

Essay

From Religious Bubble to Interreligious Dialogue: A Personal Story of Transformation

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Abstract: This paper argues that interreligious dialogue through study *and* friendships across the religious divide makes participants less susceptible to religious and cultural misinformation that is often used to maintain social bubbles, in which members draw clear boundaries between “us” and “them”. Differences between social groups can culminate in a struggle between “good” and “evil” that can escalate into tension and violence. Preventing tensions and conflicts requires respect for differences, willingness to engage in dialogue, and a sound understanding of what religion is and the historical processes that have determined its development, distinguishing between empirical facts and images to which believers adhere. Because the author is a Dutch sociologist turned journalist from a conservative Christian family involved in interreligious dialogue in the Netherlands, Israel, and Egypt, the literature review presents contemporary religious developments in all three countries. The literature review is flanked by the author’s personal narrative on the events that changed his views on truth and spirituality, making him more aware of the commonalities between peoples of different beliefs and leading him to a lifelong commitment to interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

Keywords: social bubbles; pillarisation; friendships; emigration; Islam; Christianity; Turkey; Syria; Egypt; sociology; truth seeking; interreligious and intercultural dialogue



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1. Note on Transliteration

There is considerable confusion about the transliteration of Arabic names. Many people whose Arabic names are mentioned in this paper are known in English-language publications by names with self-chosen spellings. When applicable, self-chosen transliterations will be used, while placing between brackets the spelling according to the IJMES transliteration system (e.g., Hamdi Zaqzouq [Ḥamdī Zaqqūq]). Western and Coptic names spelled in Arabic should not be transliterated and are provided in their common spellings.

2. Introduction

The paper discusses how interreligious dialogue can be reached through both study and friendship. The paper aims to answer the following questions: How can we expand our own social bubble, see the world from different perspectives, and contribute to interreligious dialogue in social relations and daily life? How did this experience influence religious engagement and activities of the author? To this end, the paper combines a literature review with the author’s personal narrative of events that changed his perspectives on truth and spirituality, making him more aware of the commonalities between peoples of different beliefs, and leading him to a lifelong commitment to interreligious and intercultural dialogue in the Netherlands, Israel, Egypt, and the Middle East more generally.

The author grew up in a conservative Christian Reformed family in the Netherlands, in a deeply pillarised Dutch society, and experienced its de-pillarisation (the terms pillarisation and de-pillarisation refer to the specific process of modernization of Dutch society). A personal tutor encouraged a life of involvement with different religious communities and meeting with leading religious leaders (Christians, Jews, Muslims) and scholars. This encouragement motivated the author to work in mutual understanding; and reporting

about interreligious tensions, while always remaining independent of religious and political leadership. These experiences impacted his personal search from a pietistic orthodox Reformed Christianity to intellectual curiosity in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (in this order), which influenced his spiritual development. In all three religions, an orthodoxy attempts to address social and political issues, while holding on to revealed truths with claims to the one and only truth, resulting in seeking protection in one's own social bubble, with the possibility that this can develop into fanaticism and violence (Goud 2023, p. 52). Many people tend to seek protection in social bubbles with clear cultural or religious boundaries between "us" and "them," believing that "we" are right, and "they" are wrong, and considerable time and energy within these structures is spent on providing a relatively safe space for those with shared outlooks, solidifying shared identities, and providing respite from the challenges of the exterior world (Larson and Shady 2017, p. 3).

Building bridges of cooperation needs genuine friendships across the boundaries of these social bubbles. Intercultural friendships are prerequisites for interreligious dialogue that, in turn, are "fundamental to reducing intergroup conflict, fear and prejudice" (Carmichael 2017, p. 28).

The first part of the paper discusses the Dutch context and focuses on the Reformed church tradition in the Netherlands, including the orthodox Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken (Christian Reformed Churches)—in which personal piety and ethics play a big role and the author grew up. The Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands) and *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam* (Free University Amsterdam), founded in, respectively, 1886 and 1890 by Rev. Dr. A. Kuyper (1837–1920) in opposition to liberalism, became overwhelming liberal over time, with theologian Harry Kuitert (1924–2017) as a major exponent of liberal theology and philosopher Sander Griffioen (b. 1941) as an exponent of orthodox Reformed thinking, both teaching at the Free University Amsterdam. Kuitert, his student Goud writes, was 'combative' in not wanting to accept handed-down truths from previous generations without searching and believed his faith had to be based on openness, personal convictions, and experiences which made him depart from traditional truths, insights, and teachings (Goud 2023, pp. 18–19, 39) which clashed with the proponents of orthodoxy due to different presuppositions; human logic versus human logic with divine inspiration. Griffioen has been a lifelong member of the *Vereniging voor Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte* (Society for Calvinist Philosophy), which influenced many Christian thinkers opposing religious liberalism.

Liberalism changed the traditional notions of personal piety. Secular philosophies, including nationalism came up and merged in religious societies with personal religious convictions, creating new boundaries to "the other."

After an overview of debates in the Netherlands, the debates between orthodoxy and liberalism in Israel and Egypt are discussed since these are the countries the author lived most of his life and engaged in local debates that involved Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In his personal account (Sections 7 and 8), the author explains how political events, social changes, including the debate between orthodoxy and liberalism, and experiences of interreligious engagement in the Netherlands, Israel and Egypt have exerted an impact on interreligious dialogue. Both literature and personal experiences demonstrate that debates are often clouded by advocacy and self-defensive stances which complicate the road towards mutual understanding. In the conclusion, the author explains what lessons have been learned.

3. Social Bubbles: The Balancing Act between the Search for Protection and Dialogue

Cultural differences help us to distinguish between "us" and "them" which is the basic characteristic of a social bubble. Culture, Kuitert writes, can be described as a way of life that people share with others, both spiritual and material, that developed in time and place. Religion is part of culture that seeks the anchoring of religious certainties that explain human experiences, like joy, fear, and pain, that all humans share and, in religious

experiences, that can direct people to an awareness of a different world or a higher power that can make or break humans.

Religious traditions are interpretive frameworks that help people understand and explain their experiences by means of beliefs, myths, often with a mix of fact and imagination, rituals, and codes of behaviour, in which millions of people have participated over a long period of time and which are maintained by communities and, in turn, sustain them. Religion, Goud adds, is also feeling home and secure, and attaches itself to physical experiences, such as prayer and feeling connected to one's past and the world around us (Goud 2023, pp. 15–16).

Non-believers may see a religion as an inextricable assembly of elements. Believers, however, who were born and raised in religious communities and who daily live in faith, experience this assembly of factors as a trusted harmony. The core concept is trust, which is needed to create order, including maintaining social connections, in an otherwise chaotic world. Religion has historically been the most vivid and effective measure to ward off insecurities, showing humanity its place in history and the universe. The life of faith differs between adherents with different levels of strictness or leniency in living according to those norms (Kuitert 1992, pp. 21–22; 1994, pp. 19–27, pp. 61–66; 1998, p. 296).

Most people feel deeply connected to their culture's ethical systems, which help determine whether certain behaviours are right or wrong. Norms and values associated with the culture, including religion, people adhere to are powerful incentives and provide motivation for action that can divide people, evoke contradictions, and sometimes even call for hate and violence (van Tillo 2017, p. 38). In every religious tradition, there are those who believe that the core of their faith is contained in sacred texts, doctrines, and fixed rituals that they themselves cherish and know best. Yet, religious traditions and codes of conduct, including the interpretations of sacred texts and doctrines, are not static, but dynamic, and continuously change over time (Eck 2002).

Changes have, throughout history, been influenced by political rulers and forces who influenced religions as far as they could to their own advantage (Frankopan 2017).

Kuitert, in line with philosopher Emmanuel Kant (1724–1804), separated faith from knowledge about our observable reality, breaking with established religious convictions that believe faith does not violate reality (Kuitert 2011, p. 123). Eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers mostly saw the individual as citizen of the world (Buisman 1992). This changed with the development of nationalism in the 19th century that linked individuals to the historical and cultural heritage of a particular group, seeing the nation as a central value. Nationalism replaced religion as the dominant conviction and, in almost all instances, has been interwoven with religious predicates (Alter 1989, pp. 9–10). We will first focus on religion and later come back to nationalism.

Networks that are formed channel us in a community with members having comparable backgrounds and beliefs that are supported or legitimised by credible institutions, inspiring leadership and adherents acting credibly. These are the 'certainties' people believe in (Kuitert 1994, p. 18). Typically, most college students tend to form relationships with those who are most like themselves in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and religion. This is even stronger at Christian universities and colleges in the USA where Christian faith is central to what students and faculty do and talk about (Larson and Shady 2017, p. 2). Yet, views, leadership, and circumstances change over time and may lose their credibility under the pressures of modernisation or scientific reflection and turn into experiences that make us insecure (Goddijn et al. 1979, p. 14).

Kuitert's own faith in religious certainties diminished over the years, describing himself at the end of his life as an Old Testament Christian who was born from dust and returns to dust, knowing nothing about the life hereafter (Pronk 2016, p. 403).

A natural response to doubts is to seek protection from challenging experiences through remaining in our own social bubble, as happened to students at American Christian universities. The consequence is that when students leave these institutions, they speak fluent "Christian," Larson and Shady write. The same phenomenon one finds at other

universities with a focus on strengthening the faith of one religion. This includes Christian theological universities worldwide, but also such a venerable institute as al-Azhar, the main centre for teaching Islam in Egypt, with a strong international focus since one finds here Muslim students from all over the world.

Within the “Christian” language, we find a multitude of differences. Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams writes that the overarching unity of all Christians is that they all interact with canonical texts that are compiled in the Bible, either through reading it or having the text read and explained to them. All Christians interpret these texts within their historical and cultural context, resulting in different ways of interaction, shaping patterns of worship, teaching, and ethical discourse (Williams 2017, p. 29). In the same vein, we see a multitude of differences in the “Jewish” and “Islamic” languages.

The term “fundamentalism” is problematic since both the media and politicians have, in the case of Islam, associated fundamentalism with such labels as extremism, violence, and terrorism (Khatab 2011, p. 17). Such labels are associated to ideological biases, Catholic Sufi-Islam expert Giuseppe Scattolin (b. 1942) states, arguing that historical facts always need to precede ideological arguments. A first requirement in dialogue is using the same terms for the same realities across religions (Scattolin 2020).

Both orthodox and fundamentalists, Kuitert explains, believe their scriptures are revealed by God and believe they know what God’s will for humanity is. Larson and Shady bring in the category of religious exclusivists, those who believe that their religion is the only way to God. Orthodox believers are usually exclusivists, but are often able to present their faith in humility and make practical compromises without giving up basic tenets of faith. Fundamentalists, however, resist religious change, refusing to compromise because compromises mean relativity (Kuitert 1994, pp. 86–87; Pronk 2006, p. 43; Larson and Shady 2017, pp. 12–13). Orthodoxy can change. Their desire to stick to the truth of their forefathers is not immune to changes that have become unavoidable, with migration and modernised communication making our world increasingly diverse and interconnected with religious identities that are continuously in flux (Venter 2018, p. 72).

Fundamentalism has a definite negative connotation in the West. Australian Muslim scholar Sayed Khatab (b. 1950) explains this is very different for Islam since knowing the fundamentals of one’s religion is honoured. Several scholars describe Islamic fundamentalism as a combination of Islamic devotion and political activism, often linked to revivalism in the light of Western political and cultural dominance. Muslim fundamentalists believe religion is flexible and has something to offer all generations. Khatab explains that Islamic fundamentalism is not necessarily radical or reactionary, and in no way does it inherently lead to violence and terrorism (Khatab 2011, pp. 14–19). Khatab’s definition of fundamentalism matches Kuitert’s definition of orthodoxy, while Khatab’s concept of ‘reactionary’ matches fundamentalism. This paper will, therefore, speak about Islamic orthodoxy or conservatism instead of fundamentalism, unless a refusal of compromising is at play. Also, extremism and terrorism need to be explained. Dutch historian and terrorism expert Beatrice de Graaf (b. 1976) explains terrorism as the outcome of seeing life as a struggle between good and evil, with extremists seeing themselves in the centre of that struggle to influence history (de Graaf 2021, p. 13).

Acceptance of difference, between adherents of different religions and within religions, cannot be separated from building friendships beyond our social bubbles and is a prerequisite for interreligious dialogue. The goal of interreligious dialogue is to become “theologically bilingual,” understanding the language of another faith community in the broadest sense. This includes understanding people with both orthodox and liberal views. Religious convictions of the other need to be taken seriously, which means that we have to accept that civil life includes various religions and beliefs (Larson and Shady 2017, pp. 8–9; Kuitert 1994, p. 58).

Anna Wilson, senior program coordinator at CollegePoint (USA), highlights three essential virtues for effective interfaith engagement: receptive humility, reflective commitment, and imaginative empathy. Receptive humility means acknowledging the limitations

of our own religious views. This can be difficult when it comes to doctrinal beliefs and is a challenge for anyone convinced of the “absolute and final truth” of one’s own convictions. Seeing that we often seek fault in others’ religious beliefs and instead should engage in open questions is the beginning of humility.

In reflective commitment, we need to put all beliefs on the table and apply Socratic scrutiny and rigorous critical thinking. It should be possible to admire an aspect of another religious tradition without weakening our commitment to our own. Receptivity may lead us to change own views and assumptions. In imaginative empathy, we learn intellectually about another religion and its adherents, as well as display a willingness and make sincere efforts to penetrate into the religious mindset of the other and understand the other from within.

We need to understand before we criticize, and when we criticize, we need to be informed. Critique should be rooted in “factual truth.” The virtues of humility, reflective communication, and imaginative empathy can only mature in the context of face-to-face encounters and budding relationships with real religious others (Wilson 2017, p. 106).

American astronomer Carl Edward Sagan (1934–1996) adds that we only can understand the social reality around us through “a set of successive approximations.” Continuous research into our own recent or more distant past can improve our self-knowledge (Sagan 1996, p. 254).

In opening our social bubbles, we should take both factual truths and faith seriously, which is the opposite of avoidance. Reducing all traditions to their lowest common denominator of shared values is such a strategy (McNeal 2017, pp. 74–96).

Many strong believers in a particular religion believe that interfaith dialogue creates a risk for participants, but this does not need to be the case, Amber Hacker of Interfaith Youth Core (USA) argues (Hacker 2017, pp. 71–73). Another major misconception is that many people engaged in interreligious dialogue believe religious exclusivists should be excluded, but they too should be invited to participate since exclusivist beliefs can still be held with humility and an awareness of one’s own fallibility (Larson and Shady 2017, p. 13).

Griffioen states that dialogue only can succeed if interlocutors are able to depend on each other’s sincerity and the integrity of each other’s convictions. In dialogue, he writes, we also need to be able to talk about inconsistencies and contradictions in the precious convictions we hold. We need to be able to see things we believe to be evident, but that belongs to the category of presuppositions (Griffioen 2022, p. 73).

McNeal provides a model for interfaith engagement, based on Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf (b. 1956), and calls this inclusion, respect for interpersonal and intellectual boundaries, promoting a shared reality where all partners in the dialogue seek to understand each other’s position, even if they do not entirely agree with it. We best come to understand ourselves in dialogical relationship with the other. Inclusive dialogue is described as the effort to seek “to break down boundaries and develop deep relationships with other people and with things that others have created, such as texts and works of art.” It greatly helps if people of different faiths experience mutual events.

Every religious believer should be able to share his or her own truth and understand other people’s efforts to interpret their scriptures. The person engaged in dialogue should be able to both learn and teach, which results in genuine friendships that provide the most “concrete and reciprocal” experience of inclusion. Martin Buber made a sincere effort to practice the inclusive approach in the dialogue between Jews and Arabs, who dispute the right to the Holy Land on foundationally different views. Buber does not present a theory for how to evaluate the truth of competing views, nor does he argue that the truth of one’s view is irrelevant. He, however, argues that in friendship, we do not seek to impose our ideas on others, including our religious beliefs.

In this process of dialogue, we should be able to become an advocate for the other in his fight against religious prejudice. This includes Islamophobia that is often fuelled by inaccurate representations of what it means to be a practicing Muslim. If a person has

had no meaningful interaction with Muslims, he/she may easily succumb to inflammatory anti-Muslim sentiment (McNeal 2017, p. 88). One may add anti-Semitism and other efforts to provide a distorted view of people different from us.

The authors of *From Bubble to Bridge* are working with university students. College years are a critical time for examining deeper faith, as the intellectual life of the student is also maturing. Openness to pluralism and diversity needs to result for a Christian in an ecumenical orientation. Learners view humble, authentic, and appropriately self-revealing teachers and facilitators as trustworthy. When difficult topics are encountered, we need to look first at what we have in common (Poppinga 2017, p. 123). Fear, ignorance, and misunderstanding are too often leading to isolationist policies, hateful speech, and even violence. Interreligious dialogue will inspire us to be good neighbours by replacing fear with empathy and love (Larson and Shady 2017, pp. 182–84).

4. The Split of the Dutch Reformed Bubble: Orthodox and Liberal

Do social bubbles provide protection? The orthodox Reformed believed so, but saw their part in society shrinking, often blaming people with liberal theological views for causing secularisation. Religious liberals, in turn, believed the orthodox were to be blamed for holding on to certainties that violate science and human reasoning, and saw this as a major reason for people leaving the church. We will see how this worked out in the struggle between the orthodox and liberals in the Netherlands.

Griffioen defines faith as a commitment to religion. True faith, Griffioen argues, is given by God and lives in us, as the New Testament says. Religion leaves human freedom in place. It is always possible to say no (Griffioen 2022, pp. 46–47). This definition is related to Griffioen's faith in the Bible as inspired by God. Griffioen's views are in line with classical Reformed faith, while Kuitert came to see all religions as a human construct (Pronk 2006, pp. 7, 12).

