Using faith to exclude: The role of religion in Dutch populism

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Religion has played a crucial role in the formation of the Dutch party system, and party competition in the first decades after World War II was, to a considerable degree, still determined by the religious denomination of voters. Most religious voters were loyal to one of the three dominant ‘confessional’ parties: the large Catholic People’s Party (KVP) or one of the two smaller Protestant parties (ARP and CHU). Until the parliamentary election of 1963, the combined vote share of the three dominant confessional parties was around 50 per cent. Most secular voters, on the other hand, turned either to the Labour Party (PvdA), representing the working class, or the Liberal Party (VVD), representing the secular middle class. The fact that voting behaviour was rather predictable resulted from the fact that Dutch parties and the most significant religious and social groups—arguably with the exception of the secular middle class and the VVD—were closely aligned. One aspect of this ‘pillarisation’ of society was that the electorate voted largely along traditional cleavage lines of religion and social class.
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The dividing lines between the social groups gradually evaporated, in part due to the secularisation of society since the 1960s. Except for the secular middle class, the social background of the electorate continued to determine voting patterns quite predictably in the following decades, but by the turn of the twenty-first century the explanatory power of belonging to a traditional pillar had faded to a large extent.\textsuperscript{4} What is more, as Dutch society became more secularised, the level of electoral support for the three dominant confessional parties began to decline. This provided an incentive for these parties to merge into the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) in 1980.

Although Dutch voters began to choose more freely, the traditional parties were hardly challenged by populist parties or politicians. During the twentieth century, political parties often associated with populism had intermittently managed to enter the Dutch lower house (\textit{Tweede Kamer}), but were never very successful (see Table 5.1).\textsuperscript{5} The Farmers’ Party (Boerenpartij) entered parliament in 1963, but has never received more than 4.8 per cent of the vote. The ethno-nationalist xenophobic parties led by Hans Janmaat in the 1980s and 1990s (the Centre Party and Centre Democrats) never grew to play significant roles. Another populist party that emerged was the left-wing Socialist Party (SP—Socialistische Partij), a party with Maoist roots which could be described as a ‘populist socialist’ party in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{6} However, the party toned down its populist, anti-establishment rhetoric to a considerable extent after the 1990s.\textsuperscript{7}

It was only after the turn of the twenty-first century that a whole array of populist parties appeared on the Dutch political scene, though few came close to representation in the Dutch parliament. Two populist parties were clearly the most successful electorally: the Pim Fortuyn List (LPF—\textit{Lijst Pim Fortuyn})—although only for a short period of time—and Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party (PVV—\textit{Partij voor de Vrijheid}). In the parliamentary election of 15 May 2002, the party newly founded by maverick politician Pim Fortuyn, a columnist and former sociology professor, broke through with 17 per cent of the vote—an unprecedented result for a newcomer. Fortuyn himself did not witness the results of the 2002 parliamentary election; on 6 May, he was murdered by an environmental activist. The party’s success was short-lived, not least due to continuous infighting after it joined a coalition government with the Liberals and the Christian Democrats. Mainly due to the organisational problems of the LPF, an early election was scheduled for 22 January 2003 in which the party that had aimed to represent the late Pim Fortuyn’s ideas suffered a significant defeat. After the 2006 election, the party disappeared from the Dutch parliament altogether. At the same time, this election
also marked the entrance of the populist, radical right Freedom Party, which was founded and has since been controlled by ex-Liberal MP Geert Wilders.8 With 5.9 per cent of the vote, Wilders’ success in this instance was still modest, but in the 2010 election his party won 15.5 per cent of the vote. After this election, the Freedom Party provided parliamentary support to the governing minority coalition formed between the Liberals and the Christian Democrats. In the early election of 2012, the Freedom Party was among the losers, but still received 10.1 per cent of the vote.

Table 5.1: Populist Parties and Seats Won in Elections for the Dutch Lower House

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Years in Parliament</th>
<th>Record vote share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farmers Party (Boerenpartij)</td>
<td>1963–1981</td>
<td>4.8% (1967)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre Party (Centrumpartij)</td>
<td>1982–1986</td>
<td>2.5% (1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre Democrats (Centrumdemocraten)*</td>
<td>1989–1998</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livable Netherlands (Leefbaar Nederland)</td>
<td>2002–2003</td>
<td>1.6% (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom Party (Partij voor de Vrijheid)</td>
<td>2006 –present</td>
<td>15.5% (2010)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: election data from http://www.verkiezingsuitslagen.nl
*In 1984, the Centre Party’s leader and only MP, Hans Janmaat, split from the party but retained his seat. In 1989, Janmaat returned to parliament as leader of the Centre Democrats.
** It is questionable whether the Socialist Party can still be considered a populist party.

