of expectations of the ways religious groups relate with each other which these Dutch migrants have brought to Australia.

This is a sociological approach to understanding the way the religious institution of the society from which migrants have come might have an impact on the process of

religious settlement in Australia. In being sociological it focuses on groups of migrants and not on the experiences of individual migrants or migrating families. It is true that individuals and families have been the carriers of Dutch culture to Australia. However, the ways in which elements of Dutch culture and society have shaped the way in which these migrants and the religious cultures they have brought with them have settled in Australia can be analysed without reference to individuals or families. Such an analysis includes an examination of the ways elements of Dutch culture have found a home in Australia, have reacted to, or have provided new images for and influenced Australian society.

A Central Feature of Dutch Religious Institution

The most outstanding feature of the religious institution of the Netherlands is referred to in Dutch as *verzuiling*, which can be roughly translated as 'pillarising' or 'columnization'. *Verzuiling* refers to a set of norms governing the relationships among religious groups and communities in the Netherlands. This pattern of social relations has emerged in a society which was among the first in Europe to establish a lasting policy of religious freedom. This system was not formally introduced, but emerged over time as religious groups established themselves, organised their infra-structures and found ways of living together in a context of peace and mutual respect. It came to fullest expression in the second half of the 19th century and continues to this day. Prior to the emergence of the religious institution of *verzuiling* there had been mild persecution of Catholics and earlier in Dutch history persecution of Protestants under Philip II of Spain.

In the Dutch religious institution of *verzuiling* the various religious groups have organised themselves in parallel communities. These parallel religious communities include a Catholic group, one for the *Hevormde* (Reformed, which is the state church), one for the *Gereformeerde* (literally, the re-reformed) and other conservative Calvinist groups arising in the 19th century as protest/revitalisation groups in the reformed tradition), as well as ones for Jews and secular Dutch. These parallel columns of religious communities each have their own media (news, print, radio), their own schools, their own preferred shopping precincts, their own professionals, their own unions, their own universities, their own political parties. Given the wide ranging nature of each *zuil*, at the personal level, individual identity was first and foremost with an individual's *zuil*.

In many countries different religious groups inhabit different areas, like the concentration of Canadian French Catholics in Quebec and the neighbouring Maritime provinces. In the Netherlands there was some geographic segregation (ghettoization) of these religious communities, primarily in rural areas, with Protestants predominating in the North and Catholics in the South. However, in most Dutch cities all of these religious communities lived together and not in specific neighbourhoods or suburbs.

The Dutch religious institution of *Verzuiling* has served to maintain and enable religious difference as well as to organise the way religious difference was held together in the one society inhabiting a very small geographic territory. This pattern is different from that in Switzerland where religious, linguistic and other differences are largely geographically separated and politically organised in separate units within a federated state. This pattern is also very different from that in the United States where there is a vast variety of religious difference but these differences are not associated with the range

of identifiably religiously distinct social organisations. Such a pattern of organising religious communities was also not found in Australia. The Netherlands is a single society, a unified state, a constitutional monarchy in which religious difference forms a primary field of social differentiation. Through the religious institution of *verzuiling* religious difference is not only tolerated, but is allowed to flourish and to organise in order to influence the course of life in the whole of the Netherlands.

However, while each column provides to those in it a full range of services, occupations, and to Dutch society a form of social differentiation; the various columns were not seen as stratified. The columns were different, the differences were socially recognised, but not hierarchically organised. This lies behind the use of the term *verzuiling*, pillarisation, or columnisation, which suggests parallel rather than hierarchical organisation.

The religious institution of the Netherlands has established a society in which religious tolerance is the norm, religious difference is expected and considered a normal and non-threatening aspect of social life, and in which there is socially regulated competition among religious groups. In this way the religious institution of *verzuiling* has provided a legitimate space for each of the religious groups, shaped competition among them, and legitimated religious difference. This can be seen as one example of the ways religious difference in post-modern, multicultural religiously diverse societies is socially organised. There is no single over-arching meta-narrative providing an integrating legitimisation of the society, but a pattern of social organisation which allows the coexistence of multiple meta-narratives separately organised into fully structured religious communities.