I have chosen to contrast Reformed orthodoxy with the theologically liberal views of Kuitert because both are clear about their presuppositions. Furthermore, Kuitert was highly influential. He used his life after his pension in 1989 to search into what faith really is, using scientific knowledge and logic as his primary tools to separate facts from imagination. In the past, many believers, he found, blurred these two domains. Logic, however, teaches us that we should treat imagination and reality as two distinct domains (Pronk 2006, p. 144).

The growing resistance of Kuitert to orthodoxy and vice versa cannot be explained without a brief history of the Dutch Reformed tradition that stems from the *Nederduits-Gereformeerde kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church), formed in 1579 as a state church during the war of independence from Catholic Spain that became known as the *Tachtigjarige Oorlog* (Eighty Years' War, 1568–1648), and became the dominant provider of collective morality in the Netherlands (a formulation borrowed from Wallet 2021, p. 5).

The Dutch Reformed Church accepted the *Belgic Confession* of 1561 that states in article 36 that the government's task is to promote church services and remove and destroy false religions.¹

This Confession is, until today, part of the confessional documents of the different Reformed churches in the Netherlands. It is even referred to in article 1 of the program of principles of the *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* (SGP, Reformed Political Party), formed in 1918.

The Dutch Reformed Church was deeply influenced by the theology of John Calvin, who desired a theocracy, cooperation between the church and government without government interference, in issues of faith of the church.²

During the 18th century Enlightenment period, ideas about human autonomy; observing the world with our senses; and independent scientific reasoning, without belief in the moral codes provided by God through revelation, were promoted, resulting in fierce Reformed resistance to these new ideas (Buisman 1992). Yet, the republic abolished the state church in 1795 that was renamed *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* (Netherlands Reformed

Church). The influence of the Reformed Church on public affairs further declined with the constitution of 1848 and the restoration of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in 1853.

The church had not only lost influence over the state, but also faced divisions between liberal and orthodox streams, resulting in multiple splits and unifications since the 19th century that gradually reduced the orthodox stream, despite all efforts to keep the faith, to a ever declining minority.

In 1834, the first conservative secession from the Netherlands Reformed Church took place. The secession of 1886, led by Rev. Dr. Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), was the largest, taking with him around 10% of the members of the Netherlands Reformed Church, resulting in the formation of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands). Some of the secessionists of 1834 joined Kuyper's church, while others remained independent and in 1892 formed the more conservative Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken (Christian Reformed Churches) ([van't Spijker 1992](#)).

The church secessions in the Netherlands became, because of the large numbers of people following them, a mobilising force for political action. In 1879, Kuyper formed the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) to oppose the dominant liberal politics of his days. The name 'anti-revolutionary' expressed resistance against 'ni Dieu, ni maitre' (no God, no master), the motif of the French Revolution (1789–1799) ([Goudzwaard 1979](#), p. 59). Kuyper also established the Free University Amsterdam, schools, and other organisations on a Reformed basis, which aimed at creating safe places or bubbles that greatly reduced contacts with people outside their circle, which created the Reformed pillar, in which members of all Reformed churches cooperated. The Catholic pillar developed in the 1890s when they clashed with the liberals over government funding for religious schools, in which they found an ally in the ARP. In 1904, a Catholic party was founded. Political cooperation with the Catholics, along with other issues, split the ARP in 1908 and resulted in the more conservative Christelijke Historische Unie (CHU, Christian Historical Union). The second breakaway, with conservative members from both ARP and CHU, resulted, in 1918, in the staunchly conservative SGP party. The system that developed became known as 'verzuiling' (pillarisation). 'Zuilen' (pillars) were the names given to extensive networks of similar-minded organisations with broad claims on the identity of their members. Members of a pillar placed a strong emphasis on relations within the own group, resulting in a sharply separate life and worldviews that resulted in Reformed, Catholic, socialist, and 'neutral' pillars ([van Dam 2014](#), p. 33).

Kuyper developed the concept of societal 'soevereiniteit in eigen kring' (sphere sovereignty), with each sphere or sector responsible for its own activity area. The created order includes the family and communities for education, worship, and many other areas of life. The state should not interfere in these spheres, but focus on public justice. These ideas were further developed in the Vereniging voor Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte (Society for Calvinist philosophy) that was founded in 1935. In 1947, the Society established a foundation for the maintenance of endowed chairs in 'Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte', in 1995 renamed Reformatorische Wijsbegeerte (Reformed Philosophy) at different Dutch universities. Reformed Philosophy rejects the thought that humans can discover the truth through human efforts alone. It needs God's revelation. Calvinist (Reformed) philosophy was popular in the circles of the ARP and other groups that stemmed from this Calvinist political approach ([Veerman and Bremmer 1979](#)).

Pillarisation was firmly established before the Second World War, but the war, the holocaust, the establishment of the state of Israel, and the cold war marked major changes in American and Western European thinking. With the American support for rebuilding Europe also came American cultural influences.

Around 1900, practically all citizens in the Netherlands belonged to a church. This was still the case in 1945, but decline set in after the war. In 1966, 67% of Dutch citizens considered themselves to be members of a church. This percentage has dropped to 30% in 2012 ([van Rooden 1996](#); [de Hart 2014](#), pp. 105–6).

Changes are not only about reduced church membership, but people no longer seeing guidance in Christian moral values. In 1979, 43% of respondents to research titled *Opnieuw: God in Nederland* (Again: God in the Netherlands) saw no connections between their most important values and the Christian faith. The remainder of the people questioned believed their Christian faith contributed to a larger or smaller extent to the values they believed to be important, or they did not know (Goddijn et al. 1979, p. 26).

Bart Wallet (b. 1977) describes the processes of ‘Verzuiling’ (pillarisation) and de-pillarisation as a historical phenomenon in the Netherlands that explains the demise of the privileged position of organised religion as the main provider of collective morality (Wallet 2021, p. 6).

Billy Graham (1918–2018) witnessed the decline of organised religion in the Netherlands and, in 1954 and 1955, organised evangelisation campaigns attracting tens of thousands of people. Other American evangelists also visited the Netherlands, witnessed the changing cultural climate in Europe, and wished to stem the tide (van Mulligen 2014, pp. 44, 55–69).

Religious influences did not go one way. Abraham Kuyper’s political and theological views and the philosophers of the Society for Calvinist philosophy had a significant impact on the Reformed community in the USA and Canada that, in 1967, founded the Institute for Christian Studies in the Kuyperian stream of the Reformed tradition.³

All churches were searching to match old church traditions with science and logic, creating a wide diversity in responses. In 1953, the Christian Reformed Synod appointed B.J. Oosterhoff (1915–1996) as professor of the Old Testament. He published several studies that were interpreted by the conservative wing of the Christian Reformed Churches for relativising the authority of revealed Scripture and giving in to ‘the spirit of the age’. Oosterhoff and fellow professors at the Christian Reformed Theological University in Apeldoorn engaged in a balancing act to maintain unity in the church. At the same time, Evangelism campaigns led to the beginning of a new conservative Christian bubble: at the one hand, the formation of Evangelical churches that attracted members from the traditional Reformed churches, while on the other hand, orthodox Reformed church members created new organisations to protect adherence to the 16th–17th confession documents of the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1966, the magazine *Bewaar het Pand* was established. Around this magazine a group with the same name was formed. The name refers to the admonition of the apostle Paul’s first letter to Timothy 6: 20–21: “Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care [read the church]. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have departed from the faith.” Not science, but teaching from the Bible, infallible and divine, without allowing text criticism to play a role, needs to have prevalence since this will protect the church from heresy and liberalism. Member churches are held to decisions of the Synod. Members of *Bewaar het Pand* opposed allowing local churches to appoint women in positions of teaching and leadership in the church, which created deep divisions in the church and a balancing act between the most conservative wing in the church and more liberal-minded churches to maintain unity (de Heer 2000; van Heteren 2022).⁴ Other churches saw similar developments, but this did not stop the demise of organised religion, which greatly impacted the leading Christian democratic parties, the ARP, CHU, and Katholieke Volks Partij (Catholic People’s Party, KVP), that had dominated politics in the first half of the 20th century. They saw their electorate rapidly dwindle in a very short period. In the elections of 1965, these three parties obtained 76 seats in the Parliament of 150 seats. This dropped to 69 in 1967, 58 in 1971, and 48 in 1972. The decline continued after the merger with only 15 seats in 2021. The Netherlands transformed from a Christian society to a mostly secular society. In orthodox Reformed circles, one can describe this as a decline of “almost biblical proportions” (Wallet 2021, p. 5).

The Dutch Reformed split into two main camps: seeking protection in newly established conservative organisations, while others sought hope in religious liberalism. Many believed in cooperation between Protestants and Catholics, which resulted in 1980 in the

ARP, CHU, and KVP merging into the Christen Democratisch Appèl (CDA, Christian Democratic Appeal Party). The ARP believed their members would be able to contribute, with their Reformed vision on politics, in the new party (Veerman and Bremmer 1979). A substantial number of orthodox members opposed the direction party leadership chose and, in 1975, formed the Reformatorische Politieke Federatie (RPF, Reformatory Political Federation). Founding members of the RPF accused the CDA of not resisting the spirit of that time (van Mulligen 2014, p. 72).

The split throughout the Reformed ranks was profound. More conservative members of the Reformed churches turned to one of the many organisations in the Evangelical movement, where people believed in the revitalisation of religion based on orthodox religious notions (Vellinga 1995), while the de-pillarisation in the orthodox Reformed churches was slower because of a strong focus on personal principles (van Tillo 2017, p. 98).

Once orthodox Reformed organisations such as the Nederlandse Christelijke Radio Vereniging (NCRV, Dutch Christian Radio Association), established in 1924 as a conservative Reformed radio broadcaster, were impacted by liberal Christian views.

Criticism of the NCRV resulted in 1967 in the formation of the Evangelische Omroep (EO, Evangelical Broadcasting), which aimed to form a bulwark in the fight against secularisation and provide the good news of the Bible to the widest audience possible, but it yet had to obtain government recognition (Vermaat 2007). Founders, including former Roman Catholic priest turned conservative Reformed pastor Herman Hegger (1916–2012), were greatly inspired by the campaigns of Billy Graham and other American preachers and saw ecumenism as a threat to the message of Jesus Christ and the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 as a fulfilment of Biblical prophecies and prelude to the return of the Messiah. The 1967 six-day War between Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria that resulted in bringing large areas under Israeli control were interpreted as God's hand in history (Vermaat 2007, p. 35; van Mulligen 2014, p. 60).

A similar dissatisfaction was seen with the Dutch daily *Trouw*, established in 1943 as a Reformed newspaper, resisting Nazi ideology, in line with the political ideals of the ARP; but, beginning in the 1970s, the publication embraced de-pillarisation (Prenger 2018). Rev. Jan Hendrik Velema (1917–2007), widely recognised as the most influential Christian Reformed theologian after the Second World War and sometimes nicknamed 'the pope' (van Mulligen 2014, p. 84), deplored the departure of *Trouw* and ARP from their initial conservative Reformed roots and, in October 1968, established *Koers* that was entirely focused on orthodox Reformed views. Velema joined the EO in 1968 and played a major role in providing the EO with sufficient members that were needed for government recognition (Vermaat 2007, p. 56).

The resistance to the liberal developments at *Trouw* provided in 1971 the impulse to form the Reformatorisch Dagblad (RD, Reformed Daily), a conservative Reformed daily newspaper. The founders wanted to halt the secularisation in their own circles, which was praised by J.H. and his brother W.H. Velema, J.P. Versteeg, and other leading theologians of the Christian Reformed Churches (Roos 1996).

Van Tillo (b. 1937) describes the developments leading to the formation of the EO and RD as the rise of restorative or restorationist societal impulses (van Tillo 2017, pp. 96–97). The term 'restorative' indicates a wish to return to the old order. It is also possible to speak in more positive terms of a religious renewal and political activism reaching a new high (Wallet 2021, pp. 10–11).

Griffioen served between 1976 and 1979 at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, Canada; between 1979 and 1991 as professor of Calvinist Philosophy at Leiden University; and between 2002 until his retirement in 2006 as professor for Intercultural Philosophy at the Free University Amsterdam. Griffioen argues, in line with Kuyper's sovereignty sphere, that a pluralist ethos is inherently impossible and, hence, the multicultural society is best described as a society with directional diversity, in which rival traditions pursue recognition.

When challenged, different ways of life are under pressure to provide self-justifications. When these ways of life are not provoked, the choice of a direction is likely to be more a matter of habit than of articulated claims. Argumentation is by nature divisive, because it is bound to stir up dormant differences that may result in dissolving society into an archipelago of islands, an image Griffioen borrowed from Lyotard and Kant (Griffioen 1994).

Orthodox Reformed and Evangelical Christians realized that they needed to strengthen mutual ties. In 2000, the RFP merged with the Gereformeerd Politiek Verbond (Reformed Political League, GPV) and formed the ChristenUnie (Christian Union), conservative in ethical issues and progressive in social and ecological issues. The merger capped thirty years of development toward a new orthodox Reformed pillar in society (van Mulligen 2014, p. 255).

Harry Kuitert (1924–2017) grew up in an orthodox family and became throughout the years a major exponent of liberal theology, grew up in a deeply pillarised society aimed at protecting Reformed orthodoxy. He not only witnessed the process of de-pillarisation, but also played a major role in this and opposed re-pillarisation as it was formed by the EO and other orthodox Reformed institutions.

Kuitert challenged Christian orthodoxy in a way that no Dutch Reformed theologian before him had done. He wrote numerous bestselling theological books, in which he presented information that was known to theologians, but not thought over in a way that was accessible to a wider audience. He responded to questions in lectures about his books and in thousands of letters. It was his method to seek the debate and initiate the thinking process with others. During this process, Kuitert further developed his views (Pronk 2006, pp. 110, 144; 2016, pp. 400–1). In an interview with Gerrit-Jan Kleinjan (b. 1983) on his 90th birthday in the Dutch daily *Trouw*, he says “all books I have written over time are records of a search, each time a step further. I did not know where I would end up. A search is only a search if you do not know where it ends. Otherwise, it is not sincere searching.”

Dutch Remonstrant theologian Eginhard Meijering (b. 1940), lector of the history of theology at Leiden University (1976–2001) and since 1980 a member of the prestigious Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, wrote that anyone who wants to understand the changes in theological views in the Netherlands must read the books of Harry Kuitert. He described Kuitert’s book of 2005 as the end of a development that distanced him from traditional Christian faith but sees him also as a scholar who challenges Christians to think about what matters in Christian faith (Meijering 2006, pp. 7–12). Goud states that Kuitert meant a great deal to believers and nonbelievers of his and subsequent generations, to be fully free to believe or not believe, without the guilt of not believing what they were told to believe (Goud 2017).

Dutch Protestant and Catholic theologians elected Kuitert in 2004 as the 7th most influential theologian in the 20th century (van Hooydonk 2004). No Dutch protestant theologian since Abraham Kuyper sold as many books as Kuitert (Harinck 2017, p. 19). Delpher, a digital archive of Dutch newspapers, shows some 4000 articles referring to Kuitert in Dutch media between 1990 and 1996. Delpher is incomplete for later years, but the number of references in the given period is staggering.

Kuitert’s doubts started early in his career. In 1968, he publicly challenged the literal understanding of the creation story in Genesis and called this a myth (Kuitert 1968), to which Netherlands Reformed pastor G. Visee (1908–1976) responded in 1969 with an apologetic booklet *Verstaat Prof. Kuitert wat hij leest?* (Does Prof. Kuitert understand what he reads?. Visee refers to 2 Peter 1: 16, “For we did not follow cleverly devised stories (Visee adds between brackets myths) when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” Visee refused historical criticism of the Bible since neither Jesus, nor the Apostles, doubted its historical validity. What matters is that they preached the salvation of God (Visee [1968] 1969, pp. 16, 66).

Arguments between Kuitert and Christian orthodoxy came to a peak in the years following his retirement in 1989. In 1994, Kuitert concluded in *Zeker Weten* (knowing with certainty) that since evolution is based on the survival of the fittest, we can no longer

maintain that God has a plan for our world, discarding the concepts of seeing God's hand in history, divine revelation, or inspiration, dear to Christian orthodoxy. There are many conflicting revelations, whose human origins can be traced. They may have value for the believers of a faith tradition, but since it is a matter of faith only, it is not providing us with historically reliable information for the world we live in (Kuitert 1994, pp. 55–65).

Kuitert argues that factual beliefs, beliefs in religious scriptures that claim to be grounded in history, need to be tested, and if these turn out to be incorrect, we need to review our conceptions of faith. When a large part of the factual beliefs of a religious worldview are undermined and religions claim that accepting impossible things are the pinnacle of piety, then believers drop out. Maintaining displays of faith that are not in line with reality causes one to live in two separate worlds. The only way to overcome living in two worlds is through accepting that displays of faith are put into words by people in a particular time and culture, in which they have formulated their religious certainties and why (Kuitert 1994, pp. 32–42).

Kuitert notes substantial similarities among the Abrahamic religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In all three, God is a transcendent personal God. God is one, is the Creator who maintains his creation and rules. Everything that happens, happens according to his will. Humanity is not subjected to fate or gods that contradict each other. The Creator is a righteous judge who also shows mercy. It is possible to communicate with him. Within these broad similarities, there are also numerous differences, not least because all three religions also claim their books were revealed by God and, therefore, have special status. Differences not only exist between these three religions, but also within each of these religions (Kuitert 1994, pp. 136–38).