Over the years, populist parties have thus become a much stronger electoral force in the Netherlands, while the traditionally dominant position of the Christian Democratic parties has been eroded. As this chapter will show, it would be wrong to assume that populist parties have simply taken the Christian Democrats’ role. Neither Pim Fortuyn nor Geert Wilders has explicitly appealed to Christian values. This is not to say, however, that religion has been absent from the discourse of Dutch populist parties—quite the contrary, in fact. However, it was not Christianity, but Islam, that featured prominently in Fortuyn’s and Wilders’ discourse. Instead of using religion as a means to conceive of the ‘ordinary’ people, the Dutch right-wing populist parties used it mainly as a means to identify those who did not belong to the ‘heartland’ to which they appealed.9

This chapter will focus firstly on the political programmes of both Pim Fortuyn and the Freedom Party of Geert Wilders, considering in particular the
limited role of religion as a means for populists to conceive of Dutch culture and identity. Secondly, it will discuss the attention devoted to Islam in the programmes of populist politicians. Thirdly, the chapter will look at the relationship between the Freedom Party and Church authorities before finally outlining the (lack of) electoral potential for religious populism in the Netherlands.

Liberal’ instead of Religious Populism

Pim Fortuyn railed above all against the ‘Purple’ coalitions that were formed between 1994 and 2002, including the ‘blue’ Liberals, the ‘red’ Social Democrats and the social liberals of the smaller D66 party. During this period, the Christian Democrats were excluded from government for the first time since 1918. After various failed attempts to build a political career via the traditional mainstream parties, Fortuyn became leader of the newly founded party Livable Netherlands (LN—Leefbar Nederland) in November 2001. He was expelled from this party by February 2002, following controversial statements in a newspaper interview (notably, Fortuyn stated that Islam could be perceived as a ‘backward culture’). With only a few months to go before the parliamentary election in May, Fortuyn founded his own party, the Pim Fortuyn List (LPF). This party could immediately count on substantial support in the opinion polls, thereby eclipsing Fortuyn’s old party, Livable Netherlands.

In his book (and, essentially, political programme) The Shambles of Eight Years Purple, Fortuyn stated that ‘The Netherlands should become a real lively democracy of and for the ordinary people, and depart from the elite party democracy which we are currently acquainted with.’ In the official election manifesto it was argued that the ‘Purple’ coalitions had left the Netherlands with a rigid and self-satisfied political culture of appointed executives lacking creative or learning capacities. Apart from the party’s populist features, the LPF’s more substantive political programme was eclectic. Fortuyn promoted a free-market economy, took a tough line on law and order issues and stressed the need to cut red tape in the healthcare and education sectors. At the same time, his position on moral or cultural issues like drugs and traditional marriage was very liberal. However, it was Fortuyn’s stance on immigration and the cultural integration of minorities that attracted the most controversy. According to the LPF manifesto, over-crowding in the Netherlands was leading to growing societal tensions. The party deemed it necessary to resist the immigration of—often unemployed and unskilled—foreigners into the coun-
try. The party manifesto spoke further of problems caused by the social-cultural ‘backwardness’ of minority groups in society and related problems such as criminality and discrimination against women, especially in fundamentalist Islamic circles.

In his discourse, Fortuyn made a distinction between a native Dutch population (although by no means in an ethnic sense) and minorities whose customs did not conform to the Dutch way of life. The 2002 election manifesto stated that these minorities often arrived from countries untouched by the ‘century-long Jewish-Christian-Humanist developments’ that had occurred in Europe. Aside from this—somewhat broad—conception of the religious and philosophical roots of European countries, Fortuyn did not truly use religion to define Dutch identity and values. Instead, he saw the Netherlands as a country of liberal Enlightenment values, and he was concerned about these being undermined. The 2002 manifesto, for instance, explicitly expressed the view that all citizens had equal rights and duties, irrespective of race, gender, faith or sexual orientation. Fortuyn’s ideology was at odds with the idea of a diverse, multicultural society in which liberal principles were put at risk. In this sense, Fortuyn evoked an ostensibly liberal heartland, but was, so to speak, intolerant of intolerant minorities. Fortuyn himself was also hardly the embodiment of religious conservatism. For a start, he was openly homosexual, and quite explicit about his rather tempestuous love life. Van Holsteyn and Irwin further describe Fortuyn’s lifestyle: ‘Ferrari, Bentley with chauffeur, butler, two lap dogs, portraits of John F. Kennedy in his lavishly decorated Rotterdam home which he referred to as Palazzo di Pietro’.

