

**Speech given by Minister Van der Hoeven
School of Advanced International Studies
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(alleen het gesproken woord geldt)

Ladies and gentlemen,

The focus of this lecture, **Religion, Education and the State**, prompts me to reflect on three important aspects of our existence. All three have been, and still are, important in my own private and professional life. First, I am a religious person. Second, I have worked in education and as a representative in my local government and in parliament. Today, I stand before you as a representative of the Dutch government.

However, more than my own identity resonates in this discussion. Each dimension – Religion, Education, and The State - warrants special merit, and each can be viewed separately. Yet, religion, education and the democratic state, are also intertwined and represent a tether to which society is attached. If the tether breaks, we risk falling into a pit of emptiness, ignorance and chaos. The importance of both religion and the State are broadly acknowledged, as is their separation. Today I would like to emphasize the importance of the third thread, the academy and its freedom.

My Dutch background, rooted in a Western European tradition, animates my thoughts today. My perception of religion, education and the state, has been nourished and shaped by that tradition. A tradition in which organised Christianity, the education system and the state, slowly evolved from overlapping circles into systems with their own

dynamics, rules and, in great measure, goals. Until recently Bologna was more or less the undisputed first modern university. But two years ago the Dean of Maastricht University disputed this countering that the University of Padua is the real starting point of the modern university. At Bologna, both government and church influenced the university's community, whereas professors at Padua could lecture free from both. The Maastricht Dean chooses academic freedom as the starting point of, and the fundamental identity for, the modern university. You might say that academic freedom, sometimes more legend than reality, remains the cornerstone of higher education.

We can safely say that all European countries – each in its own way – have succeeded in making a clear distinction between religion, education and the state. But we must also acknowledge that the relationship between the three has been dynamic, tense, and sometimes strained. In the Netherlands, this tension can be felt whenever Article 23 of the Constitution comes up for discussion. It provides for freedom of education and, in a way, is one of the most radical in the world. Not only does it allow parents to found their own schools in accordance with their own religious beliefs, it also obliges the state to fund these schools the same way it funds public education. The schools in their turn – through their governing boards -- must meet all the criteria the government sets to ensure the highest quality.

Organisations such as governing boards of schools are essential. Even if the government wanted to provide every public service, it would be unable to do so. It is therefore important that people, communities, take the initiative. Assuming responsibility for providing public services is extremely satisfying. It gives a sense of ownership and engagement with others.

While shaping your own community is a challenge, we cannot ignore the fact that people, citizens sustain society. Citizens, working with and through their organisations, can be the partners governments desperately need for their policies to succeed.

In short: strong people-to-people links are the cement of society. This is especially true in education, which must reflect the diversity of the greater European society. While some claim it to be a source of weakness, Europe's diversity is, in my mind, the source of its power. Just as America's diversity and its ability to assimilate new groups – often with differing views and practices -- is a source of its strength, so too, must it be for Europe.

Some claim that freedom of education in the Netherlands is nothing more than a celebration of individual freedom. That is not true. Our goal is to strike a balance between individual freedom and universal incentives to foster a sense of community for all schools. We have set attainment targets and examination requirements, and inspect and identify

underperforming schools, but we also expect accountability from all schools. Religious schools are not excluded! Granted, this process is sensitive, but it strives to balance freedom of religion and education with the government's legitimate concern about teaching children.

Parents, religious organisations and the government know that education is the key to children's development. Education transmits skills and knowledge from one generation to the next and contributes to personal development, socialisation, and professionalism. Looking back, perhaps we have paid less attention to socialisation in the Netherlands and other European countries than we should have. Increasing focus on the individual life, internationalisation and information technology, create problems which must be counterbalanced to prevent society from disintegrating. Which is why I chose "active citizenship" as one of the major themes of the Dutch EU presidency two years ago.

Our concern for education is motivated by the desire not only to transmit knowledge and skills, but also to promote the core values our society shares.

But – and here is a fundamental question -- what about religion? How do we take account of the fact that many people have convictions and beliefs which they ascribe to a transcendent power or being?

What I want to say is, that religion has a realm of its own. It confronts fundamental questions the state and the education system cannot and should not answer. Reason alone will never give us the answer to the question of whether this world was meant to be. Nor will we ever know for certain what lies beyond our earthly existence. Or whether there is anything or anyone that speaks to us besides our fellow human beings. Religion does not – yet! – (say with a smile) provide the undeniable evidence we demand in other domains.

Notwithstanding this, religion is a powerful force in the lives of many people and communities. A force which helps many people come to terms with their own destiny and accept guidance in their lives. The empowerment of the moral systems that are closely linked to religion, is unprecedented.

These factors can make religion a source of strength in society, even in a society that is multi denominational. And in many ways and many societies they do. But we must not ignore the other side of the coin. Within every belief system, smaller or larger groups may slide away and slowly or rapidly fall into fundamentalism.

I think it's useful to describe what I mean by fundamentalism. Karen Armstrong, in her book "The Battle for God", notes: 'All fundamentalists follow a similar pattern. It is a vigilant form of spirituality that rises as a reaction to a supposed crisis. They are engaged in a conflict with enemies, that by

their secular vision and policy are a threat to the religion itself. Fundamentalists do not see this conflict as a conventional political struggle, but experience it as a cosmic war between the powers of good and evil. They are afraid that their belief will be extinguished and try to strengthen their threatened identity by reintroducing certain dogma's and practices from the past. To avoid contamination they withdraw from the mainstream of public life and create an opposite culture, but fundamentalists are not unpractical dreamers. They have internalized the pragmatic rationalism of modern life and under the leadership of charismatic leaders, they rephrase the fundamentals in order to create an ideology that gives the believers an action programme. Finally they launch a counterattack whereby they try to make holy the ever more sceptical world'

It is true that religion can become a force that completely divorces people from reason and sets them against all those who do not share the same view. If this is added to a person's or group's frustration with his own life or with how the world is evolving, it can be devastating.