Since Kuitert expressed in *Zeker Weten* his faith in a mystical experience with God, his book was appreciated by many in the conservative flank in the church (Pronk 2006, p. 67). In *Jesus, the Legacy of Christianity*, Kuitert critiques the orthodoxy for their faith in the historicity of the gospels, which he sees as stories of faith, giving meaning to Jesus' death, but he also realizes that human beings tell stories because they have meaning for the person telling them (Kuitert 1998, pp. 11–53, 238).

The role of science is to provide facts and leave the subjective meanings to the believers. Kuitert is certain Jesus lived, preached, and was crucified, but does not believe in the virgin birth and miracles, including the physical resurrection of Jesus. Faith in resurrection is, in his view in 1998, believing that friendship with God is eternal, which will not end with death (Kuitert 1998, pp. 122, 203, 237, 242). A key fact to Kuitert was that Jesus was Jewish, adhered to the Jewish faith, and criticised the people of his days, but not Judaism. Since a Jew cannot see himself as the Son of God in the Trinitarian understanding, Jesus cannot have seen himself as such (Kuitert 1998, pp. 153–54; Pronk 2006, pp. 72–92). Kuitert's arguments shattered one by one key orthodox notions of faith.

It is impossible to speak about the world of God without metaphors. The language of faith in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam consists, from A to Z, of metaphors. Metaphors can be misused or become a trap because interpretations are given that were not intended by the original users. Dogmas are equally human since it is possible to see how dogmas follow the piety of past generations, and once a dogma has been established, piety has to adjust to dogma. All dogmatic expressions, treasured so much in orthodoxy, need to be seen in culture and time, but since they are part of our history, they cannot be removed, but they can be reinterpreted (Kuitert 1998, pp. 174–76, 200).

Piety, described by Kuitert as devotion, dedication, and veneration, should be respected. Fighting piety is denial of what someone experiences, and that kills each form of communication. We have to accept what people feel. That is the necessary basis for talks whereby we do not need to agree.

Kuitert argues in favour of more self-criticism: the realisation of the relativity of faith that, in his view, can go together with faith. He argues that all people are God's people, regardless of what faith they adhere to. That leaves space for relations with believers of other religions (Kuitert 1998, pp. 310–13). Kuitert also believes churches have responded in

a wrong way to secularisation, which many church leaders described in terms as unhinged autonomy and degradation of society. Such denunciations, however, do not help. Believers need to realise that religions are linked to morality and philosophies that have been built on those of previous generations, such as the influence of the ethical philosophy of the Stoa in the Apostle Paul's letters (Kuitert 1998, pp. 281, 296–301).

Faith needs to move people, Kuitert writes, since if it does not move me, it is not part of myself. Maintaining something as true is insufficient. Faith that moves, but is not linked to truth, is also insufficient, the Apostle Paul says when he writes about love in 1 Corinthians 13. Faith that moved Kuitert is found in Matthew 25: seeing the face of God in people in need and seeing in the New Testament a call to unite humanity through abolishing ethnic and cultural borders. Kuitert sees the church as a place for social contacts, providing people with security, pastoral care, and dignity, to make them dedicated and trust. Leaving the church is not leaving Christianity, which has deeply permeated Europe throughout its history, but the church should still pass on faith to next generations since Christian faith will not survive without institutions (Kuitert 1998, pp. 246, 265, 276, 282–91; Groeneveld 2000).

In later books, Kuitert discarded space for a personal experience with God. Pronk sees the tipping point in his theology in his book *Over religie; aan de liefhebbers onder haar beoefenaars* (About religion; to the to the enthusiasts among its practitioners). Kuitert searches for the origin of religion in human history and now believes that first there were humans, then religion, gods, and God. Our images of God are the product of human imagination, which makes knowing God beyond our human ability (Kuitert 2000, p. 94).

In 2005, Kuitert goes again a step further in expressing doubts in *Hetzelfde anders zien. Het Christelijk geloof als verbeelding* (Seeing the same differently. The Christian faith as imagination). In 2006, he, however, still left the possibility open that one can feel secure in God's hand (Kuitert 2005; Pronk 2006, pp. 67, 113, 156).

The enlightenment separated fact and fiction, which Kuitert took to its limits in his book *Alles behalve kennis* (All except knowledge). Kuitert defines knowledge as anything in our physical world that we know for certain and cannot be denied without being exposed. If we do not know, we should not speculate (Kuitert 2011, p. 27). The practice of science consists of eliminating what is not true and establishing what is. Kuitert relegates anything that is not proven factually true to the area of imagination. Theology has its place, but as a continuous process of giving meaning to a continuously changing world, which is an entirely human phenomenon and differs from religion to religion (Pronk 2016, p. 422).

Kuitert saw his work as taking church goers out of the 'house of bondage' since religions prescribe what you can and should do in the name of God. In Kuitert's view, no one can speak in the name of God (Pronk 2006, p. 141; Kleinjan 2014; Kuitert 2011, p. 25). The concept "house of bondage" is a Biblical metaphor used for the people of Israel in Egypt prior to the exodus to the promised land. Kuitert was averse to absolute truths, but appreciated religion as a search for wisdom, as his appreciation for Augustine showed since he did not present theology as science, but as *sapientia* (wisdom), a way of living (Kuitert 2011, p. 48).

Pronk has seen Kuitert's correspondence with thousands of people and noted that, despite repeated orthodox criticism, he was ready to correspond with anyone, including Rev. Herman J. Hegger, who believed the Bible was God's Word. Their correspondence became cold and culminated on 25 October 2006, in an open letter of Hegger to Kuitert in the Dutch Daily *Trouw*, in which he argued that intuition comes before knowledge and leads to God, who is, in Hegger's view, the only Purpose and Sense, who provides humanity with hope (Hegger 2006). Hegger asked Kuitert how he can be certain that he will not be judged by God. Kuitert responded that Hegger can have his intuition, but not impose his intuitions, as if these were absolute truths, on others. That is an effort to rule over someone else's faith. Hegger, Kuitert concluded, should stop threatening people with the judgement of God (Kuitert 2006). Kuitert's lifelong search for the secret of faith, with the tools of science, historical research, and logic, and the responses from his opponents resulted in

the loss of faith in religious authorities and certainty about a life hereafter (Pronk 2016, pp. 400, 422).

Kuitert undermined the foundations of orthodoxy, resulting in orthodox criticism. Meijering criticised Kuitert's *Hetzelfde anders zien* for turning faith into humanism, which makes the proclamation of the church irrelevant. Meijering opposes fundamentalism, but feels closer to orthodoxy than to Kuitert in believing in a world hereafter and God revealing himself through history, including Jesus Christ. Christians, Meijering believes, should not change the faith tradition as handed down, but a debate about the foundations of the Christian faith is needed (Meijering 1999, pp. 195–210; Meijering 2006, p. 16).

The key difference between Kuitert, other liberal thinkers, and orthodoxy is in rejecting or accepting the concept of revelation, seeing God's hand in history, and, by extension, seeing the Bible as the revealed Word of God, through which God speaks to humans. Knowledge of God, orthodox believers argue, cannot be obtained through rational thinking only, but also needs feeling. Leading Christian Reformed theologian Willem Hendrik Velema (1929–2019) explained that belief in God requires that people study the Bible to understand what God is communicating to us humans today, engage in prayer, and allow God to speak to us in our lives. Internal spirituality is dependent on knowing that God loves us. This faith should permeate our lives and is evidenced by how we live (Velema 1990).

Meijering agrees that we cannot proof revelation, but states that we also cannot discard it. Certain beliefs could be a scientific possibility, not a scientific certainty. Meijering accepts the evolution theory, but is convinced that our world is not an accidental product of an inevitable process, but created by God with a purpose. Even if we see God through images, we remain sinful people who may know they can trust in God's grace (Meijering 2006, pp. 22–39).

Life is already a sign of living in the Kingdom of God. The test for our acts should be the neighbour who needs us. Jesus, Meijering writes, preached that anyone who wanted to enter the Kingdom of God had to convert, making believers responsible for their behaviour, including care for life on earth and fighting injustice (Meijering 2006, pp. 46–67).

Radical Orthodoxy, developed by James K.A. Smith (b. 1970) and others in opposition to religious liberalism on the insights of the Dutch Reformational tradition of Abraham Kuyper and the Society for Calvinist philosophy, and summarised by Amos Yong (b. 1965), believes that it is not possible to separate faith (providing meaning) and reason since no nation exists without an ideology. That leads to the question of how dialogue can proceed on tradition-specific terms. Is dialogue between persons who do not share the same presuppositions possible? How can we consider the encounter of the diversity of religions in our time? (Yong 2007, pp. 236–41). Kuitert considered these questions and responded that truths of religions through revelations do not work, since then that religion is always right (Kuitert 1998, p. 308). Yong points to contradictions between different beliefs, constructions that in themselves seem reasonable, but in comparison seem to be a paradox. This observation matches Kuitert's definition of religion. Yong, however, goes further and states that since beliefs and practices are intertwined, religious traditions are effectively shielded from immanent critiques attempted by outsiders. Smith resists the blurring of the lines between the church and the world. Yong sympathises with Smith, but also believes no theological vision exists that can successfully answer all questions. Revelation only can be understood as knowledge of God that has been mediated through the created order. It comes down to the human experience of the encounter with God. The "testimony to the wondrous works of God can be received only through a multitude of voices, which all provide a perspective" that needs to be "discerned amidst, by, and through the community of faith." Yong states that the work of the Holy Spirit sets the Church, not individual churches, apart from other communities. He admits the practices of the historical church are messy and that the lines between the church and the world "can never be hard and fast in actuality." Identities are never pure, and there is no 'absolute other', but any authentic encounter and dialogical encounter will always be with those who have been brought near by the Spirit. In this encounter, Christians can bear witness

to the coming of the Kingdom of God that will de-absolutise all human claims in the end. Yong believes this approach opens the opportunity to engage in immanent critiques of other faith traditions and makes it possible that we are transformed through our encounter with those in other faiths (Yong 2007, pp. 242–50).

The orthodox contribution to the interfaith encounter includes apologetics, defending the faith against the polemics of others, but Christian apologetics must speak truthfully about, rather than bear false witness against, religious others. Yong recognises that believers of other religions have their quest for truth. Interfaith encounters may influence and impact the lives of others, “but there should also be every expectation that authentic interfaith interaction will result in personal transformation as well.” Interfaith dialogue will inform Christian thinking theologically “by in-depth reflection on and with those in other faiths. Theology by and for the church in the twenty-first century cannot proceed in isolation as if others were absent” (Yong 2014).

Interesting is Sander Griffioen’s observation that one of the central themes of his tutor J.P.A. Mekkes (1898–1987) was that God’s revelation comes to all humankind and subjects every dimension of culture to a radical critique (Griffioen 2017, p. 30). Griffioen focused in his most recent book on good and evil in our world and believes the good cannot be separated from a Giver (Griffioen 2022, p. 19). Griffioen does not make any reference to Kuitert in his book, and when asked, responds that Kuitert’s statement that religion is a human construct is trivial if you do not ask where the speaking about God originated, that is, divine inspiration. Griffioen does not believe in a literal six-day creation period and does not find this relevant in describing God as the Creator of our world.⁵

Kuitert’s growing conviction of faith as a human construct and as a consequence of the absence of absolute truths created a distance to his Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (Protestant Church in the Netherlands), formed in 2004 following a merger of the vast majority of the Netherlands Reformed Church, the vast majority of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands Kuitert was born into, and the Evangelisch-Lutherse Kerk in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden (Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands). Theologian Lieke A. Werkman, who earned her PhD with Kuitert, saw, in 2004, in him a deeply religious human being, but deplores he had lost confidence in the church as an institute. People need a social structure. It helps them and does good to the world through, for example, diaconal work. Kuitert had an insufficient eye for this (Veltman 2005, pp. 28–29). Yet, in 2006, Kuitert still saw a need for the church as an institute. In his later work, he sees no problem in people abandoning church. In an interview in 2014, he criticised how the concept of church was conceived and put into practice and believed this had to digress in an “enslavement of souls” (Kleinjan 2014).

Kuitert’s last books amounted to agnosticism, not knowing God exists or not, and with this, discarding the experience of faith within established institutions, which went for many too far.

Werkman argued that Kuitert was too convinced in the rationality of his own thoughts, which made him conclude that speaking about God was not only human, but ‘only’ imagination and projection. ‘How do you know?’ Werkman asks. Kuitert’s work results in humility in speaking about God, but for Werkman, does not need to lead to a farewell of God (Werkman 2020).

Dutch Jesuit priest Hans van Leeuwen SJ (1934–2019) blamed Kuitert for his focus on human weaknesses in the search for God, but not seeing the experience of faith: people who undergo a touch that is possible because humans have a natural sense of God. Nobody has ever seen God, but what humans try to put in words reflects their sense of God (van Leeuwen 2017).

Heino Falcke (b. 1966), award-winning professor of radio astronomy and astroparticle physics, believes in God. Humans are trying to create an image of God, but the universe arouses curiosity and teaches humans humility. Humans may become the conductor of God’s blessings (Falcke 2020).

The ebbing of faith made Pope Francis, who, of course, did not mention Kuitert, assure an audience of priests, seminarians, and pastoral workers “that good pastoral ministry is possible if we are able to live as the Lord has commanded us, in the love that is the gift of his Spirit” (Arnold 2023). That is a focus on living a Christian life that had been undermined by a rationality that, for committed Christians, had been taken too far.

Liberal critique of orthodoxy is profound, but orthodox responses show that science and logic do not have all the answers.

Revelation turned out to be a key concept to protect orthodoxy, not only in Reformed and Catholic Christianity, but also in Judaism, Coptic Orthodoxy, and Islam.

Orthodox rabbi Moshe Peleg does not question God’s hand in Scripture either and sees the Torah and rabbinic literature as “tools for life,” an aid to humanity to face the big questions in life.⁶ Many Orthodox rabbis claim they have actual proof, such as Yosef Mizrachi or Lawrence Kelemen,⁷ beliefs Kuitert found untenable.

Popular Coptic Orthodox theologian and author Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty (b. 1937) does not question that God speaks through the Bible (Malaty 1993, pp. 5–7). The conservative charismatic Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda [Shinūda] III (1923–2012) argued the Coptic Orthodox faith is bound by the borders set by the Bible, sayings of the saints, authorised dogmas, and ancient church rituals (Shenouda 1988; Tadros 2013, pp. 9–10).

Muslim scholar Muhammad Abu-Laylah argued in a book used at Azhar University that God speaking through the *Qur’an* and Islam should not be questioned (Mulder 2022).

Kuitert’s books demonstrate the human origin of religions that involved various political influences, providing us with canonical scriptures, tradition, and dogmas, in which facts and imagination have been mixed, aiming at girding desired codes of conduct. The orthodox defence in turning to revelation to substantiate believed factual claims that violate science and historical critical research alienated many people and turned Kuitert into a leading figure, taking Reformed Christians out of their ‘house of bondage’.

Dutch history shows the orthodox Reformed have long been a political force to be reckoned with. The decline of faith after the Second World War greatly reduced the appeal of Christian democratic political parties, which, in turn, impacted policies that were intended to support faith-based policies.

The discussions between Kuitert and his critics show that religion cannot depend on the search of factual truths and logic only. Real faith, in the words of W.H. Velema, allowing God to speak in our lives, is based on personal experience that moves people and determines how people live. Discussions about religion, orthodoxy, and politics took a very different turn in Judaism and Israel.

5. Judaism and Israel: Religion as a Political Factor

Unlike the orthodox Reformed, who saw their influence dwindle in the Netherlands, orthodox Jews saw their influence, both religiously and politically, grow in Israel, leading to a deeply polarised Israeli society.

The current state of Israel and Messianism are deeply intertwined. The Israeli success in the June 1967 war boosted messianic views to an unprecedented height, making many Christians and Jews believe modern Israel is the revival of ancient Israel in Biblical times. Messianism took various forms, but all resulting in support for Israel. The dispensationalists among American Evangelicals, promoting a “literal” or “straightforward” reading of biblical prophecies that minimise allegorical or “spiritualized” interpretations, interpret Jesus’ prophecy that “Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24) as a sign that Israel will embrace Jesus as their Messiah before his second coming to earth. Israel’s victory in 1967 was also widely celebrated by American Jews, who collected over USD one hundred million in support for Israel. The elated responses made Israel’s eloquent Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abba Eban (1915–2002), publish his widely popular *My People, The Story of the Jews* (1968), underscoring the link between ancient and modern Israel, in which Zionism plays a major role.

Jewish orthodoxy has long been divided over mixing faith with politics, which changed over time. This paper will present the views of an Orthodox opponent to mixing faith and politics with Jewish support for Evangelical messianism since that was politically opportune in the advancement of Zionism.

Jerusalem-based Orthodox Rabbi Lion Wagenaar (d. 1979)⁸, born in Germany and surviving Auschwitz, expressed his opposition to the euphoria following the June 1967 war in correspondence with German author Helmut Spehl (b. 1930)⁹ between August 1967 and February 1970. Wagenaar believes Zionism violates the basic tenets of Jewish faith. “Judaism as a faith forbids to set up a Jewish state as a political entity until apocryphal times,” the return to Jewish statehood always has been God-centred, never a political design that humans had to carry out. God is just, but Zionism and the state of Israel were founded on and continue to promote myths, political and military means that violate Old Testament principles of justice. Being Jewish is not based on a blood band, but on faith, a mindset of living holy. The Jewish people were chosen to be a nation of holiness, bringing the nations to the faith in one God. With Wagenaar, there is no convergence between Christian orthodoxy and Jewish orthodoxy. He criticises the apostle Paul for diverting from Judaism since he placed the focus on faith instead of living according to God’s requirements. Wagenaar would have most likely agreed with most of Kuitert’s views in his book about Jesus, but not his later views on religion in general. Wagenaar criticises Western political double standards and sees the Jewish state as a Christian creation since Christian nations wanted the Jewish state and provided substantial support. The Muslim world did not drive out Jews, but the Christian world did. Wagenaar’s criticism also concerns lies of Israeli politicians, such as the claim that Israel is the only hope for Jews in need. Zionists lured Arab Jews to Israel because Israel needed them. Wagenaar does not call for the dismantling of the state of Israel, but his views show a deep resentment of linking faith with politics (Wagenaar and Spehl 1970, pp. 22–27, 40–41, 63, 112, 129).