Following Fortuyn’s murder, his party’s subsequent unsuccessful record in government and its subsequent electoral decline, Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party became the most successful new populist party. As an MP for the Liberal Party, Wilders had become increasingly critical of Islam, and he eventually broke with his party in September 2004 after a conflict with the parliamentary leader over the issue of Turkish EU membership—Wilders was very much against Turkish accession to the Union. He formed his own one-man faction Groep Wilders (Wilders Group), and founded his Freedom Party (literally, ‘Party for Freedom’, PVV) in February 2006. In its early documents, the populist character of Wilders’ party was already visible. In his ‘declaration of independence’ from the Liberal Party, for instance, Wilders declared: ‘I do not want this country to be hijacked by an elite of cowardly and frightened people (from whichever party) any longer. [...] I therefore intend to challenge this elite on all fronts. I want to return this country to its citizens.’

Wilders
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expressed his contempt for the self-sustaining political system, which supposedly stood isolated from society and argued that ‘politicians should no longer be deaf to the problems troubling ordinary people in every-day life’.22

While Fortuyn never explicitly portrayed the Dutch people as a homogeneous body,23 Geert Wilders, from the end of the 2000s, constructed a more specific image of his ‘heartland’ of ordinary, hard-working Dutch people, epitomised by the fictional couple Henk and Ingrid. Wilders was also more explicitly patriotic than Pim Fortuyn, and increasingly used nationalistic discourse over time.24 In the Freedom Party’s manifestos, symbols such as the Netherlands’ maritime past—the Dutch flag flying across the oceans for centuries—and the nation’s dyke-building skills were used.25 Symbols of Christianity, however, were absent from these patriotic conceptions of the Dutch heartland.

Nevertheless, and similarly to Fortuyn, Geert Wilders repeatedly referred to the ‘Christian/Jewish/Humanistic’ culture of the Netherlands; the Freedom Party even proposed a new Article 1 of the Constitution stating that this culture should remain dominant.26 In the 2010 manifesto, ‘Jewish-Christian and humanist values’ were perceived to be fundamental to the Netherlands’ success.27 Both religious and secular citizens, it was further noted, could be proud of this.28 References to Jewish, Christian or humanistic values were absent, however, from the Freedom Party’s 2012 parliamentary election manifesto.

In terms of substantive policies, Wilders’ initial programme was similar to Fortuyn’s, but more radical concerning immigration and integration.29 Wilders perceived Islam to be a violent ‘ideology’ and argued that Dutch culture had to be protected against the process of ‘Islamisation’. The 2010 manifesto nevertheless argued that the PVV was not a single-issue party, as Islamisation allegedly touched upon a range of social issues: ‘Economically it is a disaster, it damages the quality of our education, it undermines security on the streets, causes an exodus out of our cities, drives out Jewish and gay people, and flushes the century-long emancipation of women down the toilet.’30 Similarly to Pim Fortuyn’s message, as can be seen in this quote, the Freedom Party manifesto called for the preservation of Dutch liberal values threatened by the rise of Islam. Neither the LPF nor the PVV could thus be considered as examples of ‘classical’ extreme-right parties if we consider their organisational origins—both parties were essentially personal projects and shunned associations with extreme-right movements—or their political ideology.

Whether Wilders was a true liberal at heart is, however, a moot point. He worked together with conservative publicists Bart Jan Spruyt—who broke ties
with the Freedom Party as early as 2006—and Paul Belien, who positioned himself strongly against Islam, but also against abortion and euthanasia. In addition, Wilders built up links with various American neo-conservative think tanks. Wilders’ own ideology also contained some unmistakably conservative elements. The Freedom Party, it can be argued, presented a programme of ‘militant civic nationalism’ characterised by a clear dislike of cultural diversity. The 2010 Freedom Party manifesto argued that the ‘culture of the sixties’ was to be abandoned, and that children at school should be taught a ‘canon of Dutch history’ with particular emphasis on the Netherlands’ ‘heroic national history’. Somewhat analogously to Fortuyn’s previous criticism of the ‘left-wing Church’, Wilders blamed progressive (left-wing) elites for undermining traditional norms and values. Furthermore, although Wilders presented himself as a defender of women and of gay rights, these issues were mainly discussed as part of Wilders’ warnings against the threat of Islam. In its manifestos, the Freedom Party remained silent about moral-cultural issues such as euthanasia and abortion. When it (finally) expressed a position on the latter issue in March 2011, the Freedom Party parliamentary group actually favoured more restrictive legislation, when compared with the existing law.