In the Netherlands, it has long been inconceivable that someone should be killed for expressing an opinion. But we live in troubled times. You have undoubtedly heard about the murder of filmmaker and columnist Theo van Gogh, which was motivated by Muslim fundamentalism.

Since his murder, we have been confronted with several

violent incidents. These are serious blows to a society which asserts itself as moderate, tolerant and open. Our society risks being split in two, into “them” and “us”. All members of society must find the path to dialogue, to mutual respect, where everyone’s right to freedom of expression is honoured. Those who move from religion to fundamentalism and then take the last step to physical violence in their own country, or elsewhere, must be stopped by all legal means. Nobody in his right mind will argue this point. But when we look at religion, and especially its intolerant form of fundamentalism, we should not shy away from the debate about how to deal with it. In short: to what extent can we, do we, tolerate the intolerant? To what lengths can we, do we, accept those who don’t accept us?

Mr. Fukuyama, I think your recent analysis of the last years in The Netherlands is slightly painful, but adequate. The pendulum swung from political correctness (denial) to blaming and shaming a whole group in our society.

The answer will not be found by ignoring or suppressing religion, nor in ignoring or suppressing fundamentalism. In my view there are three main stakeholders: the state, the educational system and the institutionalized religions.

I have been lucky to travel both to western countries and countries with a Muslim majority over the past few years. And what struck me was that many people I met were struggling with that same question: to what extent can the

intolerant be tolerated? What can we do, what should we do, to prevent our youngsters from radicalizing? How do we counter the attraction that intense antagonistic ideologies has to some of them?

Here are some of the “do’s and don’ts” that I think can make a starting point in answering this crucial question. To start with “the don’ts”,

- I’m convinced that strong oppression does not work. I understand, however, that such an approach is appealing to politicians who can show the electorate that “they are doing something about it.” But then do we not jeopardize a cornerstone of our civilization? How far do we go in limiting the freedom that is so essential to an open democratic society, so precious for education, and so desired by those deprived of it.
- A second “don’t” is simplification and generalisation. The diversity of mankind is mirrored in the incredible richness of our body of knowledge, in our everlasting yet varied pursuit to give meaning to our lives, and in the many ways power is controlled within societies. True dialogue, one that builds bridges between opposites, isn’t served by reducing differences but by finding ways to coexist.
- The third don’t is to fall into the same trap extremists have fallen. Where those who don’t share your view are objectified, stripped of their humanity. The history of the

20th century has shown us this dark side of human behaviour.

In terms of “the do’s”, I see three things to address:

- First while we must maximize the benefits we enjoy as individuals, as communities, as product of our freedom, we must likewise not shy away from true, honest dialogue about the role of freedom in communities. That dialogue has to take place on at least three levels:
 - internally, within schools, universities, religious communities and government. That won’t be easy for many reasons. One of them being the painful search that alienates many youth from the government, from reason and from their religious upbringing.
 - the second level -where two institutions meet on territory, they each claim as their own- is even more difficult.
 - the third level is that small area where all three parties are involved.

In addition to the complications noted above, we have to account for the vast pluriformity and fragmentation of today’s society. In former days the king could call the bishop and the dean and deal with them. Those days have past. Knowledge is split up in disciplines and sub disciplines. The domain of the state has become a corpus mixtum of parties influenced by public opinion, private

enterprise and the media. The conclusion I draw is: success or failure in establishing a genuine dialogue between the parties will largely depend on individuals.

- This brings me to the second point. I think we should embrace a relational view of the world. As Buber noted, our true existence lies in relationship. Fulfilment largely depends upon we knowing others and others knowing us. As Yale President Richard C. Levin eloquently noted: “the flow of students across national borders enables deeper mutual understanding, tolerance and global integration.”
- So, and now I come to my last point, providing future generations with the best education possible is crucial. Not only to sustain our economies, but also to secure a future with a vibrant social fabric that is impervious to those who try to tear it apart.

From the days of Bologna and Padua the study of religion has been part of the universities curriculum. Often the desire to educate the clergy on the highest level, was one of the main reasons to found an academy. The zeal for academic freedom has created the unique environment where believers, agnostics and non-believers, study the practice of religions and their holy texts. Doing so from both an inner and an outer perspective. I consider the academic dialogue between those views to be of the utmost importance to shape the underline structure, which is vital for democracy. Therefore it's my intention to appeal upon the universities to start this dialogue. I will invite them

to bring together scholars from all over the world to face the issues we raised today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The philosopher Eugen Rosenstock Heusy defined our era as a time of transition. In the last thousand years, he says, we have learned that we all live in one world. In the new millennium we just entered, we will have to learn something else – what it is to be one mankind. Rosenstock sees religion as a vital power which will contribute to that learning process. I hope he is right. I hope and I believe that education, religion and the state will fully fulfil their roles as safeguards against emptiness, ignorance and chaos. And that each, in its own way and its own domain, will contribute to our common future.

Thank you.