Where Wagenaar displays knowledge of Jewish and Palestinian history, Billy Graham does not in his 1970 film *His Land*. Calvin College scholar Bert DeVries (1939–1921) found his film full of unproven assumptions, such as that the founding of the State of Israel “was literally foretold by the biblical prophets, and that the creation of Israel is an important step in God’s timetable, a step that brings us closer to the return of Christ.” Claims do not have to be accurate to have impact, and impact it had on Evangelical Christians in the USA, who believed that rallying to the support of Israel would bring the second arrival of Jesus Christ closer. The 1967 war showed Graham God was on Israel’s side. The identification of prophecy with modern Israel and the silence about Israel’s history between ancient and modern Israel resulted, in DeVries’ views, in a dangerously slanted portrayal of Israel that justified conquering land and that Arab claims on Palestine are not worth mentioning (De Vries 1971).

The American Jewish Committee (AJC) saw the film would be able to rally support for Israel and helped make Graham’s film an international success. Billy Graham became the leading evangelical supporter of Israel through the mid-1970s. In later years, Graham was taken over by a host of other evangelists and pastors who advocated evangelical Christian Zionism (Hummel 2018, pp. 1128–46). Supporting Israel became responding to God’s will (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, pp. 107–8, 132–39), a view that greatly impacted churches in the Netherlands (Snoek and Verkuyl 1988, pp. 7–8).

It is, at this point, needed to present Jewish and Christian messianism in a historical context and see how this intersected in the late 19th century with the secular political Zionism of Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) that led to the establishment of the state of Israel and influenced modern-day Jewish orthodoxy.

Robert Eisenman (b. 1937) describes the events leading up to the messianic movement that followed Jesus of Nazareth, who was preaching the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ crucifixion by the Romans was a shock to his followers and was interpreted in the context of messianic beliefs, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Jewish temple in 70 CE, and Greco-Roman philosophies in the first centuries CE, which deeply influenced the formation of

the Christian church (Eisenman 1997) that further departed from Judaism, which will be described under the section of Egypt. Both Eisenman and Kuitert describe the departure from Judaism to an extent that made Wagenaar state that Islam is closer to Judaism than Christianity (Wagenaar and Spehl 1970, p. 42).

Messianic movements presenting followers with hope for a utopian world have come up throughout history, but none was as impactful as the one around Shabbetai Zevi (1626–1676) who lived in the Ottoman Empire in a period of Jewish humiliation and persecution in a society that was deeply religious. Old eschatological visions were mixed with new elements. Zevi's messianism even had an impact on Jews and Christian millenarian circles in the Netherlands, England, and Germany. Many Jews sold houses and property to journey to the Holy Land. When the Ottoman Sultan authorised his arrest and Zevi converted under pressure to Islam, Zevi was presented as a tragic, but still legitimate, redeemer. Hundreds of Jews followed him in converting to Islam, but most did not. After this death, it was speculated that he had been the suffering Messiah, rather than the final redeemer. It took years for Jewish orthodoxy to regain control. Shabbateanism only finally disintegrated in the early 19th century (Scholem 1954).

Both Eisenman and Scholem demonstrate that religious developments always need to be studied in the context of time and location, which made Kuitert question the orthodox belief in God's hand in history.

With the Enlightenment, absolute trust in religion greatly reduced. Secular ideologies, including nationalism arose in the West. The sovereign nation-state became the objective to strive for. Nationalism has often been interwoven with religious predicates, the nation as a holy entity. Service and even death for the nation have been elevated to the level of sacrifice and martyrdom, impacting Zionism. In the same period European powers conquered land from a greatly weakened Ottoman Empire and encouraged ethnic and religious groups to break away from their empire and form their own nation states, starting with European guarantees for Greek independence in 1830 (Alter 1989, pp. 101–2). Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924), the American president from 1913 to 1921, argued that the principle of self-determination should be rigidly applied, with every nation having the right to establish its own state (Alter 1989, pp. 10–11).

The reduced trust in traditional religion led to religious liberalism that resulted in various forms of orthodox resistance, including the orthodox Reformed and Evangelical Restorationism, which is the belief Christians should try to emulate the life of the apostolic early church since this would be a purer and more ancient form of the Christianity. Restorationists were calling for, and willing to sponsor, the emigration of Jews to Palestine as a precondition for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, while simultaneously seeking to convert them to Christianity, Gershon Shafir writes.

The political elite in Europe came to see religion as a tool to increase their influence in the Ottoman Empire. Russians became the patrons of the Orthodox and the French of the Catholics, but since the protestant numbers were small and the British wanted to gain a foothold in Palestine, the narrative of a Jewish return to Palestine was encouraged to justify their ambitions, “long before vague Jewish messianic aspirations became a concrete Zionist project, and long before Jewish voices proclaimed Jews to be a nation rather than a religious group” (Shafir 2017).

Cohen describes the Zionist labour movement from its earliest days that initially saw itself building a revolutionary class as the agent of national liberation for the Jewish people. Early Zionists, in line with the nationalist beliefs in their days, came to see the Hebrew language as a critical element of cultural authenticity, linking modern Zionists to the Jews in antiquity. The First Zionist Congress in Basel (1897) linked the call for a Jewish national home in Palestine to Israel in antiquity, encouraging Jews to settle here (Cohen 1987, pp. 55, 86). Under the influence of Eastern European Jewish orthodoxy, religious convictions gradually became more important, forming religious Zionism.

During the First World War, the British government tried to obtain support from both Arabs and Jews, resulting in an exchange of letters in 1915–1916 promising Arab indepen-

dence in return for an Arab revolt against the Ottomans and, in the Balfour Declaration, a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine, using the religious narrative of the Jewish return to Palestine to safeguard British imperial interests in the Middle East after the pending demise of the Ottoman Empire (Shafir 2017).

The promotion of the religious narrative ignores anything that does not fit that narrative, such as debates about possible large-scale conversions to Judaism in 8th–10th century Khazaria, north of the Caucasus, first suggested by German Orientalist Karl Neumann (1793–1870) and later further researched, since that undermines the claim of a direct line between the inhabitants of ancient Israel and Jews with roots in Russia (Falk 2017).

Following the Ottoman defeat, Palestine became a British mandate, and the narrative of Jews returning to their homeland was promoted with success. Emigration increased. Land acquisitions, mostly from large absent landowners, led to clashes with local Palestinians that, in turn, resulted in discussions about and proposals for partition. David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973), at the time the Executive Head of the World Zionist Organisation and chairman of the Jewish Agency in mandate Palestine, proclaimed Israeli independence on 14 May 1948, in accordance with the 1947 United Nations partition plan. The Arab League was opposed to the UN plan and the establishment of Israel. Several Arab countries invaded Israel one day after the declaration of independence, which was immediately de facto recognised by the USA. Other countries followed. Israeli independence was followed by a massive exodus of Palestinians. The war ended in an armistice, with a border beyond the lines drawn in the UN partition plan (Eban 1972, pp. 347–58).

Orthodox Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog (1888–1959) boycotted the declaration of independence. He wanted a Jewish state with Jewish religious laws and had worked for years on a constitution for the new state, based on biblical laws and believing in Israel as a theocracy. The secular leadership at the time, however, did not want Israel to be controlled by religious laws (Polak 2023).

Between 1948 and 1967, successive labour governments focused on strengthening Israel, not fearing military confrontations with their Arab neighbours, and, in 1956, joined Great Britain and France in an attack on Egypt following Egypt’s nationalisation of the Suez Canal, benefiting Israeli military developments. In the same period, Israel made all efforts to stimulate Jewish emigration to Israel, knowing well that this would strengthen their hold on the land (Dayan 1976).

A major turning point was the Six-Day War in 1967. Israel marched into Jordanian-held East Jerusalem and allowed soldiers and the orthodox to pray at the surviving Western Wall of the second Jewish temple. The Westbank, Gaza, Sinai, and the Golan heights were taken. The rapid occupation of areas that once were part of ancient Israel strengthened a messianic stream in Judaism and Christianity and created openings for political Islamism in the Arab World. The war deeply intensified the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. This is, Sigal Samuel writes, not a story of how religion drives conflict, but how conflict impacts religion (Samuel 2017).

The war reverberated in the Netherlands, resulting in massive support for Israel, in particular, in orthodox Reformed churches, leading to discussions about God’s promises for Israel and what this meant for the church in the Netherlands (Snoek and Verkuyt 1988).

The war also resulted in 1969 in the establishment of the Nederlands Palestina Komitee (Netherlands Palestine Committee), which saw the Israeli conquest of Arab lands as a colonial occupation.

In 1973, Egypt and Syria tried to regain lost land in the October War. Their initial success resulted in an Israeli nuclear alert, which made President Nixon order on the same day an American airlift to replace all of Israel’s material losses. Only this support enabled Israel to push back Egyptian and Syrian armies. Oil-producing Arab nations responded with an oil boycott of pro-Israel countries, including the USA and the Netherlands (Gutfeld and Vanetik 2016). The Jewish community in the Netherlands was highly defensive of Israeli policies. In November 1973, young Dutch Jews established the Werkgroep Israël (Israel Study group) in support of Israel, with young Israel-minded Christians joining them.

The author found the Netherlands Palestine Committee far too secular and leftish and the Israel Study group too apologetic and established in December 1974 the Werkgroep Midden-Oosten (Middle East Study group), favouring dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians.

In November 1977, during the tenure of Menachem Begin (1913–1992) as the head of the government, Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat unexpectedly visited Jerusalem, resulting in peace negotiations and peace with Egypt in September 1978. Begin, prior to the foundation of Israel the leader of the Zionist militant group Irgun, was the first Likud politician who became Prime Minister. His ascension to power indicated the growing strength of Jewish nationalism and orthodoxy which greatly impacted the non-Jewish inhabitants of Israel.

In 1994, British author William Dalrymple (b. 1965) travelled around the Arab World and Israel, documenting a diminishing Christianity. During the war of independence, around 55,000 Christian and 650,000 Muslim Palestinians fled or were driven from their homes. In 1922, around 52% of the population of Jerusalem was Christian, reduced to under 2.5% in 1994. Armenian Bishop Hagop said his community had not received one single building permit since 1967. Israelis changed the Old City into a Jewish city. Christian ruins, including the ruins of the biggest monasteries ever discovered in the Middle East, have been looted and covered under soil, but the ruins of the tomb of a 15th century rabbi and ancient synagogues were preserved. Dalrymple notes that probably on no other site on Earth, the distant past is so politicised as in Israel, referring to a statement of Israeli archaeologist Shulamit Giva, who accused Israeli Biblical archaeology of being a tool in the hands of the Zionist movement [attempting] to find a connection between ancient Israel and modern Israel. Dalrymple refers to the early Ottoman period in Jerusalem, when interreligious interaction was abundant and unimaginable today (Dalrymple 1999, pp. 311–38).

Dalrymple's sad account was made before religious nationalists further strengthened efforts to Judaize East Jerusalem and Palestinian areas.

Israeli, Egyptian, Jordanian, American, and European leaders knew the 1996 elections between Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres (1923–2016) and his opponent Benjamin Netanyahu (b. 1949) would be crucial for the region. Peres received international support during an international summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, on 13 March 1996, yet Netanyahu was elected with a very narrow margin. Until today, Israeli politics has been dominated by Netanyahu, who, in December 2022, formed Israel's most religious nationalistic government since Israel was founded.

Israel defines itself as democratic and Jewish. Palestinian MP Ahmad Tibi (b. 1958) prefers to formulate this differently: democratic for Israeli Jews and Jewish for Israeli Palestinians. The influence of the secular labour party greatly declined. Ultra orthodoxy has grown tremendously, largely because orthodox women give birth to an average of close to seven children, three times as many as with secular Jews. In 2023, the ultra-Orthodox make up close to 14 percent of the population and are expected to grow in the coming decades to 30 to 40 percent. They live in their own bubble in their own quarters with their own schools, where religious education dominates their outlook. The ultra-Orthodox that are critical of Israel and Zionism still exist but have lost much of their influence. The younger generation of orthodox accepted the idea of a greater biblical Israel. Jewish colonists in Palestinian territories that were occupied in 1967, many of whom are orthodox, are today represented in the Israeli government. They see the Palestinian population in these areas as "an error" and want to divert greater sums of money to further colonisation. Israeli historian Yuval Harari (b. 1976) warns that Israel is a regional military power with nuclear arms, ruled by a government consisting of extremists that openly disseminate racist views and expansionist objectives that can set the entire region ablaze (Polak 2023).

6. Egypt: Christian and Muslim Orthodoxy

In both the Netherlands and Israel, we see the orthodoxy attempting to steer politics in line with their belief system, while protecting their belief systems through providing

education within their own social bubbles. De-pillarisation has crushed many of the institutions that aimed at protecting orthodoxy in the Netherlands. The orthodox bubble in Israel, on the contrary, is growing.

Developments in Egypt differ markedly from the Netherlands and Israel since Egypt is both profoundly religious and impacted by both Christianity and Islam in their search to find and preserve religious truth. The Coptic (meaning Egyptian) Orthodox Church has been the main Christian denomination throughout Egypt's history. The small Protestant and Catholic churches attribute their roots mostly to Western influences since the 19th century. Religion was hijacked in the 20th century for political purposes, either through the Islamist slogan 'Islam is the solution' or Islamophobe claims in the West that present slanted descriptions of non-Muslims in Islamic societies as evidence of Islam's intolerance (Scott 2010, p. 3).

The section will provide examples of modern Islamophobic writers who frequently refer to a religious past in Egypt that their audience in the West is mostly uninformed about, with Western scholars warning of their simplified narratives that serve political objectives. Following this overview, the main events that shaped the Coptic Orthodox belief system that was completed before Islam entered Egypt in the 7th century will be described. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Egypt became deeply influenced by the West. Both the Coptic Orthodox Church and Islam experienced religious revival, strengthening conservative religious sentiments in society. Egypt has been ruled by autocratic regimes since 1952 that, until the revolution of 25 January 2011, have used Machiavellian methods to use or oppose religious sentiments when it suited them. After 2013, when Islamists were removed from power; successive governments tried to reduce the influence of politically motivated revivalist Islam as much as possible.

Various modern authors, such as Bat Ye'or (b. 1933), attributed the decline of Christianity throughout the ages to an almost continuous persecution of Islam through a system of culture and religious laws (Ye'or 2001). Contemporary political activists, Copts and non-Copts, living in the West, present a very dark picture of Christian life in Egypt. Paul Marshall (b. 1948) writes about 'Egypt's Endangered Christians', Magdy Khalil about 'The Ordeal of Arab Christians', and other authors attribute blame to 'radical political Islam' (Thomas et al. 2004). Several conservative private think tanks, such as The Gatestone Institute, claim Muslims persecute Christians. Their objective is to report on various subjects, including threats to the United States, events in the Middle East, and their possible consequences for the USA.¹⁰ Raymond Ibrahim (b. 1973), working with the Gatestone Institute, published in 2013 a book on Islam's new war on Christians, stating on the cover flap that Christian martyrdom is not of the past, but experienced by Christians across the Muslim world today (Ibrahim 2013).

This image of the persecution of Christians in Egypt with references to Coptic political activists even accusing church leaders in Egypt of being lackeys of the government, frequently comes back in texts written by Western politicians, such as Bas Belder, Member of the European Parliament for the conservative *SGP*, 1999–2019 (Belder 2020). In the years the author worked in Egypt, senior church leaders frequently objected to the claims made by these activists. On 2 August 2022, Coptic Solidarity (USA) paid for a publication in *Christian Newswire* accusing the head of the Egyptian Protestant churches, Rev. Dr. Andrea Zaki (Zakī) Stephanous, of being an 'agent' of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi ['Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī]. An overview of Arabic media articles since 2003 shows a man who is in favour of Muslim–Christian and Church–government dialogue, but not an agent of the government of Egypt (Hulsman 2022).

Philip Jenkins (b. 1952) deplores many people have an insufficient eye for how religious change happens and do not see that globalisation, encounters with other faiths, and the dilemma of living under hostile regimes were also issues Christians in the past have grappled with. Some Muslim regimes have been inconceivably brutal, others mild and accommodating. That diversity suggests, Jenkins notes, that persecution and violence are not inherent in the faith of Islam, but are related to circumstances in particular times

and places. One needs to ask why some native churches disappeared and others, like the church in Egypt, survived. Looking only at Islam is insufficient. “To some extent also decisions taken by churches themselves determined whether they died or lived.” The Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt better adapted to the changes than churches in North Africa. Jenkins attributes this to its network of monasteries and villages churches. In addition, Egypt was spared many of the conflicts that were fought between different rulers and dynasties, while government control was weak in Upper Egypt, which left Christians largely to their own internal rule (Jenkins 2008, pp. 4, 34–35, 236–37, 242).

Rachel Scott notes that modern relations between Copts and Muslims are linked to global conflicts and tensions (Scott 2010, p. 196). She warns against the tendency in the West to see Islam or Islamists as a monolithic bloc, assuming the divinely revealed law cannot be changed and, hence, that Islamic tradition is fixed. Such beliefs hamper discussions. Islamists, as all religious people do, engage with the foundational texts of their religion. Muslims do this with the Qur’an, hadith [ḥadīth], and Islamic jurisprudence that are used to legitimise and understand current realities. These responses come also, within the same Islamist movement, with considerable diversity. The invention of tradition is an ongoing process and is affected when rapid transformation undermines social patterns. Scott’s thesis illustrates the complex ways in which Islamic tradition is modified, reinterpreted, and changed in response to the circumstances of the moment. Their organisations are made up of members with different views and agendas. Policy statements can reflect which group has gained the upper hand (Scott 2010, pp. 5, 10–11).