It was not Christianity, however, that inspired Wilders’ more conservative viewpoints. According to Koen Vossen, ‘[Wilders’] main objection to the progressive elite is what he terms their cultural and moral relativism, leading to a refusal to distinguish between superior and inferior cultures, as a result of which the West has become weakened and has not recognised the Islamic threat in time.’ As far as the role of religion in Wilders’ discourse is concerned, negative references to Islam were clearly more dominant than positive references to traditional Christian norms and values.

Characterisation of the Religious ‘Other’

Populist entrepreneurs in the Netherlands have not explicitly presented themselves as defenders of a ‘good Christian’ people. As clarified by the previous section, however, religion did play an important role in the discourses of both Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders. Both politicians pointed out the malign effects of the growing presence and influence of Islam in Dutch society, and it seems that Wilders’ position on Islam has become more radical over the years. By the time Wilders had founded his own party, much of his discourse revolved around this theme, and in early 2008, he attracted substantial con-
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trovery with his seventeen-minute anti-Islam film *Fitna*. Tensions reached their peak before the film was actually released; since its contents were unknown, there was widespread concern about the reactions it might provoke among the Muslim community. The film—the release of which triggered little societal unrest in the end—focused mainly on the violent and intolerant aspects of Islam and the threat of Islamisation in the Netherlands and beyond.

In its 2010 election manifesto, the Freedom Party went so far as to argue that ‘Islam is predominantly a political ideology; a totalitarian doctrine aimed at dominance, violence and suppression’. Islam was mainly associated with threats to culture, security and freedom of speech. The party claimed that many Muslims supported Sharia and that ‘the Koran dictates behaviour which is incompatible with our *Rechtsstaat*, such as anti-Semitism, discrimination [against] women, killing infidels and [waging a] holy war until Islam has achieved world dominance’. Wilders not only blamed the progressive elite for the decay of cultural norms and pride, but also for Islam’s growing influence. The 2010 Freedom Party manifesto even spoke of an ‘alliance’ between the left-wing elite and Islam. The PVV associated the dominance of ‘mouldy left ideals’ with ‘the hated multicultural experiment’ and its malign effects, and the manifesto concluded that ‘Islam does not bring us cultural enrichment, but sharia-fatalism’. In order to counter the process of Islamisation of Dutch society, the party for instance proposed to stop immigration from Islamic countries and the building of mosques, as well as banning the Koran and closing Islamic schools.

At the start of the decade, voicing concerns about immigration and the lack of social integration of the Muslim minority proved to be very effective electorally. Indeed, Fortuyn’s success is generally linked to his hard line on the salient issues of immigration and integration, which at the time were insufficiently addressed by the major parties. World-wide religiously motivated terrorist attacks and the murder in 2004 of the controversial filmmaker Theo van Gogh by an Islamic fundamentalist are likely to have bolstered concerns about Islam. After the demise of the Pim Fortuyn List, Geert Wilders filled the space on the radical right. The Freedom Party reached its electoral zenith in 2010, despite the fact that this election was fought more over the economic crisis and austerity measures than over the alleged Islamisation of society.

In the parliamentary election campaign of 2012, the euro crisis and proposed austerity measures almost entirely eclipsed issues of immigration and integration. In Wilders’ campaign, Islam also played a relatively small role. In the televised debates, the Freedom Party leader mostly denounced
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‘Eurocrats’, deceitful ouzo-drinking Greeks and Eastern European labourers threatening to take Dutch jobs. In previous years, Wilders had already adopted a Eurosceptic position, but now he went so far as to promote a Dutch exit from the European Union (EU) altogether. Yet despite the lack of focus on the issue, it would be wrong to suggest that Wilders had changed his mind about the influence of Islam in Dutch society. Although the Freedom Party prioritised ‘Europe’ to a greater extent than before, the statements concerning Islam, immigration and integration remained practically unchanged.44 What is more, in an interview on 27 December 2012, Wilders announced that fighting Islam would be his priority again in the coming year.45