The Australian Religious Institution in 1947

The Australian society to which Dutch migrants came was markedly different from that which had shaped them in the Netherlands. According to the 1947 Census, 39 per cent of Australians said they were Anglicans (Church of England), 11.5 per cent Methodist, 9.8 per cent Presbyterian, 6.1 per cent other Protestant and only 20.7 per cent Catholic. This demographic preponderance of Protestants was reflected in a Protestant domination of the religious and cultural ethos of Australia. There was mild antipathy between Protestants and Catholics. Catholics were seen as more likely to be working class. However, while the 'standard brand' religious expectation of Australians in 1947 was Anglican and Protestant, this expectation was lightly held. Moreover, the Catholic-Protestant difference was aligned with a major ethnic difference, Irish-English. ethnicity was the stronger of the two differences.

One distinctive feature of the Australian religious institution is that Australians have long taken a cool approach to religion (Carey, 1996; Thornhill, 1991). They have never been among the world's great attendees, or contributors, or most pious (Bouma, 1992). The 'laid back' attitude Australians take to most aspects of life extends to religion as well. Thus the Australian norms related to religious belief, practice and participation direct that there be some, but that it not be all consuming.

The Dutch in Australia

The religious institution of *verzuiling* in the Netherlands has formed the religious expectations of Dutch migrants to Australia. As a result of their experiences in the Netherlands, they would have expected to find and to be part of religious difference in the society to which they had moved. They would not have been fearful of religious diversity, so long as their own group was allowed space to grow and establish itself in the panorama of religious groups. They also would have expected a degree of competition among religious groups. Experiences with *verzuiling* can be seen to influence the ways in which Dutch migrants settled religiously in Australia. The discussion of these effects treats separately migrants from different *zuilen* by focusing on The Reformed Dutch, the Catholic Dutch and the Secular Dutch. This is in part justified by the fact that, according to Overberg (1988: 355) emigration from the Netherlands was '...organised along bloc lines, with the religious blocs strongly represented'.

The Reformed Dutch

One of the achievements of Reformed Dutch migrants to Australia has been the formation of a denomination of Christianity which was new to Australia, the Reformed Churches of Australia. The need to establish another religious denomination seemed surprising to some Australians at the time. Given the rise of ecumenical thought and the sense that Australia already had plenty of denominations to cater for the religious needs of its citizens, such an activity ran counter to the prevailing Australian religious institution. Nonetheless, the Reformed Churches in Australia was formed after a genuine effort had been made by many to find a religious home among the Presbyterians in

Australia. Some Dutch migrants continue to find their religious homes in Presbyterian or Uniting Church congregations. However, a significant body felt strongly the need to maintain the purity of the Christian faith in the way they were accustomed to expressing, inculcating and celebrating it. This group banded together and organised congregations and then a denominational structure through which to express and pass on Reformed Christianity as they saw it. According to the 1991 census nearly 14 000 Australians identified themselves with the Reformed Church. According to Ward and Humphreys (1995: 90) 'Baptised membership (of the Reformed Churches of Australia) stood at 10 138 (including 6008 communicants) as at February 1994. Attendance is high - about 8300 attenders each week and most are in church every Sunday'.

It is said of the Reformed Dutch that forming new and distinct religious organisations is part of their religious heritage. The norms of freedom of religion established in the Netherlands, a freedom in the context of an established state church, has provided an opportunity for the rise of quite a number of distinct religious denominations and the formation of new, or separate groups on the basis of what to the outsider may seem to be extremely fine points of theology. This cultural heritage was expressed in my youth in another part of the Reformed Dutch diaspora by the following aphorism, 'You cannot split dead wood'. Which meant if a congregation or denomination was theologically alive and growing, finding new ways to express in the current context their timeless faith, serious difference of theological view were likely to arise and lead to charges of heresy and organisational differentiation. This continues to happen wherever groups of Reformed Dutch find themselves in sufficient numbers. Australia became such a place after World War II.