Jenkins’ and Scott’s observations contrast starkly with authors like Bat Ye’or, Marshall, Khalil, and Ibrahim and Coptic Solidarity, which show views on Muslim–Christian relations that are never far away from political convictions. Rev. Dr. Andrea Zaki Stephanous notes that religion and politics are intricately intertwined in the Arab World (Stephanous 2021, p. 8), contrasting greatly with countries, such as the Netherlands and Israel, that have been deeply influenced by the Enlightenment in separating religion and state and viewing the role of religion in society, although the orthodox in Israel are making efforts to increase the influence of religion (Polak 2023). These contrasts make Egypt a great example for a study about the complexities in Muslim–Christian relations throughout the ages that are relevant for our understanding of interreligious dialogue today.

The first three centuries of Christianity are known in the Egyptian church as the ‘era of persecution’. Unlike the popular view today, these persecutions were more periodical outbursts of persecution that gave the Coptic Orthodox Church many of its martyrs (Davis 2004, pp. 21–42). Roman persecution ended with the emperor Constantine (272–337 CE), who used Christians to tip the balance of power in his favour during a civil war against other contenders of the throne. Constantine found a highly divided Christianity. Two major groups were the Arians, stressing God’s unity at the expense of the notion of the Trinity, and the Orthodox, who stressed the notions of the deity of Christ and the Trinity. Statements Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 263–339 CE) attributed in his biography about the emperor to Constantine, like seeing a distinction between the Father (God) and the Son (Jesus), indicate sympathies with some Arian beliefs. Eusebius was an orthodox bishop and, for a while, advisor of the emperor who called for the Council of Nicaea (325 CE), since it was in Constantine’s political interest to see the uniting of Christians who saw God as the ruler of the cosmos and Earth and the emperor as his representative on Earth, which gave him powers no Roman emperor in the third century had—remarkably, the representative of God who was not interested in spreading the gospel beyond the borders of his empire (Eusebius of Caesarea 2012). Arianism was defeated at the Council of Nicaea, but never fully disappeared. The decisions made at this council influenced to a large extent how the church developed in later centuries (Kuitert 1998).

Interestingly, Islam presents a view of Jesus that was and is much closer to Arianism than trinitarian Christology (Suermann 2020). The political interest in supporting the missionary dimensions of Christianity and later Islam only developed in later centuries (Goddard 1996).

The Arab conquest of Egypt, 639–642 CE, was a watershed moment for Egypt. They called the mostly Christian inhabitants “Qibt,” a name derived from the Greek Aegyptus, which became our word Copt. Mariz Tadros calls the usage of the name Copt of significant socio-political importance (Tadros 2013, pp. 23–24), which was underlined by an Egyptian Ambassador in the Netherlands who, at the opening of an exhibition of icons, stated that he was proud to be a “Muslim Copt,” signifying that both Muslims and Christians in Egypt are Egyptian (Watson 2000, p. 6).

The Arabs brought Islam to Egypt. Egypt’s Christians had no idea of what religion this was, but they rapidly noticed that the major differences between their orthodox Christian faith and this new religion was in how they viewed Jesus, a prophet with a special status, very different from their notions of the deity of Christ and the Trinity, as has been reflected in early debates between Egypt’s Christians and Muslims (Suermann 2020).

Islam can be seen as a further development of Arianism, growing further away from Christianity, with early Muslim rulers stressing their differences from the Orthodox faith that was held in the Byzantine Empire. The continuity and differences between these three religions, as well as the claim all three make on the divine inspiration of their canon, make it interesting to study the origin and further historical developments of Islam. The focus of Western and some Muslim scholars of religion on the historical critical method of research, however, is not appreciated by many Muslim scholars. Eildert Mulder (b. 1949) presented the draft of his book review of a book of Emilio Platti (1943–2021), *De Koran herontdekt* (The Qur’an rediscovered) (Platti 2020) to Azhar scholar Hassan Muḥammad Wajīh (Wageih 2022), who does not believe all outcomes of the historical method and referred to Muhammad Abu-Laylah’s book *Al-Qur’ān al-Karīm min al-Manẓūr al-Istishrāqī. Dirāsa Naqdiyya wa Taḥlīliyya “Alif-lām-mīm, Zalik al-kitābu lā rayba fīhi hudān lil-muttaqīn”* (The noble Qur’an: From the orientalist perspective. This is the book about which there is no doubt, a guidance for those conscious of Allah) (Mulder 2022).

The critique of orthodox Muslim scholars on rationalist approaches to the study of divine scriptures appears to be similar to those of orthodox Christians and Jews, regardless of their denomination.

The focus on a rationalist approach of religion was uncommon (but not absent) during most of Egypt’s history since the arrival of Islam. Egypt, despite periods of interreligious tensions, also never saw Muslim–Christian relations degenerate into a sectarian civil war. Makari’s book is a testimony of the lessons of history that can help to address tensions (Makari 2007, p. 3).

Copts experienced a period of religious revival during the Fatimid period, until Caliph al-Hakim (985–1021) made an end of this with an intensity and brutality that was one of the worst in Egyptian history and saw a large drop in the number of Copts, as many converted to Islam (Tadros 2013, pp. 26–27).

Christianity was long a force to be reckoned with in the Muslim world. Until as late as the eleventh century Asia was the home of at least one-third of the world’s Christians, with Africa perhaps home to 10 percent. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Christians in the Middle East experienced a widespread cultural renaissance (Jenkins 2008, pp. 4, 32).

History is showing ups and downs for local Christians, but throughout history, the number of Christians also declined. Philippe Fargues (b. 1948) and Youssef Courbage (b. 1946) provide in *Christians and Jews Under Islam* an insight into the demographic changes that took place in previous centuries. Interestingly, the percentage of Christians slightly grew during the 19th century, but declined after the First World War, mostly due to instability and regional conflicts (Fargues and Courbage [1997] 1998).

The percentage of Christians has been stirring intense political debate since Copts have been disputing the credibility of the data presented by Egypt’s Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS). The last nationwide census dates to 1986 and indicated that Copts made up 5.6 percent of the population. Expatriate activists claimed the Copts constituted between 15 and 25 percent of the Egyptian population. Elsässer notes “The desire to build a case that would shock into action a Western audience seemed to

tend toward exaggeration, simplification, and selective perception” while serious research uniformly concluded that the CAPMAS figure must be fairly accurate (Elsässer 2014, pp. 76, 161, 247).

The huge differences in presenting Coptic population figures did not exist at the Coptic Congress in 1911. Coptic representatives then demanded more significant representation based on taxes paid (Mikhail 1911, pp. 28–29). Muslims organised a counter congress and argued that the Copts sought power disproportionate to their numerical size in the nation (Monier 2021, p. 24) which they, nevertheless, obtained from Egyptian nationalist leader Saad Zaghloul (1859–1927) to foster unity between Muslims and Christians to push the British colonialists out of the country. Copts remained prominent in Egyptian politics until the 1952 coup d’état of Gamal Abdel Nasser. From this moment their political influence greatly declined while voices of discrimination accompanied by substantially higher population claims increased (Wakin 2000, pp. 21–25).

Since Pope Shenouda was elected in 1971, Coptic counter-narratives to the dominant national unity discourse gained prominence. Pope Shenouda was more assertive than his predecessors and did not hesitate to challenge the president publicly about issues he felt the government had responded inadequately to issues concerning Coptic Christians (Elsässer 2014, pp. 81–84).

Pope Shenouda’s assertiveness coincided in the 1970s with the establishment of the *American Coptic Association*, their campaigns for Coptic rights with increasing the alleged Coptic proportion to 20%, never providing any evidence.¹¹ *Al-Kiraza*, the official *Coptic Orthodox Church* magazine, edited by Pope Shenouda, adopted a similar claim in 1977 (Tadros 2013, p. 32).

In 2002, Metropolitan Bishoi [Bīshūy], the influential Secretary of the Holy Synod, stated “President Mubarak spoke some time ago about 10 percent of the population so let’s keep that number as a guideline” (Hulsman 2002). In 2008, Pope Shenouda publicly claimed Copts made up 15 percent of the population (Bayyūmī and Ramadān 2008).

It is plausible to attribute the differences between CAPMAS counting and church estimates to the “the inconsistency of position,” a term coined by Egyptian sociologist and human rights activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim which links claims of higher Coptic population percentages with claims about inequality from the moment their political influence declined which did not match their economic influence (al-Shaykh 2000). Ibrahim noted that “Copts earn on average 30% more than Muslims” (Marshall and Assad 1999, p. 80).

Discrepancies lead to tensions. Islamists believe Copts exaggerate their number in a bid for disproportionate power, while Copts, in turn, believe Muslims deflate their numbers to undermine their presence and weight in the country. The CAPMAS stopped recording religion in the censuses since these debates gave them a headache (Scott 2010, p. 8).

In 2012, extensive research was carried out to investigate Christian claims, resulting in an estimate between 5 and 6 percent. French demographer Philippe Fargues contributed to this report and disagrees with researchers who call CAPMAS figures “estimates”. Their figures may have a margin of error, he said, but it is still based on counting. The estimates Christians provided are mostly politically motivated guesses (Hulsman 2012). Tadros argues the government has data and blames the government for lack of transparency in releasing credible data. The failure to release available data “adds fuel to the fire of rumour and suspicion.” (Tadros 2013, pp. 30–35). A Lebanese Christian scholar opined in 2015 at a conference at Vienna University that one should not dispute Christian population estimates since all Arabs exaggerate (Hulsman 2015).

Inflated population claims and claims of persecution or discrimination often go hand in hand, indicating political objectives, as Scott earlier noticed, which need more digging into Muslim–Christian relations in Egypt’s contemporary history.

Just as in the Netherlands, Egypt’s orthodox Christians resisted religious liberalism since this came up in the 19th century and called for revivals in line with the Bible and at times tradition, so also Muslims did. The difference, however, is that European orthodox Christian responses addressed European liberalism. Nineteenth-century Coptic Orthodox

and Muslim responses had to address Western liberalism that colonial powers had brought to their countries with efforts to undermine the Ottoman empire, as is obvious in the writings of Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838/1839–1897), who referred to Muslim religious scriptures in seeking answers to Western encroachments on the Muslim world. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War was followed by Western dominance over protectorates that were predominantly Muslim. Islamic thinkers responded to these political changes, not rejecting modernity, but calling for liberty, social justice, equality, and solidarity. With the fall of communism, the focus point of world politics became Islam, which led to various responses, some of them militant (Khatab 2011, pp. 20–23).

In 1952, colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser [Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir] (1918–1970) removed the deeply unpopular king with his cabinet that depended to a large extent on the political power of both Muslim and Coptic landlords. The land reform that followed destroyed the basis of the 2000 wealthiest landlords, who could otherwise have challenged the regime. Nasser’s principal opponents during his reign were the Muslim Brothers, making them the prime targets of political arrests and subjecting them to political sadism. During 1961 and 1966, he initiated a socialist transformation (Waterbury 1983, pp. 341–42, 423–24). The Muslim Brotherhood radicalised in this period, as exemplified in the writings of their ideologue Sayyid Quṭb (1906–1966), who developed a strong Manichean approach in creating a sharp distinction between good (Islam) and evil (all else); unbelief, also of Muslims; and belief. A true Muslim, Quṭb argued, is committed to the establishment of an Islamic order and state. Nasser, who saw his writings as an attack on the regime, had him arrested and executed (Vatikiotis 1988, p. 66). His works, however, live on in Islamist circles and became the basis of even more radical thoughts (Berman 2003).

After Nasser’s death in 1970, President Anwar al-Sadat gradually released Islamists from prison and used them to dismantle the secular/leftist powerbase of his predecessor in an effort to impose a new economic policy, resulting, Nadia Ramsis Farah explained, in a transition crisis. In November 1971, Pope Shenouda had become the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church. His predecessors avoided confrontations with the state, but Pope Shenouda, a theologically conservative leader with a history in the revivalist Coptic Sunday School Movement, was more assertive and thought to voice the Copts political demands. Muslim–Christian clashes started in 1972, with the burning of a small building in Khanka, north of Cairo, that the pope had turned into a church without having a license. Such clashes had not been seen during Pope Shenouda’s and Sadat’s predecessors. President Sadat requested Dr Jamal al-‘Utayfi, the Deputy Speaker of Parliament and confidant to the president, to form a fact-finding committee to investigate what happened. Al-‘Utayfi’s committee detected an over-sensitivity of Muslim and Christian religious leaders regarding publications about religious subjects and highlighted three key issues that repeatedly led to sectarian tensions: the licensing of church buildings, missionary activities, and censorship of the publication of religious books (al-‘Utayfi 2009).

Al-‘Utayfi’s report and recommendations were excellent and repeatedly referred to in Egyptian media as the very points that needed to be addressed, but most recommendations were not implemented, human rights activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim wrote 36 years later. If they had been implemented, many sectarian incidents in the following years could have been avoided (Ibrāhīm 2000, 2008).

Coptic writers at the time frantically argued for a secular order, in which a plural society could develop—an allegiance to the nation, not to a religion. Their voices drowned in the increasing polarising voices. Islamic groups strengthened their influence on university campuses and, in January 1977, clashed with Coptic Christians in Upper Egypt. They were trying to pressure the government into accepting the literal application of Islamic law, which was strongly opposed by Pope Shenouda. Clashes escalated in the following years. In May 1980, the government proposed a constitutional amendment to make the Shari‘a (Shari‘ah) the source of legislation. Farah describes this amendment as the worst blow in Muslim–Christian relations during his reign. Sadat thought to silence Pope Shenouda by accusing him publicly of initiating and intensifying religious strife, which did intensify

more strife (Vatikiotis 1988, p. 68; Farah 1986, pp. 1–5), culminating in June 1981 in the arrest of around 1500 people, including Islamists, political activists, and intellectuals of all colours, as well as 120 Christians, including 8 bishops and 24 priests. Pope Shenouda was put under house arrest in the Monastery of Bīshūy. Not long after, Sadat and Bishop Samuel, then head of the Committee of Bishops that had temporarily replaced Pope Shenouda, were killed by Muslim militants during a military parade on 6 October 1981 (Watson 2000, p. 85). The tensions had interrupted the dominant pattern of the Christian community's survival that, through the ages, had been based on fostering relationships with Muslim rulers (Vatikiotis 1988, pp. 66–67). Sadat's successor Hosni Mubarak (1928–2020) gradually released leaders imprisoned by Sadat. In January 1984, Pope Shenouda's monastic arrest was lifted, allowing him to preside over the Coptic Orthodox Christmas celebration on January 6.

The policies of Nasser and Sadat had contributed to the increase in Islamic political violence, but also factors outside Egypt played a major role. Western dominance, of which Israel is seen as an extension, and Western military adventures in the Muslim world are widely resisted and contribute to growing extremism. An excellent example is Usama bin-Laden's interest in jihad that was triggered by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. His movement could develop thanks to the support of the USA, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan for his fight against the Russians in 1986–1989 (Khatab 2011, pp. 94–97).

Not only Western politics, but also Islamic theology and ideology, are important factors in the process of radicalisation. Bin-Laden's al-Qaida attracted many Egyptians, using the intellectual framework known as Salafism, pietistic in focus, but sharing much of the rejectionist worldview of the jihadis, with a widespread antipathy toward communication and contact with non-Salafis and non-Muslims. Al-Qaida and other radical movements borrowed ideas from earlier Islamic movements, capitalising on social, economic, and political constraints in the Muslim world, seeing their ideology and activities as a defence of Islam. In doing so, they used selected religious narratives from the past and gave these new, but perverted, interpretations. Many of the audiences they reach out to, Khatab concludes, are unable to distinguish between truth and ideological propaganda. Khatab believes jihadism can be eradicated at its roots through defining the nature of the conflict and providing support to the mainstream Islamic community in struggling against it (Khatab 2011, pp. 237–48).

We should distinguish here between *Salafism* and the Muslim Brotherhood. Where Salafism is pietistic and tends to be non-political when they are politically weak. This enabled them to grow in local village mosques all over the country. The Muslim Brotherhood is political activist and more pragmatic without tampering with their basic ideology (Durie 2013). The government and church established in the 1980s some cautious contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood. Some of the younger and more impatient members joined the militant al-Jamā'a al-Islāmīyyah and Jihadist movements and, in the 1980s and 1990s, attacked police, Christians (in particular, jewellers, because they needed money), and sometimes tourists, with the purpose of harming Egypt's tourism industry—all in hopes of pressuring the Egyptian government to apply the Shari'a more strictly. After the November 1997 terrorism attack in Luxor, killing 58 tourists, the Egyptian government cracked down on Islamic militancy.

The government was unable to address widespread poverty and left social care largely in the hands of Muslim and Christian religious organisations, including the Muslim Brotherhood, which improved their public image. The Egyptian government was walking a tightrope. Expanding Jewish settlements in occupied Palestinian areas, the Palestinian *Intifādah* with harsh Israeli responses, and the USA-led invasion of Iraq (2003) had strengthened Islamist and anti-Western sentiments (Elsässer 2014).

Sectarian tensions came back. Coptic researcher Peter E. Makari, describing the Mubarak period, is convinced that we should not interpret these as a clash between the West and the East, or between Christianity and Islam, but rather between what he calls "more conservative and extreme elements in all religions that adopt exclusivist claims

and intolerant attitudes toward the other and other adherents of religions who seek reconciliation, peace, and justice for all” (Makari 2007, p. xx). The terminology used by Makari reflects a possible liberal bias in linking conservatism with ‘extreme elements’ and ‘intolerant attitudes’, as opposed to the liberal approach of openness to all.