The Freedom Party has thus clearly continued to use Islam to distinguish between the native ‘heartland’ and the ‘outsiders’ threatening it. Indeed, events in the years following the 2012 election have provided Wilders with scope to revitalise his anti-Islamic discourse. The Charlie Hebdo shootings on 7 January 2015, for instance, were described by the PVV leader as an ‘act of war against everything that we stand for: our freedom of speech, our freedom of expression, our freedom of press, by people inspired, once again, by Islam, by the Koran, by Muhammed’.46 He furthermore criticised the political elites in Europe for ignoring the problem and for their lack of willingness to address the issue. Later that year, on 3 May, Wilders gave a keynote speech at the ‘First Annual Muhammad Art Exhibit and Contest’ in Garland, Texas, which featured cartoons satirising the Islamic prophet.47 In addition, the advance of Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East, and the concomitant decision of European jihadists to join the battle (and possibly return home later) were portrayed by Wilders as severe security threats. The PVV leader expressed the view that it was best to let Dutch jihadists leave, strip them of their Dutch nationality and refuse them re-entry into the country.48 Finally, Wilders also voiced concern about the surge in migration into Europe across the Mediterranean Sea from an anti-immigration as well as a security angle; on several occasions the populist politician picked up on reports that boats contained not only asylum seekers, but also IS fighters.49

Little Support from Religious Authorities

Since neither successful nor unsuccessful populist parties have made strong appeals for the preservation of traditional Christian values, it is unsurprising that there have been no official links between them and Church authorities. What is more, the populist parties could count on little religious backing.
Relevant data concerning Pim Fortuyn’s short-lived party is lacking, but in a survey in the Protestant daily newspaper *Nederlands Dagblad*, Protestant Church leaders were asked about their own and their followers’ views on Geert Wilders. More than three-quarters of the 1,228 respondents agreed with the statement that ‘a Christian cannot vote for the Freedom Party’. As regards their congregations’ opinions, a third of the respondents thought there was some support for Wilders in their community. However, nine out of ten clergymen thought that there were not many, or just a few, Wilders-enthusiasts in their congregation. The former secretary-general of the Protestant Church of the Netherlands (PKN), Bas Plaisier, had denounced Geert Wilders’ rhetoric on previous occasions. According to Plaisier, Wilders’ philosophy was incompatible with the principles and message of the Church, since the politician failed to show respect for people of different faiths.

Catholic Church authorities, too, have criticised the Freedom Party. Bishop Gerard de Korte, for example, argued that Wilders did call attention to genuine problems, but that his solutions were crude, and that his rhetoric divided people—something that he deemed irreconcilable with the Catholic social philosophy. In a previous interview, the Bishop had stated that he was worried about the violent side of Islam, but that it was necessary to maintain an open dialogue, without hurting the feelings of Muslims in the way that Wilders did. In an interview published in May 2009, Emeritus Bishop Tiny Muskens thought it was ‘mean’ that Wilders rallied people against Islam for political purposes, and that Dutch people were probably wise enough to vote for a different party. Despite this, Muskens also expressed his own concerns about radical Islam.

Such concerns were certainly more widespread among the Dutch clergy. Although the ecumenical Council of Churches had described Wilders’ short film *Fitna* as ‘one-sided and provocative’, some priests reviewed the film more favourably, with one arguing that ‘[the] Koran and violence were inseparably linked to one another’. Among the Protestant Church leaders in the *Nederlands Dagblad* survey, furthermore, a quarter were concerned about the Islamisation of the Netherlands. This rose to about 50 per cent of the respondents located in the Dutch ‘bible belt’—despite the fact that this is an area with relatively few Muslim residents. On balance, however, Church authorities have been critical rather than supportive of Wilders’ agenda, a response that was presumably felt by Wilders himself, who in March 2010 suggested that the Church should take a tougher line against Islam, instead of joining politicians in their political correctness.
The fact that Churches were generally critical of Wilders was again evident on 23 March 2014, when the Protestant Church of the Netherlands organised an ecumenical service against racism. Although the organisers stressed that the event did not constitute an ‘anti-Wilders service’, it was clearly a response to Wilders’ remarks on the eve of the municipal elections of 19 March. The PVV leader had asked a crowd of supporters whether they wanted more or less of the Labour Party, more or less of the European Union and, most controversially, more or fewer Moroccans. After the audience shouted ‘less, less, less’ to all three, Wilders assured his supporters that his party would ‘take care of that.’

