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BOOK REVIEW

Young Muslims and Christians in a Secular Europe: Pursuing Religious Commitment in the Netherlands, by Daan Beekers, London, Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2021, xi + 226 pp., \$108 (Hardback), ISBN 976 1 350 12731 9

In the past few decades, empirical youth research has gained more interest among scholars of religion. Overall transformations like secularization, religious and secular pluralization, individualization, social-media communication, continued generations of new religions and of religions through migration find the interest of sociology, anthropology of religion, and religious education with a focus on the lives of young adults. Beekers' anthropological post-doctoral research was conducted in the Netherlands with highly educated, young Christian and Muslim urban adults from the ages of 18–28. This research adds a cross-religious perspective, a comparative anthropology of Christians and Muslims, so to say, to the mostly intrareligiously focused anthropology of Christianity and anthropology of Islam.

Departing from portraying Christianity as a majority religion and approaching Islam as a religion that arrived in the Netherlands through migration, Beekers' work looks for commonalities in the way highly religiously committed young adults respond to a secular society. Therefore, the author chooses to focus on revivalist, fundamentalist, and radical groups: evangelical Protestant Christians and Salafi and similarly oriented Sunni Muslims. He expects to find the tensest relations between these groups and the pluralist society in which they live and wants to understand their 'fervor' of commitment, which is prominently portrayed in Dutch media (6). As his aim is cross-religious and, in that sense, comparative, Beeker makes a strong argument for the analysis of the plural dynamics within both worldviews and everyday life. His point of departure is a versed depiction of the Dutch societal and political discourse of church-state separation, Islamophobia, alongside simultaneous strong, liberal self-representation.

The research was conducted in Rotterdam and the Hague during 2009–2012. Beekers' methods consisted of a focus group and conducting interviews to focused on everyday life within a consumer-culture framing, accompanied by participant observation in a variety of circumstances, like communal and private meetings and religious classes and gatherings. These events took place in cafes, mosques, churches, universities, and student associations. From a comparative perspective, the chapters examine how these young adults came to such an intense commitment to God (chapter 2); how they perform this commitment on a more individual level (chapter 3); why the support of social relations at mostly pedagogical meetings matters so much (chapter 4); how they prevail against the acceleration of work life and consumer culture (chapter 5) and distracting media consumption (chapter 6); and ending the book with a summarizing conclusion.

In engagement with recent literature on the general transformation of religion since the 1970s, Beekers makes a strong argument that subordination under the will of God is deliberately chosen with the typical late modern emphasis that this is the only way that devotion is, and not simply feels, 'true.' Despite constating a tension between the poles of autonomy and heteronomy or choosing alternative conceptions of liberal freedom and agency, Beekers stresses that a good part of the moral work in the respective groups is about integrating the two poles of self-determination on the one side and bonding with a determining other on the other side. Central for that is the convergence of an ethics of submission and an ethics of

authenticity. At the bottom of ‘doing God’s will’ lies the renunciation of one’s own desires by sincerely scrutinizing the desires of the self and relying on an external being. This orientation distinguishes this approach from other forms of self-fulfillment that do not refer to a higher being. One main difference between the evangelical Christian and Salafi youth is the latter’s confrontation with a negative societal view of Islam as violent and intolerant. Nevertheless, according to Beekers’ field, the young-adult life phase and social networks are still more important determinants of why some of them become dedicated to their religion. A challenge for both groups is the surrounding consumer culture and demanding workplaces they are actively part of. It is constant work to recognize and follow God’s will, which makes their piety highly reflexive. The moral-religious work is continuous for both groups, even when Christians may stress that redemption through Christ already liberates them in the present time.

By choosing revivalist groups, the research is interested in the ‘imperfect achievement of religious ideals’ in everyday lives and within the secular surroundings (22). Revivalism emphasizes an unreachable ideal of putting religion above all in life, giving it top priority. The author is interested in that constant failure and imperfection because, through this experience, the faith of the youth turns vulnerable, what Beekers calls ‘precarious piety’ (174–179). This precarity triggers a bundle of coping practices. The search for networks—as places of reaffirmation and spaces of performing the reflexivity of devotion—has to be understood in the context of these challenges presented by contemporary culture. Toward this background, it is understandable that the main benefit young people gain from prayer and other religious practices is not a closeness to God, but rather the feelings of tranquility and peace.

One of the results of the book is insight into how strongly faith and practice are grounded on the individual level (‘means, method, and methodological ground of their submission centered largely on the self (92)’). Even if social networks matter, self-scrutinizing and sincerity toward oneself make up a more relevant part of the practice of the young adults in Beekers’ study and are interpreted in terms of the late modern elements of their faith. Faith communities come into play as reaffirmation against the doubts induced by cultural pluralism and—a bit more on the Salafi side—also as pedagogical empowerment and transfer of ‘authoritative’ knowledge by experts that often stand outside the ‘classical’ mosque institution.

The degree of self-relativizing might be stronger with the Christians within the sample. But Beekers offers as an explanation that most of them moved from small villages to urban, pluralist surroundings for their studies, and only then was their faith questioned by the new worldview of pluralism, which was only fictive before. What follows can be ‘disambiguating moves’, like emphasizing Christ’s salvific sacrifice against relativistic experiences (22). Understood in this way, if the individual is accepted as the person s/he is, the individual is discharged from striving for salvation. Beekers convincingly shows how doubt, like imperfection, functions as a trope that can vitalize and invigorate an individual’s commitment and lead to the search for reaffirmation in pedagogical contexts.

One would be remiss in overlooking the in-depth remarks on interview and focus-group evaluation methods. The book proceeds by illustrating, differentiating, and opposing the findings to present research positions with citations from the interviews, a focus group meeting, and field notes of sceneries and performances. The decision to take this approach and the comparison between the two devotee groups that runs through every chapter not only make a very readable book, but also a book that gives a solid insight of emic discourses as well as an excellent overview of connecting discourses within the field of religion and youth research. At the same time, this methodological decision to embed the research into a prefigured research discourse of late modernity theories instead of a more grounded approach

potentially obscures developments within that generation. Acceleration processes, search for authenticity, expressive individualism, and so on are presupposed as anchors of interpretation.

There are remarkable passages where more ambiguous or ambivalent conclusions are drawn from the empirical material. For example, Beekers opposes the ‘heretical imperative’ of religious choice, as put forth by both Peter Berger and Charles Taylor—who are leading references—because his informants are brought up in religious families. Thus, he concludes, other ‘spiritualities’ are not a real choice for his informants. More than religiously plural options, it is the distractions of media, consumer culture, the workplace, and the routine of everyday life that challenge their religious commitment. A traditional lifestyle is the outcome of that struggle yet, this time, not in a prior form, but rather the result of a ‘free’ submission to God’s will. It in those passages where Beekers delves into these religious discourses of his informants that this work is at its most revealing and instructive.

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