Emigration substantially increased with the Muslim–Christian clashes in the 1970s and has continued ever since. Christian emigration is related to economic factors, escaping sectarian violence, fear for a country that is dominated by an Islamist philosophy, and a more secured life in the West. Just before the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, Coptic businessman Mounir Ghabbour [Munir Ghabbūr] published with Ahmed Osman a book expressing fear for a disappearance of Christians from the Middle East, linking this to Islamism (Ghabbour and Osman 2010, pp. 175–89). Not long after publication, various Arab countries were plagued with revolutions and civil war, in which Islamists played a dominant role that indeed spurred Christian emigration. Ghabbour and Osman’s book confirms the thesis of Makari that clashes were not between Christians and Muslims, but related to efforts of Islamists to turn Egypt and other countries into states with a greater role for Islam in the public domain. Andrea Zaki Stephanous’ (b. 1960) view of political Islam is in line with Ghabbour and Osman. He, however, adds the perils of Israel for Egypt’s Christians since also Israel blurred the lines between religion and politics, providing justifications for militant Islamists to create an Islamic state with similar blurred lines. The foundation of the state of Israel claiming justification of land appropriations on Old Testament prophecies and the doctrine of land and covenant of God with his people resulted in many Egyptians seeing the book as legitimising war crimes and murder for the sake of his chosen people with theological disputes within Egypt’s churches (Stephanous 2021, pp. 10–18).

Tadros describes the increase of sectarian violence against Christians, Baha’is, and Muslim Sufis between 2008 and 2011, that, alongside huge discrepancies between the rich and poor, fraudulent elections, and police brutalities to suppress (perceived) opposition, became some of the catalysts for the January 25 Revolution in 2011. The weeks following the uprising showed the highest degree of national unity between Muslims and Christians since the Egyptian revolution against British occupation in 1919. Christians hoped that the country could change to an inclusive democracy, distinct from a majoritarian (Muslim) rule, Tadros writes. The revolution, or uprising, led to the removal of President Hosni Mubarak and a political settlement between the army and the Muslim Brotherhood, the strongest political entity at the time, to facilitate a fairly smooth accession to political power, while the army would receive impunity from accountability (Tadros 2013, pp. xi–xii).

During the Sadat years, Islamists pushed article II of the constitution, stating that the Shari’a is the main source of legislation. That was insufficient for them. In later years, they argued for a stricter application of the Shari’a. This makes the July 2011 poll of Fāṭima al-Zanāṭi and Muḥammad al-Ghazālī into what Egyptian respondents found of maintaining, amending, or annulling Article II of the constitution of great interest. Only one-third of the respondents had heard of Article II, unawareness of a key article that had been the focus of many public discussions since the 1970s. Of Muslims who knew of this article, the overwhelming majority wanted to keep this, while the overwhelming proportion of Christians would rather let go of this article.

The next indicator was the Parliamentary elections in 2011/2012, registering a higher voter turnout than any of the previous elections since Nasser’s coup d’état in 1952. Parties that were outspoken Islamist (Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood) obtained 65.3% of the votes.

The third indicator is the first round of the 2012 Presidential elections, during which Islamists candidates obtained 43.26% of the vote. During the second round, an army officer ran against Muslim Brotherhood candidate Muhammad Morsi [Mūrsī] (1951–2019), who won, although disputed, the elections, primarily because many Egyptians did not want a president with a military background. The data show a large percentage of floating voters, with a rapidly declining support for Islamists.

During the first months, cooperation between Islamists and non-Islamists appeared to be possible, resulting, for example, in October in a multi-party delegation with Islamists and their fiercest ideological opponents to the Netherlands. Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II (b. 1952) took office on 18 November 2012; major sectarian clashes had not yet taken place. These developments made Tadros publish *Copts at the Crossroads; The Challenges of Building Inclusive Democracy in Egypt*, with a preface dated January 15, expressing hope for a new era. This was not a blind hope. Tadros noted, for example, that many Copts did not trust a Brotherhood rule, resulting in emigration, although the numbers are disputed (Tadros 2013, p. 2).

Tensions built up with debates on a new constitution. Islamists pushed through a new constitution with a strong Islamist character. Non-Islamists opposed, which led, George Masīḥa, member of the Constitutional Assembly explained, to rapidly escalating tensions between Islamists and non-Islamists (Serôdio 2013) ultimately resulting in massive demonstrations and the removal of President Morsi.

It is obvious that the al-Sīsī government wants to push back Islamism. In July 2015, the president gave a landmark speech about the need to renew the religious discourse and linked this to counterterrorism (Kamal 2015). Reducing Islamism also comes with reducing poverty, in the past providing Islamists with a fertile soil, but this turned out to be far more difficult than changing the religious discourse. The percentage of Egyptians living under the poverty line increased from 27.8% in 2015 to 32.5% in 2018. In February 2021, President al-Sīsī (b. 1954) sparked a storm among conservative Muslims when he instructed verses from the Qur'an and sayings from the Hadith be struck from textbooks. Changes become visible in religious education at Egyptian schools, emphasising religions' common denominators and tolerance. The struggle for the religious soul of Egyptians is over a century old and will not rapidly disappear (Elsässer 2014).

In conclusion, religious developments cannot be discussed in isolation from political and social circumstances. The impact of organised religion as the main provider of collective morality greatly reduced in the Netherlands, despite orthodox efforts to hold their ground. Israel started as a predominantly secular country and became more orthodox, which also gained increasing political power that includes hardcore radicals. Islamism in Egypt grew in number and radicalism since the Nasser years, which is to a large extent related to poverty, education, suppression, and frustrations about efforts of Western powers to change the Islamic world according to their agenda. There are no indications that the direction of religious adherence in each of these three countries will change any time soon, which makes interreligious dialogue of paramount importance to reduce division and religious motivated violence.

7. Expanding My Bubble through Travel and Friendships

In this section, my personal narrative begins. I travelled to places and met with leading religious, academic and political leaders of all denominational backgrounds, that my parents could only vaguely have imagined from news or movies on TV. This was a major part of my formation.

I was raised in a Christian Reformed family during a period in which the old Reformed pillar crumbled and many orthodox Reformed, including my parents, sought salvation in a new orthodox Reformed pillar.

My family belonged to church of Rev. J.H. Velema. I attended his catechism classes where traditional Reformed faith was reinforced. We believed that what we were taught was the norm and that all other beliefs were deviations from the truth. This did not mean that other people were bad, but they lacked knowledge of the truth, and that necessitated evangelism and missionary work to bring them to the truth.

Israel's victory in the June 1967 war created in our Reformed bubble a euphoria that was seen as the hand of God restoring Israel, which was a sign that the arrival of the Messiah was nearby. The newly founded EO played a major role in this euphoria, presenting ancient and modern Israel as the people of God. My parents were among their first members and promoted membership to anyone in their Reformed Christian circle.

My father corresponded with and supported former Catholic priest Rev. H.J. Hegger, who represented all the values that were important to my father: an anti-Catholic conservative Reformed pastor who became one of the leading founders of EO and a leading opponent to liberalism. My father liked Hegger's critique on Kuitert without having read any of his books.

I started a newspaper collection about Dutch media reporting about Israel, which I maintained until after the October War in 1973. The collection shows an Arab–Israeli conflict with a decisively pro-Israel bias, characteristic of Dutch media reporting at the time.

The October War made me believe Israel needed support. That belief brought me in 1974 to Israel, where I further dug into faith issues, meeting Jews and Palestinians. My discovery of Christian Palestinians led to traveling around the Arab World and discovering ancient churches that struggle with the phenomenon of emigration; culminating in settling with my family in Egypt in 1994, focusing on Muslim–Christian relations.

I will describe how I continuously tried to make sense of conflicting opinions and beliefs through actively looking for people who were explicit exponents of such conflicting beliefs and befriending them. Bit by bit, my initial beliefs shattered, my bubble expanded, meeting a great variety of different believers, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, both orthodox and liberal, with people living their faith in sincerity and others using religion to justify certain behaviour to achieve certain interests. My initial convictions turned out to be naïve. I no longer see good and evil as spiritual powers outside us, but the consequence of choices we make that may positively or negatively affect others. Friendships resulted in asking more questions and more study and confronting friends with newly developed views, which brought me to the limits of what one can believe in good faith and what not.

My initial focus on Israel changed. Many members from my church had been called to missionary work; others had been called to serve Christian media or otherwise serve the Kingdom of God, and I felt the call to work for peacebuilding.

In December 1974, I became the leading founder of the Werkgroep Midden-Oosten (Middle East Study Group), which became a vehicle to meet interesting people on topics of interest, such as Prof. Oosterhoff. The choice of the name showed a wider interest than Israel alone.

In 1975, I travelled overland to Israel with the intention to meet as many Middle Eastern Christians as possible in Istanbul, Antakya, Syria, and Jordan. A new fascinating ancient world had opened to me. In Israel I met with Orthodox Jewish rabbi C.J. Auwendijk in Metula, on the border with Lebanon. He was armed with a rifle to protect himself and the area from marauding Palestinians, but also spoke about peace and God's promise of land to the Jews. Zionism was God's hand in history, and Palestinians, he believed, would have to accept that. I also met with Palestinian–Arab–Christian–Israeli Greek Catholic priest Elias Chacour [Shaqūr] (b. 1939), who also spoke about peace, yet addressing numerous injustices against Palestinians, both in the past and contemporarily. It seemed that God's hand in history was used to justify a turn in history that was favourable to one particular group.

Willem van 't Spijker (1926–2021), professor of church history at the Christian Reformed Theological University, saw my interest in Israel and Arab Christianity and advised me in 1976 to contact retired Dutch diplomat Daniel Van der Meulen (1894–1989) since he was a committed Reformed Christian, had a great interest in Arab Christianity, and believed in Muslim–Christian dialogue. Van der Meulen had served between 1915 and 1948 in the Netherlands Indies and Saudi Arabia and had an impressive network of leaders in the Arab World ([van der Meulen 1977](#)). Van der Meulen became the advisor of the Middle East Study Group and encouraged me to travel more and meet more people. I discussed the various study options with Daniel Van der Meulen, and given my interest in the position of Christians in the Muslim world, I chose development sociology at Leiden University.

Traveling and meeting people captivated me. In September 1976, I travelled over land to Athens and took the boat to Alexandria. I had no idea that my time on the ferry would open opportunities to meet with other youth. Coptic Evangelical youth Adel Soliman

Safangy invited me to stay with his family in Alexandria. Young Muslim Medhat Ismail [Midḥat Ismāʿīl] (1951–2023) invited me to stay with his family in Cairo. Both families became friends. Adel later emigrated to Canada, as so many educated young Copts have done. My first time in a Muslim family happened to be during Ramadan. It was a humanising experience, enjoying joys and sorrows together. The Muslim was no longer an abstract entity, but had obtained a human face.

In Cairo, I found a spiritual home in the Anglican Church, met with Christian missionaries, some focused on reaching out to the African refugee community, while others believed they had to reach out to Muslims. I understood their motives, although that was not the path I saw for my life. Egyptians I met were yearning for peace, not out of love for Israel, but with a widespread awareness that more wars would be disastrous for the country. I appreciated this sentiment that strengthened my desire to play a role in peacebuilding.

Van der Meulen introduced me to Egyptian sociologist Dr. El-Sayid Yassin [al-Sayyid Yāsīn] (1993–2017), who, between 1975 and 1995, was head of the influential Al-Ahram Institute of Strategic Studies. Al-Ahram newspaper in 2017 described him as “one of the most prominent and influential writers on Egyptian politics in the years prior to the 2011 revolution” (Al-Ahram 2017). That visit was eye opening. Yassin instructed a researcher at his centre to give me a first introduction to Egyptian society and politics.

Van der Meulen also introduced me to Dr. Piet Dirksen (1928–2022), a Dutch scholar at the time teaching Old Testament at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo (ETSC), who gave me an introduction to Egyptian Christianity.

In 1976–1977 I spent a year in Israel, first in Nes Ammim, Israel, established in 1963 to foster ties between Christians and Jews, and later kibbutz Ramat Hashovet, established on socialist grounds. I used my time in Israel to meet with many different people advocating dialogue and used information and connections to advocate peace building and dialogue through the Werkgroep Midden-Oosten.

At Leiden University, I pursued any subject I could find in the line of my interest, including Islam, comparative religion, and Middle Eastern Studies. Seeking dialogue and Christian commitment went hand in hand. I was active in church and the Christian student group *Ichthus*; and followed lectures in Reformational Philosophy with Prof. Dr. Sander Griffioen, addressing questions about the relation between science and faith. My work for the Middle East Study Group continued during my entire studies. My professors encouraged this engagement, and I was offered space at our faculty to host speakers and debates.

In November 1977, months after I started my study, President Anwar al-Sadat [al-Sādāt] made his historic visit to Jerusalem. I was elated and visited the Egyptian Embassy, where Deputy Ambassador Muḥammad Al-Ghaṭṭrīfī was open to meetings and questions and provided me with information about the peace process that Sadat’s visit had initiated. The Camp David Accords followed in 1978, and the Israeli–Egyptian peace was signed in 1979.

During my student days, I became a member of the ‘Anti-Revolutionaire Jongeren-studieclubs’ (Anti-Revolutionary Youth Study Clubs, ARJOS), the political youth movement of the Reformed ARP believing in political idealism rooted in Christian convictions. I rapidly became a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, in which I was for years the Middle East expert. I came to know several members of Parliament and saw the process of political negotiations about the merger between three confessional parties ARP, the CHU, and the KVP, into the centrist Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and believed, after initial hesitations this should make it possible for people leaning to the left and right to cooperate.

I was taught that the realisation of the current state of Israel was prophesied in the Old Testament or Torah. This belief was reinforced by the EO and numerous Christian pro-Israel advocates and groups. In the summer of 1981, I went to Israel with the purpose of speaking with Jews and Christians about these Biblical promises and learned about different interpretations of the Scriptures that mixed with political interests.

I visited Egypt every single year after my first visit, mingled with Egyptian youth, both Muslim and Christian, mostly stayed with Egyptian families, and found the country, its history, and its people fascinating. In 1981, I found a divided nation with Islamists clashing with Christians who expressed deep mistrust of their intentions and met with Coptic Orthodox Bishop Samuel (1920–1981), who asked me how these Muslim–Christian tensions were reported in the West. I was impressed by the bishop’s sincere wishes to live in harmony with Muslims in Egypt. A few weeks later, on October 6, Bishop Samuel was killed with President al-Sadat when they watched the annual military parade. I was devastated. The slayings made me more determined to focus on dialogue.

Another defining moment was the Turkish military coup d’état in 1980, which heralded a new exodus of Syrian Orthodox and Armenians from Eastern Turkey to Istanbul and Europe. Bert Dorenbos (b. 1942), director of EO from 1974 to 1987, was at the time deeply concerned about anti-Christian discrimination and persecution in Eastern Turkey and, around 1981–1982, formed a committee to study and publicise the plight of Armenian and Syrian Orthodox Christians in Eastern Turkey. His aim was political, pressuring Dutch politicians to facilitate the arrival and acceptance of Christians from Eastern Turkey in the Netherlands. One of the members of this committee was Dirkjan Groot, founding director of Dorcas, a Christian ministry established in 1980 that supports projects that uplift disadvantaged Christians around the world. I was asked to become the lead researcher for this committee since I was already known in various churches in the Netherlands for my work on Christians in the Middle East and was politically active in the CDJA. I contacted numerous organisations and experts, including Henk Glimmerveen (1923–2020), a leading human rights activist and authority on this subject at the time. I believed in providing humanitarian support, but had growing misgivings about the prejudices I found within my Christian friends about Muslims and Islam. I saw the influences of politics in both Turkey and the Netherlands on religion, and I no longer accepted to attribute the tensions in Turkey only to Muslims or Islam.

In 1982–1983, I spent an academic year on a field study of small farmers in a small Muslim village near Fariskur, Damietta [Dumiyāt], which interrupted the work of our committee.

I was used to attending church every Sunday. In Cairo, I had met with Coptic Orthodox Bishop Musa (b. 1938), consecrated in 1980 as the first Bishop of Youth, who told me of Father Boulos al-Hadidi [Būlus al-Hadīdī] (1935–2005) in Damietta, and decided to attend weekly services in his church in a city with only a small number of Christians. Regular meetings at his home about faith fascinated me because the Orthodox teaching was Bible-based, just as I had been taught in my Christian Reformed Church. Father Boulos’ explanation that Bible and tradition go hand in hand made sense to me. I found the history of the church in Egypt going back to the early church after Jesus’ life on earth fascinating.

I have met with many young Christians wanting to leave Egypt, and each time, they explained that they would have insufficient opportunities to advance in life if they remained in Egypt. Many also did not want to stay in a country where public life is fully dominated by Islam. Emigration motives were mostly economical since descending from a Christian lower- or middle-class family often would not help them to create a better life in Egypt, where being part of a well-to-do family helps to advance in life. Sadly, for many youths, the only way to migrate to the West was through claiming persecution and applying for asylum, resulting in numerous claims that were either exaggerated or not true, but it often worked in the West, where many people did not trust Islam. Many Christian persecution stories that I later investigated were deeply impacted by this mechanism.

I met with Dutch Jesuit priest Henk Van Ruijven, S.J. (1936–2004) who invited me for visits to different places in Egypt where the Catholic church was active, including Minia [Minyā], and introduced me to his fellow brother Frans Berkemeijer, S.J. (b. 1939), a strong advocate of dialogue, and Coptic Catholic Bishop Antonios Naguib [Najīb] of Minia (1935–2022). The bishop later became Patriarch and Cardinal and always remained supportive of the dialogue work I carried out in later years.