Apart from the Church authorities, the Freedom Party also received criticism from other representatives of the more broadly defined Christian ‘pillar’. Doekle Terpstra, a CDA member and former chairman of the Christian Trade Union CNV, has been particularly vocal in his critique of Wilders’ polarising discourse, which he described in an op-ed article as ‘a threat to a society in which toleration, hospitality and solidarity are core values’. Prominent former Christian Democratic politicians also expressed their distaste for the Freedom Party’s politics, particularly during the coalition formation process of 2010 (which resulted in a Liberal-Christian Democrat minority coalition with support from the Freedom Party). Among those who opposed the coalition because of Wilders’ party’s involvement were the former chairman of the Protestant ARP, Willem Aantjes, and former CDA minister, Cees Veerman. The acting CDA Justice Minister, Ernst Hirsch Ballin, also expressed his opposition, while acting Health Minister, Ab Klink, resigned as negotiator during the formation process—and gave up his seat in parliament—as he would not support any cooperation with the Freedom Party.

Although Wilders could count on little in the way of support from the Dutch Christian pillar, there is considerable evidence showing that the Freedom Party has relied on financial backing from conservative Christian and Jewish organisations in the United States. Over the course of 2012, several former Freedom Party MPs provided insights concerning the party’s funding sources (after resigning, disgruntled, it should be said). Hero Brinkman stated that the party received hundreds of thousands of euros from American donors, while Wim Kortenooven confirmed that Wilders was very active in lobbying Jewish organisations for money. Indeed, as well as conservative lobby groups, several Jewish organisations such as the Children of the Jewish Holocaust have openly admitted to sponsoring Wilders.

The good relationship between Geert Wilders and sympathetic Jewish organisations goes further than merely sharing a common enemy in Islamic
extremism. Wilders has said he feels a strong affinity with Judaism and the state of Israel, and has explained that his stay in Israel and travels through the Middle East as an adolescent (aged between seventeen and nineteen) contributed to shaping his ideas.64 Other (former) Freedom Party MPs, such as Raymond de Roon and Wim Kortenoeven, shared Wilders’ explicit pro-Israeli views or were active in Jewish interest organisations. Pro-Israeli sentiments were also clearly expressed in Freedom Party manifestos: ‘For the Freedom Party the Jewish State has always been a beacon of hope, progress and western civilisation. The cheap Israel-bashing of the allied forces of Islam and the left should be countered on all fronts.’65 With regard to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the Freedom Party stated that the Netherlands and the EU should not demand any further territorial concessions from Israel. The party also claimed the conflict had an ideological rather than a territorial character, and spoke of ‘a conflict between the reason of the free West and the barbarism of the Islamic ideology’.66

The Freedom Party did not gain unanimous support from the Jewish community, however. Some American Jewish organisations, such as the Anti-Defamation League, have voiced their disapproval of the party on the basis of Wilders’ intolerant message.67 Jewish religious authorities in the Netherlands have not openly backed Wilders either. Similarly to various Christian Church leaders, Awraham Soetendorp, a prominent progressive Jewish Rabbi, even distanced himself strongly from Wilders’ ideology on the grounds that the politician hurt people in their ‘deepest being’.68 What is more, several Jewish organisations and alleged sponsors of the Freedom Party reacted very negatively to the party’s support for a ban on the ritual slaughter of animals.69 In electoral terms, the results of a survey carried out by the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute in 2009 suggested that, despite Wilders’ pro-Israeli stance, the Freedom Party could rely on the support of only 2 per cent of Jewish people in the Netherlands.70

The (Lack of) Electoral Scope for Religious Populism

From a purely electoral perspective, there appears to be little incentive for populists to place more emphasis on the Christian roots of Dutch society. The gradual decline of Christian Democracy as a dominant political tradition was noted earlier in this chapter. For most of the period between 1946 and 1967, the three confessional parties together controlled a majority of the seats in the Dutch Lower House. After the official merger of the three parties into the
CDA, the Christian Democrats’ seat share dropped to forty-eight of the 150 seats in 1981. During the period of the ‘Purple coalitions’ (1994–2002), the Christian Democrats were out of office for the first time since 1918, but they did become the largest party in parliament again in the eight years that followed. In the parliamentary election of 2010, however, the party received just twenty-one seats, an all-time low at that point. In the early election of 2012, the CDA lost a further eight seats after receiving only 8.5 per cent of the vote, becoming the fifth party in parliament in terms of size. The (minor) gains made by the smaller Christian parties failed to compensate for the electoral misfortunes of the CDA, suggesting that the electoral scope for religiously inspired political platforms has decreased to a large extent. Although religion may still prove a good predictor of voting behaviour, the absolute number of religious voters in the Netherlands has dwindled. This has consequences for the traditionally dominant Christian Democrats and also for the smaller religious parties in the Netherlands. Despite the fact that their support levels have remained stable, the Christian Union (CU) and the Reformed Political Party (SGP), the two parties most clearly defined by their religious appeal, attract only a small percentage of the nationwide vote.