As the numbers of Dutch migrants to Australia increased and passed the 50 000 mark, the press for and resources necessary for the establishment of a separate religious organisation were met. The question of a separate religious organisation of other aspects of society has been a continuing issue for the Reformed Dutch in Australia. Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, independent, parent controlled schools have been organised (Watt, 1988:361-2). However, separate unions, professional associations, media and universities have not yet formed. There is some talk of a separate university, but finding sufficient numbers of well resourced, like minded people has not been successful. In these efforts the Reformed Dutch is beginning to form tentative alliances with other conservative Calvinist evangelical groups in Australia. Whether such an alliance will yield a population base sufficient to support a separate socio-cultural column in Australia remains to be seen. The most serious obstacle to such an alliance is the propensity to internal disagreement and organisational differentiation of the groups which would be involved. Should such alliances be successful, there could emerge a conservative evangelical Calvinist Christian *zuil*, or column, in Australia.

The Australian religious institution also had norms about the degree to which one took religion seriously which were at variance with the deep seriousness with which the Reformed Dutch took their theological and ecclesiastical heritage. In doing this the Reformed Dutch migrants became one of the first several groups of post-War migrants to take their religion more seriously than the Australian norm. These groups, including Muslims, orthodox Christian and Buddhists have established a contrary pattern and have been instrumental in re-awakening interest in the dynamics of the relationships among religious groups in an religiously plural society (Bouma, 1994).

The Catholic Dutch

The experience of the Catholic Dutch was somewhat different. They were the largest religious group among Dutch migrants. The Dutch Catholic hierarchy encouraged post-War migration and preferred Australia as a destination (Overberg, 1988: 358). There was considerable pressure for separate Dutch ethnic parishes. For a while, Dutch speaking Catholic chaplains were supplied for these migrants, in part funded by Dutch sources and in part from Australian Catholic resources (Overberg, 1981 and 1988: 358-9). However, separate ethnic parochial organisation was refused to the Dutch, as it was to other non-Irish Catholic migrants to Australia, by a Catholic hierarchy which was committed to the universality of Catholicism and the necessity of Catholics from all backgrounds to find their religious home in the Australian (very Irish) version of Catholicism (Lewins, 1978). This violated the expectations of these migrants, some of whom formed de facto Dutch parishes in, at least, Melbourne and Sydney. The consequences of this policy decision for the levels of participation in Catholic parishes of migrants from Italy, the Netherlands, Germany and other parts of the world have yet to be fully examined.

The Catholic Dutch would also have expected to find a range of Catholic social and cultural organisations from the media to sporting clubs and unions. In terms of separate religious organisation of other aspects of social and cultural life, the Catholic Dutch arriving in the 1950s would have understood the motivation behind the Democratic Labor Party and found it to make sense to them. The system of Catholic schools would have been familiar, except that they would have expected a higher level of government support for such education than was the case in the early 1950s. However, other forms of

separate Catholic religious organisation were not found in any significant strength in Australia when compared with the Netherlands.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to disentangle data on the Catholic Dutch from other Catholic data at this time. Thus it is not possible to see what effects they have had on levels of participation in Catholic parishes in Australia and whether their patterns of involvement have taken on a pattern more consistent with or distinct from other groups of Catholics.

The Secular Dutch

The secular Dutch migrants had little trouble "assimilating" into Australian culture and society given the Australian expectation that religion was something to have as a label, or identity, but not something which would demand much in time, resources or involvement. Later in the 1960s and 1970s there was also the growing expectation that secularisation was an inexorable process and that religion was largely on the way out as a force in Australian society. According to this secularisation perspective which began to dominate the Australian religious institution, religion was becoming a leisure pursuit selected by the minority - a decreasing minority of the population. The secular Dutch joined the ranks of those who declared 'no religion' in the Census and disappeared religiously. Again it should be noted that a declaration of 'no religion' had been widely accepted in the Dutch society from which they had come and so the secular Dutch had no adjustment to make in making such a declaration in Australia. Indeed it was Australians who were learning what it meant to register oneself in the census as a 'none'. However, it would be interesting to know how the secular Dutch responded to Australian

unions, political parties, media. Did these organisations seem secular to the secular Dutch, or were they dominated by echoes of religious expression?