Fr. Henk treasured personal friendships, regardless of someone's religious or denominational affiliation, and showed that the needs of Muslims and Christians were not much different; both suffered from poor economic conditions, poor education, and poor medical circumstances. Fr. Henk was concerned with individual people, showed compassion, irrespective of their beliefs. He helped me a lot to gain an understanding for Egypt and Egyptians.

During this study year, Copts spoke a lot about the house arrest of Pope Shenouda III (1923–2012) in 1981. I befriended Dr. George Habib Bibawi [Ḥabīb Bibāwī] (1938–2021), professor of church history at the Coptic Orthodox Seminary, who was close to Fr. Matta al-Maskin [Mattā al-Miskīn], an influential church reformer in these days. Bibawi “accused Pope Shenouda of being ignorant of early church teachings and accused him of heresy” (Guirguis and van Doorn-Harder 2011, p. 186). Bibawi told me during these days that it was better Pope Shenouda had been removed from power since he saw him as a firebrand, who had used his position to push President al-Sadat into concessions for the church, but by doing so, had not only alienated the president, but also ruffled the feathers of many Muslims, which, in his view, was a major cause of the escalations into bloody collisions between Muslims and Christians. I felt sympathy for the positions of Fr. Matta al-Maskin and Dr. Bibawi, who argued for less political activism on the part of the head of their church and more separation between church and state since that would reduce tensions in society. However, I did not want to hear only stories critical of Pope Shenouda's handling of church-state relations, but to gather a different point of view.

I was told that, in the UK, an Anglican priest by the name of Fr. Dr. John Watson (1939–2014) had become extremely active in advocating for the release of Pope Shenouda, and I decided to visit him after my return to the Netherlands. Watson was adamant that no government should interfere in the internal policies of any church, and, thus, Pope Shenouda's monastic arrest was an anathema to him. Watson was an excellent and critical writer and used his access to the Archbishop of Canterbury to advocate for the release of Pope Shenouda, making him much loved by the Copts in the UK and the USA. We too became friends and frequently exchanged views about the church in Egypt. I tried to reconcile the opposing views about Pope Shenouda. Watson was an excellent sparring partner for this.

After my return to the Netherlands, I picked up work with the committee that resulted in a 205-page report on Christian minorities from Eastern Turkey, and was presented to the Dutch Parliament on 14 February 1984.

Work on the report made EO director Dorenbos instruct producer Pee Koelewijn to make a film about the last Armenians in Anatolia, Turkey with the intent to use this to lobby in Parliament to accept more Christian refugees from Turkey. I was unhappy about this production since I believed relevant context was left out for the sake of advocacy.

While the EO focused on persecution claims, I wanted to investigate opportunities to support the remaining Syrian Orthodox continue in their traditional homeland. My report to parliament was greatly appreciated by Syrian Orthodox Bishop Julius Yesu Çiçek (1942–2005), since 1979 Archbishop of Central Europe. For my wish to seek support for the church in Tur Abdin, he showed less interest. He once explained to Henk Glimmerveen and me how he was growing his diocese by encouraging Syrian Orthodox to leave Turkey for settlement in Europe. I found this to be a selfish attitude, which damaged the Tur Abdin church since his encouragements contributed to the dwindling of the local church.

My involvement with Christians from Turkey made me write my master's thesis under the supervision of Prof. Griffioen about factors leading up to the Armenian genocide in 1915 taking the lives of around 1.5 million people (Raheb 2021, pp. 65–72). I studied the growth of nationalism among Armenians, Turks, and other nations in the multi-religious and multi-linguistic Ottoman Empire, with foreign powers stirring up nationalist sentiments that aimed at weakening or destroying the Ottoman Empire. Both nationalist Armenians and nationalist Turks wanted to create national states dominated by one religious group, both claiming many of the same territories. This conflict had little to do with religious

convictions, but rather with ethnicity tied to language and culture and so breaking away from the Ottoman Empire. Armenian nationalists were in the majority deeply secular, not showing much interest in living a pious Christian life, but used the label of Christianity for a decisively political purpose.

My earlier experiences and thesis had altered my outlook on Christianity in the Muslim world, placing me in opposition to forms of nationalist ideologies in which ethnicity, linguistic identity, and religious heritage were fused to an extent that clashes with people with different nationalist and religious identities became inevitable.

My studies at Leiden University had broadening my view of the world in which I had grown up. My interest was to contribute to the perseverance of the church in the Arab World, and this continuation of the Christian presence needed, in my opinion, dialogue, education, and development, not only for Christians in the Arab World, but for all.

My study made me focus on empirical facts, intellectual trends, and the social relations between people, including the historical, political, cultural, religious, and economic aspects of societies, as well as social change, regardless of whether facts and analysis were convenient for particular groups or in line with prevalent convictions.

After I graduated in 1984, I went for Dutch Interchurch Aid to Tur Abdin in South-eastern Turkey, to describe the position of the local Syrian Orthodox Church and make inquiries on what could be done to help the church remain in Tur Abdin. I was welcomed by Syrian Orthodox Bishop Timotheos Samuel Aktash (b. 1945) in the fifth-century Monastery of Mor Gabriel. I loved to see the monks, the school with dedicated young Syrian Orthodox students participating in the liturgy. The bishop took me to beautiful villages with ancient churches. It deeply struck me that the bishop lamented the efforts of Bishop Çiçek to encourage Syrian Orthodox from Tur Abdin to move to Europe since this destroyed centuries-old local communities. The bishop had convinced me that if this community would disappear, that also their monasteries and churches would crumble.¹² Dutch Interchurch Aid supported the bishop's views and funded a second visit, leading me to Syrian Orthodox Bishop Yohanna Ibrahim [Yūḥannā Ibrāhīm] (b. 1948) of Aleppo and H.H. Patriarch Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas (1933–2014) in Damascus, who both deeply deplored the departure of Syrian Orthodox from Tur Abdin and supported efforts for a development project. Dutch Interchurch Aid was unable to obtain the needed funding, but the visits provided much information on the demographic decline of the Syrian Orthodox in Tur Abdin. Bishop Aktash did not give up and was able to find other support. Churches, monasteries, and houses have been renovated; development projects were initiated; and pilgrimages to the heartland of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Turkey are made, which kept the local church alive.¹³

Bishop Yohanna Ibrahim later spoke at the Apostolaat Oosterse Kerken (Apostolate Eastern Churches) in Tilburg, a Catholic organisation creating understanding for Eastern Orthodox churches, and argued that the future of the Syrian Orthodox Church lay in the Middle East, not in Europe nor North America. The Syrian Orthodox who had emigrated to Canada in the decades prior to the Second World War had disappeared in Canadian society, through mixed marriages and secularism. The current Syrian Orthodox Church in most Western countries consists mostly of first- and second-generation immigrants, with practically all priests coming from Tur Abdin and Syria. Since Europe and North America had become highly secularised, he did not believe the number of people being called to the priesthood would greatly increase in the West. Orthodox clergy in the West are making all efforts to maintain their communities, but it will not be easy. In the overwhelmingly Muslim Arab World, however, Christians are maintaining their own identity and culture in a region where they have been present since the early days of Christianity.

Syria and other Arab countries in the 1980s were ruled by authoritarian rulers who accepted religious diversity, as long this would not challenge their rule. No one could have expected at that time that the Egyptian Revolution of January 2011 would be followed by an uprising of Sunni Muslims against the Alawi-dominated rule in Syria. Syrian Christians became major victims in this civil war since they had supported the Alawi rule. Bishop

Yohanna was a true shepherd for his people and did not want to flee the violence of the civil war. I met the bishop again in 2012 at the opening of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) in Vienna, Austria. He believed he was still able and was obliged to talk with different warring parties to protect his own community as far as possible. Bishop Yohanna was not naïve, but followed what he believed was necessary for his church in Aleppo. Bishop Yohanna disappeared in 2013 while traveling with Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Boulos Yazigi [Būlus Yāzīgī] (b. 1959) of Aleppo to Latakia to negotiate the release of two kidnapped priests. No one knows which group kidnapped them on the road from Aleppo to Latakia. No one heard from them after this kidnapping. It is widely presumed they were killed, but nothing is certain. The destruction of Syria is a tragedy, but I do not think blaming Islam for the killings of Christians is right. Instead, this is a political conflict that uses religion to mobilise communities and justify violence. I am convinced that any religion can be used to encourage people to do good, but at the same time to commit horrendous crimes.

Exposure to the views of Syrian Orthodox and later other Christian leaders in the Middle East made me realize that I had to be cautious with claims of discrimination and persecution made by Christian migrants from the Middle East, and I understood that I should always verify such claims with information obtained from local leaders.

During my study year in Egypt, I had spoken to people about returning to Egypt for work with Coptic development projects through the Bishopric of Ecumenical and Social Services (BLESS). I met with Bishops Athanasius (1923–2000) and Marcos (b. 1944), but things were to change. President Mubarak released Pope Shenouda from his monastic arrest, who, in turn, relieved Bishop Athanasius of his position and consecrated Bishop Serapion as the head of BLESS, who discontinued the talks for my position at his bishopric. Bishop Athanasius had been one of the committee-of-five who ruled the Coptic Orthodox Church after President Anwar al-Sadat had sent Pope Shenouda in exile to the Monastery of Bishoi, which was seen by Pope Shenouda as disloyalty. It was years before the two church leaders were reconciled. With this change, it was impossible to obtain a position at BLESS.

In this period, I asked the church council of the Christian Reformed Church of Leiden for permission to become a member of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt since I had become deeply impressed by the church, many of its bishops, priests, and members. I was not intending to leave the Christian Reformed Churches, but wanted to be a member of both churches, one in the Netherlands and another in Egypt. It took months of discussions in both Egypt and the Netherlands. Coptic Orthodox Metropolitan Bishoi (1942–2018) of Damietta spoke about rebaptism, while I argued, in line with my upbringing, that there is only one baptism. I spoke about the procedures with Dr. Isaac Fanous [Fānūs] (1919–2007), the famous iconographer of the Coptic Orthodox Church, who introduced me to Fr. Antonios Amīn (1925–2007) of the St. Marcos Church in Cleopatra, Heliopolis, Cairo. Fr. Antonios asked for a letter from the Christian Reformed Church of Leiden stating that I was baptised with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by an ordained minister who was ordained through the laying on of hands and a prayer to receive the Holy Spirit. I travelled to the Netherlands, met with the church council and Rev. Gerard den Hertog (b. 1949), and obtained the needed letter. Fr. Antonios went with this letter to the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Abassiya [Abāssiya], Cairo, to ask permission to accept me as a member of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which they did, but I had to receive the Holy Mairun (oil) since this had not been administered to me in the Christian Reformed Church. Fr. Antonios anointed me with the Holy Mairun at the baptismal in his church, witnessed by my Dutch friend Eildert Mulder (b. 1949), after which he led the liturgy and preached about conversion in fact being a baptism. Bishop Musa was informed about this procedure, approved of it, and gave me the name ‘Brother Cornelis.’

There was no Coptic Orthodox Church in the Netherlands at the time, and becoming a member of both churches did not come up in discussion in Egypt. With the establishment of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the Netherlands in 1985, however, some members claimed

that a dual membership of two different churches in one country was not possible. Bishop Marcos of France (1923–2008), the first European to be consecrated bishop in the Coptic Orthodox Church,¹⁴ knew of my dual membership and asked me to join monastic life, seeing in me a potential successor to his bishopric in France. We both knew only Pope Shenouda could make that decision, but since most members in his diocese were non-Egyptian, it would be hard for an Egyptian to succeed him. I appreciated his trust in me, but declined (Hulsman 2008). I had come to see myself as ecumenical, being a link between the Coptic Orthodox Church and people coming from different traditions, but not in the position of a cleric.

I had applied in October 1986 for the position of director of the Christelijke Emigratie Centrale (Christian Emigration Centre). Most members of the board were affiliated with the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP), and after the merger with two other Christian parties to the CDA, were actively involved in this political party. Reformed ARP politician Wil Albeda (1925–2014) had played a major role in the formation of the CDA and believed during his term as Minister of Social Affairs in 1977–1981 that providing emigration consultancy based on religion belonged to the past.

During my tenure as the last director of the Christian Emigration Centre, I carried out several tasks: providing potential Dutch emigrants with information, advice, and referrals to relevant institutions about and in different emigration countries; working on my international church network for emigration; initiating exchanges with young people from Dutch emigrant communities abroad; starting a program to facilitate the emigration of refugees; building relationships with different embassies. I used my contacts with journalists for media publications, lobbied with other Dutch emigration centres at the Dutch Parliament, began documenting the history of the Christian Emigration Centre in a book, and arranged for the archives of the Christian Emigration Centre to be transferred to the Historisch Documentatiecentrum (Historical Documentation Centre of Dutch Protestantism) at the Free University Amsterdam (de Wit 1993).

Instead of the centre simply being abolished, we reached a compromise with the Ministry of Social Affairs to merge the four emigration centres in 1991 in the Nederlands Migratie Instituut (Netherlands Migration Institute, NMI), with the added task of remigration of migrant workers who wanted to return voluntarily to their home countries. I suggested to set up the Stichting Dienstverlening Emigratie Nederland (Netherlands Emigration Foundation), providing paid emigration services to make it self-sustainable and became its director, starting on 1 January 1994. The Netherlands Migration Institute abolished its emigration consultancy activities and thereafter only focused on remigration. It was hard work, but my interest in contributing to dialogue in Egypt had the overhand.

8. Working in Egypt: Addressing Politically Motivated Images of Muslim–Christian Relations

During my time in the Dutch emigration service, I frequently travelled to Egypt and promoted in the Netherlands knowledge about the church in Egypt and seeking support for Egypt's poorest Christians. During my travels I came to know Sawsan. We married in Egypt in 1988 after which she came to the Netherlands where we got three children (in 1998 our fourth child was born in Egypt).

In the summer of 1994, Jos M. Strengtholt (b. 1959), a well-known Dutch freelance correspondent for different Christian media in Egypt since 1988, asked me if I could take over his function since he would leave Egypt. I liked the idea of working for Christian media since that would enable me to focus on the position of Christians in Egypt and surrounding countries and engage in dialogue with the purpose of playing a role in reducing Christians leaving Egypt and the Arab World. I believed, at the time, this opportunity to return to Egypt was a call of God.

The editors of the EO, TROS Television Radio Broadcasting Foundation, and RD Jos worked for told me they did not want a time lapse between his departure and my arrival. I would have to be in Egypt by 1 October 1994. This afforded me very little preparation time

indeed. My announcement to resign as director of the Netherlands Emigration Foundation came as a shock to the board and staff. The experience with emigration consultancy, political lobby work, and fundraising turned out to be an excellent preparation for the uncertainties I would later face in Egypt.

I also worked with the *Katholiek Weekblad* (Catholic Weekly), *News Network International* (later succeeded by *Compass Direct*) and *Christianity Today* in the USA. The focus of my media reporting was on Christians living in a predominantly Muslim society. It became a period of growing dissatisfaction with American Coptic political activists attributing social ills and tensions to Islam and (Islamist) Muslims that found its way in many Western Christian organisations and media and fuelled Islamophobia.

Fr. Henk Van Ruijven, S.J. introduced me to Fr. Dr. Christiaan Van Nispen, S.J. (1938–2016), a major figure in Muslim-Christian dialogue, who, in turn, introduced me to his friend Dr. Abdel Mo'ti Bayoumi [Abdel Mu'ti Bayūmī] (1940–2012), former Dean of the Uṣūl el-Dīn (i.e., core Islamic theology) college at the prestigious al-Azhar University. I wanted to focus on empirical facts. What was true in the stories people told me and what was fabricated or merely perceived but factually untrue? Van Nispen explained the importance of gaining understanding by asking open questions in personal friendships with Muslims ([van Nispen tot Sevenaer 2006](#)).

A few years after my family had moved to Egypt, the EO decided to end work with correspondents in the Arab World. Working for them was my main source of income, which led to a financially difficult period that prompted me to look for other sources of income. During this period Dirkjan Groot of Dorcas asked me if I would investigate the persecution of Christians in Egypt and report back to Dorcas, as this would help Dorcas conduct a fundraiser for persecuted Christians in Egypt. Dorcas would pay for this work. I asked if I would be permitted to write about the wider context and show nuances, but Dirkjan did not want nuance because that would not help his advocacy and fundraising activities. I declined.

In 1995, the Dutch Christian organisation Open Doors asked me to investigate the stories of Christian human rights lawyer, Morris Sadek [Maurice Ṣādiq] (b. 1942) about Christian girls in Egypt being kidnapped by Muslims and being forced to convert to Islam. Initial relations with Morris Sadek were good, and his stories sounded convincing, but, as time elapsed, I learned that Ṣadek met in most cases with fathers and brothers of converted girls in his office in Shubra, Cairo, and never made the effort to visit families on location to discover the various factors that led to conversions. I spent over one year working on this report. I wanted to understand the facts and learned through lots of interviews and discussing results with church leaders how complex reasons leading to conversions can be. Gradually, I discovered that for Morris Sadek, truth was subordinate to his belief that no Christian should ever convert to Islam, and when this happened, it always had to be the result of Muslim pressure or deception. I was surprised that Coptic activists, just like Sadek, were not at all interested in any background information, but continued in their belief that screaming “murder” would be the best way to stop or at least reduce the number of conversions to Islam taking place. My wife Sawsan played a significant role in this research, helping me to understand stories told in the wider Egyptian cultural context and receiving people for interviews at home.