Table 5.2: Answer to the Question: Are You Religious?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Freedom Party (PVV) voters</th>
<th>Christian Democrat (CDA) voters</th>
<th>All respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
<td>83.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES) 2010. Note: only valid answers are included.

A close look at the Freedom Party’s voters in the 2010 election further suggests that a more religious course would probably not hold much appeal for Geert Wilders’ supporters (see Table 5.2). Data from the 2010 Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES) suggest that about 40 per cent of Wilders’ supporters were religious, a figure below the average of almost 50 per cent when all respondents are included. Among Christian Democrat voters, on the other hand, 83 per cent claimed to be religious. Data from the 2012 DPES survey indicate that these figures had essentially remained the same by the time of the following election. Considering the overall low levels of religiosity among Freedom Party voters, most of Wilders’ own supporters...
would probably not be overly impressed by a greater appeal to Christian values. Then again, one might suppose that ‘religious populism’ could appeal to more devout CDA supporters who are dissatisfied with the current state of political affairs, or concerned about the role of Islam in Dutch society.

Furthermore, even without an overt religious appeal, Wilders managed to attract a considerable number of voters who had previously opted for the Christian Democrats. According to a study undertaken by Van der Meer et al., 10.4 per cent of those who voted for the CDA in 2006 switched to the Freedom Party four years later. Of the eight largest parties in the Dutch Parliament, only the Liberals lost more voters to the Freedom Party (15.8 per cent of VVD voters switched to the PVV in 2010). The Freedom Party did particularly well in the traditionally Catholic province of Limburg in the south, which is also Wilders’ home province. This region was previously the heartland of the Catholic People’s Party, and subsequently the CDA. While the Pim Fortuyn List also did well in this region in 2002, south Limburg could truly be seen as the Freedom Party’s stronghold after the party broke through.

It has been alleged that certain theological or cultural differences between Catholics and Protestants (or even between different groups of Dutch Protestants) might explain why particular religious groups may be more (or less) inclined to share Wilders’ monocultural conception of Dutch society. It is questionable, however, whether Wilders’ success in the traditionally Catholic south is related to the religious convictions of the voters living there. Results from a study conducted by Van der Brug et al. provide no reason to assume that Catholic voters are more likely than Protestant voters to support far-right parties. Moreover, the Freedom Party has actually been relatively popular in some of the Protestant ‘bible belt’ areas in the Netherlands as well. Van der Meer et al. showed that the PVV managed to attract a considerable share (9.1 per cent) of voters who had previously voted for the Christian Union, a party founded as the result of a merger between two Protestant parties. A smaller share of Reformed Political Party (SGP) voters had made the switch to the Freedom Party, yet 17.4 per cent of those who voted SGP in 2010 had at some point expressed their intention to vote PVV in opinion polls conducted in the years prior to the 2010 election.

Certainly not all Christian voters felt an affinity with the Freedom Party’s programme. As well as (former) party representatives, many grassroots CDA members expressed their disapproval at the formation of the Liberal-Christian Democrat coalition, which relied on the parliamentary support of the Freedom Party. A significant share of Christian Democrat members who subscribed to
values such as freedom of religion (and of religious education), hospitality towards asylum seekers and generosity towards the developing world were critical of Wilders’ programme, which was at odds with these very values. About one-third of the members voted ‘no’ during a party congress in October 2010, which was held to decide on the Christian Democrats’ participation in the minority coalition. Among the members of their Liberal coalition partner, the formation of the minority coalition caused much less of a debate.

Table 5.3: Probability of Future Vote for the Freedom Party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1–3 (not likely)</th>
<th>4–7 (uncertain)</th>
<th>8–10 (likely)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010 CDA voters</td>
<td>80.6%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All non-PVV voters</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>1904</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 CDA voters</td>
<td>87.3%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All non-PVV voters</td>
<td>78.0%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>1339</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES) 2010 and 2012. Note: Respondents have been placed in the three categories by the author, and the labels represent the author’s interpretation of the survey item values. Only valid answers are included.