While in the Netherlands, the secular *zuil* was seen as one among several religiously organised columns of socio-cultural life, secular Australians argued for several decades that the secular view was the dominant one. One of the geniuses of the Dutch system of *verzuiling* is to preserve an understanding of religious diversity and to make room for a variety of approaches to religion to be pursued with none of them having to be seen as dominant. Australian Anglicans have had to learn to be one group among several, as have several more recently arrived religious groups. The Dutch have an experience with such diversity which may help groups which have a tendency to seeking to dominate to find another way of living in a religiously plural society.

Conclusion

Today one of the most pressing challenges facing Australia is the settlement of a wide variety of religious groups. How is Australia to find a way of socially organising this religious diversity? Dutch migrants to Australia can be seen as offering an example of a workable model of religious inter-group relations in post-modern, multicultural societies. The pre-migration experience of Dutch migrants with the way in which religious difference was socially organised by a religious institution of *verzuiling* in the society from which they migrated may help other Australians to establish a new and inclusive religious institution. Australia is developing social structures and norms which enable religious diversities to coexist. Australia is constructing a new religious institution, one which promotes mutual respect and which gives each religious community the security

of being a legitimate part of the whole. A religious institution which also allows for a wide range of types of internal organisation and the elaboration of such religious infra-structures as separate schools, cultural associations, and self-help associations.

References

Bouma, Gary D. (1984) *How the Saints Persevere: Social Factors in the Vitality of the Christian Reformed Church,*. Monash University, Department of Anthropology and Sociology Monograph Series No. 4, Monash University, Victoria.

Bouma, Gary D. (1989) 'Religion and Dutch Identity in Australia', in A. Ata (ed) *Religion and Ethnic Identity: An Australian Study,* Spectrum and Victracc, Melbourne., 1989, pp. 34-44.

Bouma, Gary D. (1994) *Mosques and Muslim Settlement in Australia,* Australian Government Printing Service, Canberra.

Bouma, Gary D. (1995a) 'Religion and Migrant Settlement', *Asian Migrant* VII(2), pp 38-41.

Bouma, Gary D. (1995b) 'The Emergence of Religious Plurality in Australia, A Multicultural Society', *Sociology of Religion,* 56, Pp 285-302.

Bouma, Gary D. (1997) 'The Settlement of Islam in Australia' *Social Compass,* 44(1), Pp75-86.

Carey, Hilary (1996) *Believing in Australia: A Cultural History of Religions,* Allen and Unwin, Sydney.

Dixon, Robert (1996) *Catholics in Australia,*. Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

Lewins, Frank. (1978) *The Myth of the Universal Church,*. ANU Press, Canberra.

Overberg, Henk (1981) 'The Dutch in Victoria 1947-1980: Community and Ideology', *Journal of Intercultural Studies,* 2, 1: pp 17-36.

Overberg, Henk (1988) ‘Post-War Dutch Immigration’ in Jupp, J. (Editor) *The Australian People: An Encyclopedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origins,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, pp 355-361.

Thornhill, John (1992) *Making Australia,* Millennium, Sydney.

Ward & Humphreys, (1995) *Religious Bodies in Australia*, New Melbourne Press, Melbourne.

Watt, Michael (1988) ‘Dutch Settlement in Tasmania’ pp 361-2 in , in Jupp, J. (Editor) *The Australian People: An Encyclopedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origins,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney.

[1] I wish to thank the several editors who read and commented on earlier drafts of this chapter. It is a better product thanks to their suggestions.

[2] I wish to express my gratitude to the Re-shaping Australian Institutions Project of the Research School of Social Sciences of the Australian National University for an which has made it possible for me to develop a theory of institutions and to reflect on Australia's religious institution. This chapter grows out of that project. Some of the material in this chapter was presented in a paper given to the annual meetings of the Religious Research Association and The Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 8-11 November 1996, Nashville, Tennessee.