Open Doors introduced me in 1996 to Fieldstead and Company, the organisation of the wealthy Ahmanson family founded in Orange County, California, USA. They had been funding *News Network International* before it collapsed and were interested in my work on conversions of Christian girls in Egypt to Islam.

Roberta Green Ahmanson told me she wanted to replace *News Network International* which had a focus on religious freedom in general, by a new organisation that would exclusively focus on persecution of Christians. This became the start of *Compass Direct*, co-funded by both Fieldstead and Company and Open Doors.

I did not agree with the exclusive focus on the persecution of Christians. The Ahmansons were citing sources of Christian persecution based on information provided by Coptic

activists and in the media, while I was speaking from personal experiences and research in Egypt that did not match those sources. Despite our differences, the Ahmanson's and their staff remained extremely courteous.

Much of their information at this time came from Dr. Paul Marshall, who had previously worked with Dr. Griffioen at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto where Marshall was still based. Marshall at that time was working with Lela Gilbert on his book *Their Blood Cries Out: The Untold Story of Persecution Against Christians* (Marshall and Gilbert 1997). Fieldstead and Company provided a supportive environment for Marshall's work. The book, dealing with many different countries, including Egypt, was mainly based on the work of advocacy organisations, media reporting and advocates and experts from around the world that told a particular narrative about Christians and persecution (Marshall and Gilbert 1997, pp. xvii–xix) but not fieldwork. Marshall had, at the time, never visited Egypt, and, thus, his sources about Egypt were all second hand. The book became a best seller and a source of information for many people.

After visiting Orange County, the Ahmansons flew me to Washington, DC, where they had arranged my stay in the Willard Intercontinental Hotel near Capitol Hill and the White House and arranged meetings with some congressional staffers about preparations in the House of Representatives for what later became the International Religious Freedom Act (1998). Just as my contact person at Open Doors had done before I left for the USA, inquiries were made if I could testify in Congress about the persecution of Christians in Egypt. However, those responsible first needed to be sure I would present a view in agreement with their perspective. I was well received, but I was not comfortable with their line of thinking in lobbying for the International Religious Freedom Act. After I had returned to Egypt, I expressed reservations about this act in various articles.

In my estimation, a significant number of individuals and organizations involved with lobbying on behalf of the International Religious Freedom Act (1998) were at least partially driven by a Christian missionary agenda. As a Christian, I did not oppose Christian mission work, but I believed that it was important to provide a balanced view of the complex situations faced by Christian minorities in the Middle East.

Later, in 1996, I met with Open Doors founder Anne Van der Bijl (also known as Brother Andrew, 1928–2022) and told him that of course I wanted to support persecuted Christians and advocate human rights, but believed this had to be in the context of a better understanding of Muslim–Christian relations, including systematically following Egyptian media reporting about Christians in Egypt, engaging with Muslims and learn of their views about Christians, which later turned into a database. Anne Van der Bijl welcomed my aspirations and described this work as God's calling for me.

Lutheran pastor and scholar of Coptic Church history Otto Meinardus, used to visit Egypt regularly to maintain his connections with Coptic Orthodox Church leaders and collect data for new articles and books. During each visit, I helped him as he gave me great insights into understanding the Egyptian Church and its traditions. Beliefs that I initially thought were certainties began to waver. He showed me how traditions were not as fixed as I initially believed, but changed over the generations under the influence of interests, struggles or other factors.

Meinardus explained the difference between popular faith and official faith. Popular faith tends to be syncretistic. One can see this, for example, in Egypt in the similarities between the celebration of saints in the Coptic Orthodox Church and Muslim Sufis. Official faith, however, is what is taught by the clergy or other experts in a particular religion and is shielded by canonical religious texts (Meinardus 2002).

Part of Coptic Orthodox faith is the widespread belief in miracles. Some have been officially sanctioned, such as the miraculous displacement of the Muqattam Mountains during the reign of Pope Abraham (between 975 and 978 A.D.); other miracle stories belong to the realm of popular faith, such as the apparition of the Blessed Virgin in 1997 in Shentena al-Hagar, which lasted a few weeks and attracted about 150,000 people at that time. My wife and I were among them. I could not believe the light flashes we saw were apparitions

of the Holy Virgin as local people believed. This experience made me more cautious of miracle stories.

Religious images are not harmless. In tensions between Christians and Muslims, religious images can develop into a stream of poisonous lies, embellishments, and accusations, often published in the Western press that I have resisted since I arrived in Egypt in 1994. That resistance also resulted in threats of those who had created those images (Mulder 2006).

I have had numerous discussions with clergy and scholars about the Coptic Orthodox Sunday School Movement, a revival that began in the 1930s and was much opposed by the Orthodox bishops of the time.

Reformers knew they only could change the church from within through monastic life. Reformers became monks, later bishops and with Pope Shenouda the first Sunday School reformer had become pope which resulted in consecrating bishops in line with his thoughts each time an old bishop had passed away. Reformers also clashed as we have seen in literature between Fr. Matta al-Maskin and Pope Shenouda neither of the parties thought of either leaving the church or expelling the other party from church which is related to the principle of accepting authority since authority comes from God (Mamdūh 2009).

In 1999, I was asked to write a chapter for a book about the Coptic Orthodox Holy Family tradition (Gabra 2001). It enabled me to delve into the traditions of this ancient church and showed how stories of an ancient and more recent past are created and become relevant in the lives of people who believe in them. It became a confrontation between actual historical facts and wishful thinking and a desired to offer local Christians something to hold onto. Some bishops, including Bishop Dimitrius (b. 1948) of Malawi, insisted that Jesus had actually visited specific locations in Egypt while other bishops did not deny the tradition, but their faith was not tied to the belief that this tradition presented historical facts. Bishop Dimitrius' repeated statements claiming certainty where I saw none created in me more and more doubts about absolute truths.

Income from journalism had severely dropped, yet I stubbornly refused to give up the mission I had started. In June 2000, economic problems and extreme work pressures led me to a severe form of pulmonary embolism that brought me very close to death with my wife wishing return to the Netherlands. Yet, after recovery I was asked to teach mass communication at the American University in Cairo which gave new hope that I could continue my mission. Kerk in Actie (Church in Action) gave an extra push to remain working in Egypt, helping us to form an Egyptian NGO and a company fostering mutual intercultural and interreligious understanding through building a database in Egypt. Not long after German NGOs Missio and Misereor joined in supporting this work. Various reports I worked on showed how social problems, cultural factors such as honour and shame, weak government policies but also religion contributed to the complex relationships and tensions between Muslims and Christians. Gradually I became convinced that there is no "good" or "bad": to understand how interreligious tensions can grow and develop, we must instead pay attention to events and understand the interconnection between social and political factors.

The book about the Coptic Orthodox Holy Family tradition brought me in December 2002 in contact with Dr. Willem Kuiper, at the time assistant professor of Medieval Dutch Literature at the University of Amsterdam who had found a reference to *De Goede Hof* (The Good Garden) in *Der leken spiegel* (The Mirror for Lay People), an encyclopaedia written by Jan Van Boendale (ca. 1279–1350 CE) but was uncertain about its location in Egypt. I recognised in the description the garden around the tree of the Holy Family in Mattariya, once part of the ancient city of Heliopolis and today part of northern Cairo. Kuiper used my information for his article about *De Goede Hof* (Kuiper 2003). Kuiper explained that in understanding the development of Christianity in Europe we need to understand that in "late antiquity and Medieval times texts are not "descriptive" in the sense that they describe an "actual truth" but "normative": they describe a higher truth, whereby older and well-known texts served as models to steer an intended reception. Reading these text as "actual truths," as has been done by orthodox believers since the Reformation, is resulting

in gross misunderstandings. Literature, both worldly and spiritual, is not of all times, but tied to time and place.”¹⁵ Kuiper’s approach helped me in understanding debates about Christian-Muslim relations since orthodox Christian and Muslim believers so often refer back to their own textual heritage. The Bible, Qur’an and other holy books I came to understand as scriptures that are written by people who saw God’s hand in personal experiences and circumstances around them. The texts interact with human feelings such as love, anger, fear and hope that are perennial. Authors have been influenced by literature preceding them even though we may no longer have access to many of these texts from antiquity and the beliefs and circumstances of their times. Scriptural texts were also often influenced by the political circumstances that shaped their context. This suggests that what is written in the holy books is partly related to time and place and partly is wisdom literature that helps us deal with various issues that arise in daily life.

Our book on the Holy Family led me to the study of Egyptian locations mentioned in the Bible. In 2007–2008 Egyptologist Dr. Lutfy Sherif [Luṭfi Sharīf] drew my attention to the book, *Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times* (Redford 1992). Redford showed that Biblical history and the historical/archaeological records often do not match. This did not match with my faith of God inspiring the various Bible authors. If the text was divinely inspired, how could it contain texts that were in violation with the historical/archaeological records?

Not all people I came in contact with agreed to my changing views on scriptures. American editor Rick Anderson took the text of the Bible “as absolutely true” and “the infallible word of God.” At the time, I corresponded with Dr. Larry Levine, an Orthodox Jew teaching mathematics at Stevens Institute of Technology, New York. Both believed that God is a God of miracles. If the archaeological and historical records do not match with the text, then the text is right, and we must seek for explanations that leave no doubt to the historical accuracy of the text (Anderson 2003). I came from a similar faith tradition, but the ease of various religious leaders to manipulate factual truths led me to stop believing in the absolute certainties that so many Orthodox had taught. My focus shifted from discussions of increasingly elusive certainties to a focus on living together.

Another way to address misunderstandings that can evolve into tensions is to listen to the wisdom we find in other religions and cultures. Egyptian philosopher and former minister Hamdi Zaqqouq [Ḥamdī Zaqqūq] (1933–2020), whom I have met on several occasions, stated that since we live in a very diverse world, it is of paramount importance that we can relate to others who are different from us and compared humanity to sailors on a ship. “We must cooperate in order to sail the ship into a safe harbour. Humanity must cooperate if we want to keep earth inhabitable for our children and grandchildren” (Ṣalāḥ 2004).

Since 1997 my wife and I have worked on building a database about the role of religion in Egyptian society resulting in the foundation of Centre for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation company (CIDT) in 2005. This attracted the attention of Prof. Andreas van Agt (b. 1931), Prime Minister of the Netherlands, 1977–1982, who visited Egypt in 2006 and lectured at different universities and the Lions Club about dialogue, met with Egypt’s Minister of Foreign Affairs and the head of the Arab League and each time underlining the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. The European funded Anna Lindh Foundation financed improvements to our database with a network with similar minded organisations in Europe and the Arab World which was launched by HRH Prince El-Hassan Bin-Ṭalāl in Amman, Jordan, 2008, who describe the database as a “vector for change” (El-Hassan Bin-Ṭalāl 2008).

In 2007 the Egyptian NGO Centre for Arab-West Understanding (CAWU) was founded by leading representatives of all churches and the Azhar as well as a number of influential scholars and media representatives¹⁶ and became the vehicle of student internships, Egyptian and non-Egyptian, Muslim, Christian, secular or whatever religion students adhered to. Between 2008 and 2022, CAWU hosted 427 student interns, who contributed in various ways, for periods ranging from one to twelve months, to interreligious dialogue that was reflected in numerous reports in the *Arab-West Report* database that my successor

Dr. Matthew Anderson in 2022 renamed Dialogue Across Borders; Emerging Perspective on Intercultural and Interreligious relations.

CAWU's contribution has been unique in that it has maintained good relations with all Egyptian religious institutions while remaining independent of each. Until 2011 CAWU was probably the only Egyptian organisation with such a wide diversity of leading religious representatives. This changed with the formation of the Bayt al-Ayla (House of the Family) after a terrible bomb attack on worshippers of the Two Saints Church in Alexandria on 1 January 2011 that claimed the lives of 23 people and injured 97 people. Each of the churches and al-Azhar that participate in Bayt al-Ayla has its own dialogue activities, either self-funded or through own fundraising. Representatives represent their religious institution and are bound by the beliefs and policies of their institutions. That makes Bayt al-Ayla different from CAWU. Bayt al-Ayla has grown out to be a major and influential centre for interreligious dialogue in Egypt. Sadly, Bay al-Ayla is not well known outside Egypt.

Egypt experienced great instability in the years 2011–2014 when Islamists were striving for power and later pushed into the margins. This period made them visible and accessible which gave us unique opportunities to interview also radical Jihadi Salafis and in 2014 we even had the spokesperson of Bin-Laden's al-Qaida visit our office and meet with our students. He wanted to talk, and I had prepared our students: ask 'why' questions but do not engage in argumentations about what in his statements is true or not. These radical Islamists presented Islam as the victim of Western powers. These meetings were lessons to us but of course we should not expect change in one meeting but every opportunity to meet people radically different from us should be taken.

In 2020 Egyptian student intern Nour Saad, a graduate of the 'Deutsche Evangelische Oberschule' (DEO, German Evangelical High School) and student in Germany, interned at CAWU resulting in a paper of religious education at the DEO during which students in the last two school years follow cooperative religious education, whereby Christian students learn to understand the religious language of Muslim students and vice versa. When this initiative started Egyptian educational authorities responded with hesitation. In 2020 the Ministry of Education announced the introduction of subject of ethics and principles in Egyptian schools. This is clear proof, Nour Saad concludes, that progress in the field of interreligious education in Egypt is made which gives hope for the future (Saad 2020).

9. Conclusions

The research question we sought to answer with this paper concerns how we can contribute to interreligious dialogue by seeing the world from different points of view. At the same time, the paper tried to explain how this has influenced my faith in the context of the differences between religious orthodoxy and religious liberalism, intertwined with political influences in Dutch, Israeli and Egyptian cultures, deeply influenced by Abrahamic beliefs. Since World War II, American Evangelical influences aimed to strengthen Orthodox Christianity in the Netherlands and Egypt, as well as the State of Israel, believing that this was "God's will," often merging with Islamophobic prejudices.

The paper argues that interreligious dialogue should not only concern members of different religions, but also orthodox and religious liberalism. The paper concludes that deeply held beliefs about one's own truth are linked to an absence of awareness of the broader historical context, the positions of the parties involved and their beliefs, understanding that these are not static, but dynamic and constantly changing over time.

Both literature and personal narratives show a strong intertwining of religion and politics through ideologically driven institutions and media that aim to promote the interests of their own social bubble with associated stories and myths. The conclusion is that interreligious dialogue should strive to separate myth from factual truth, which is far from easy because of the various interests involved.

Evidence in the literature and personal narratives also show people's personal social bubbles can expand through personal friendships across religious borders, in which personal faith can be questioned. The personal narrative adds the importance of having

one or more long-term personal mentors in interreligious dialogue, providing guidance, connections, and encouragements. A pluralist attitude can contribute to promoting the common good that, in turn, needs interreligious dialogue to build bridges of understanding and create social and political solidarity that is needed to address world-encompassing issues that keep our earth inhabitable for our children and grandchildren.

There is also a need to offer students opportunities to expand their understanding of different religious beliefs with tutors who can introduce them to widely different believers living in circumstances that contrast with their own experiences. The student interns the author has worked with were given the opportunity to actively engage in activities and share their experiences with others through contributions to the *Arab-West Report/Dialogue Across Borders* database.

Further research could be conducted on separating myth from factual truth in reporting about interreligious relations, the interaction between religion and politics, and other authentic dialogue experiences. How can a better understanding of the relationship between religion and politics be communicated to committed orthodox Jews and Muslims and temper the religious angle in the political conflict between Israel and Palestinians? How often do serious approaches to interreligious dialogue lead to a more liberal understanding of faith? What other factors may play a role in such an outcome? Why do some people retain their original beliefs more or less?

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Notes

¹ <https://www.nederlandse-geloofsbelijdenis.nl/artikel-36> (accessed on 17 May 2023).

² Zeeuws Archief, Nederduits-Gereformeerde kerk (Dutch Reformed Church), <https://www.zeeuwsarchief.nl/zoekgids/nederduits-gereformeerde-kerk/> (accessed on 8 April 2023).

³ <https://www.icscanada.edu/about/our-story> (accessed on 20 May 2023).

⁴ <https://www.bewaarhetpand.nl/> (accessed on 27 May 2023).

⁵ Sander Griffioen. Email to author 28 April 2023. Eildert Mulder states the orthodox Reformed tend to ignore Kuitert, conversation with author 5 May 2023.

⁶ The author participated between October 2021 and September 2023 in regular Zoom meetings with rabbi Moshe Peleg.

⁷ <https://youtu.be/vgmBLSfqX9I> and <https://aish.com/rational-approach-to-divine-origin-of-judaism/> (accessed on 20 May 2023). Many more examples of orthodox Rabbis giving their proof exist.

⁸ Helmut Spehl, Lion Wagenaar zum Gedächtnis ([arendt-art.de](https://www.arendt-art.de)) (accessed on 26 May 2023).

⁹ https://www.arendt-art.de/deutsch/palestina/Shahak/israel_shahak_prof_helmut_spehl_ueber_helmut_spehl.htm (accessed on 26 May 2023).

¹⁰ <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/about/> (accessed on 11 May 2023).

¹¹ In none of the publications of the *American Coptic Association* one finds any convincing evidence for their population claims. One finds, however, much distrust of government sources. Correspondence with founder Dr. Shawky Karas between 1983 and 1991 did not lead to any evidence either.

¹² I have several letters of the bishop in my files.

¹³ Archbishop Polycarpus Augin Aydin, 2022. Email to author 16 December.

¹⁴ <https://orientale-lumen.blogspot.com/2008/07/repose-of-metropolitan-abba-marcos.html> (accessed on 27 May 2023).

¹⁵ Willem Kuiper. 2022. Email to author 28 November. Translation of the quote in Dutch by the author.

¹⁶ <https://cawu.org/founders> (accessed on 7 June 2023).

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