Although the other two-thirds of the CDA members eventually endorsed the minority coalition, DPES data suggest that few of those who voted for the Christian Democrats in 2010 or 2012 were likely to make a future switch to the Freedom Party (see Table 5.3). Only 5.5 per cent of the CDA-voting respondents in 2010 thought it was likely that they would ever vote for the Freedom Party (providing an answer ranging between eight and ten on a ten-point scale). Less than 1 per cent of Christian Democrat voters surveyed thought they would ‘certainly’ vote for Wilders’ party one day (giving an answer of ten). On the other hand, over 80 per cent thought it unlikely that they would ever vote for the Freedom Party, providing an answer ranging from one to three. At the same time, 59.3 per cent of Christian Democrat supporters indicated that they would ‘never’ vote for the Freedom Party (giving an answer of one). The data suggest that most Christian Democrat voters in 2010 were also less likely than other non-Freedom Party voters to support Wilders’ party in the future. This may indicate that in the 2010 election Wilders had largely depleted the reservoir of former CDA voters willing to vote for the Freedom Party. What is more, compared with the 2010 data, CDA supporters in the parliamentary election of 2012 expressed an even lower likelihood of ever voting PVV.83
Although voters have switched from parties with a religious appeal to the populist radical right in the past, a substantial number of Christian voters disagree with Wilders’ key policies concerning Islam, immigration and the developing world. At the same time, it is highly questionable whether Wilders, or any populist party in general, would benefit from campaigning on the basis of an explicitly religious platform. After all, the Netherlands has become increasingly secularised, a phenomenon illustrated by the gradual decline of the Christian Democratic party family.

**Conclusion**

Populist parties and entrepreneurs in contemporary Dutch politics have refrained from building an image of a religious ‘heartland’ and appealing to ‘good Christian’ people. This also applies to the most electorally successful populist parties: the Pim Fortuyn List and Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party. Both Fortuyn and Wilders claimed to defend Dutch culture as shaped by liberal Enlightenment values, even though conservative elements could be found in the discourse of the latter politician in particular. Apart from referring to Jewish-Christian and humanist values, neither the Pim Fortuyn List nor the Freedom Party explicitly used religious symbols in their portrayal of Dutch identity.

Still, religion did play a prominent role in both of these populist political discourses. Rather than using religion to define those who belonged to the ‘heartland’ they appealed to, however, it was mainly employed as a means to identify the ‘others’, whose faith was considered to be incompatible with Dutch culture and values. Both Fortuyn and Wilders saw Islam—in terms of the immigration of Muslims, as well as their lack of social integration—as the main threat to Dutch culture. Whereas Fortuyn placed issues related to immigration and integration firmly on the political agenda in 2002, Wilders reaped electoral success on the basis of a harsher anti-Islamic discourse after Fortuyn’s murder and his party’s demise. Wilders’ Islam-related rhetoric has certainly not softened in the years following the successful parliamentary election of 2010, although the populist radical right politician placed greater emphasis on his opposition to the EU in the early 2012 parliamentary election campaign. Events such as the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks and the rise of Islamic State in the Middle East gave new impetus to Wilders’ anti-Islamic discourse in later years.

Despite some apparent concerns about (radical) Islam among the Dutch clergy, neither Fortuyn nor Wilders could rely on outspoken support from
Catholic or Protestant Church leaders. Instead, where Church officials commented on Geert Wilders’ rhetoric, the remarks were mainly, although not exclusively, disapproving. Church leaders tended to criticise Wilders for offending Muslims with his harsh anti-Islamic criticism. There is sufficient reason to assume that neo-conservative and Jewish organisations, particularly from the United States, provided financial support to the Israel-friendly Freedom Party. At the national level, however, official ties between the Freedom Party and religious authorities have been lacking, and Wilders has also seemingly been unable to gain substantial electoral support from the Jewish community.

As far as the electoral scope for ‘religious populism’ is concerned, it is hard to see how a more explicit appeal to Christian values would pay off for Wilders, or indeed for any other populist party. The Freedom Party’s share of the electorate in 2010 and 2012 largely consisted of non-religious voters, and although a substantial number of erstwhile Christian Democrat supporters voted for the Freedom Party in 2010, Wilders found it difficult to attract many more afterwards. Significant numbers of Christian Democrat members expressed their discontent with the Liberal-Christian Democrat minority government formed in the autumn of 2010, which relied on the Freedom Party’s parliamentary support. Moreover, in view of the largely secularised nature of Dutch society and the diminished role of religion in Dutch electoral politics, it is unlikely that a religiously inspired discourse would greatly enhance the electoral fortunes of any populist party.