

Religion to lose broadcasting perk in Netherlands

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The announcement by Dutch Culture Minister Sander Dekker that the government's plans to overhaul the way public broadcasting in the Netherlands is funded, includes withdrawing subsidies for religious broadcasting, has infuriated the Catholic Church. At present religious groups are given £13 million a year to produce propaganda programmes, but this will end in 2016.

At present, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and humanists all have airtime on Dutch television, proportionate to their size. The Catholic broadcasting includes Sunday Masses, news features and a popular dating programme, "Farmer Seeks a Wife". The minister's letter said "small faith and philosophy broadcasters" would no longer be eligible for subsidies, a decision that would affect the Jewish broadcaster, the Roman-Catholic network and possibly a few others.

The Catholic bishop of Roermond, Frans Wiertz, was fizzing with fury at the prospect of losing this lucrative perk. "Religion is private – that's a view we've heard more and more in recent years. The current cabinet is now trying to put this view into action."

He said the broadcasters are "part of a society that in part no longer understands them ... this is a pathetic and risky path".

In an editorial, the Protestant daily *Trouw* said the decision showed that the free-market VVD party, that is in a coalition with the Social Democrats, wanted to stress "the principle of Church-State separation that has become popular in the VVD, but with more totalitarian than liberal overtones".

Jewish broadcasters were also outraged that the hundreds of thousands of euros of public money given to them to run a broadcasting station would be withdrawn, possibly resulting in the closure of its services.

Christian networks may be able register with the government as corporations, which would allow them to charge membership fees and apply for separate arts and culture subsidies, the Jewish station, however, may lack the necessary 50,000 members to do so (given that there are only an estimated 40,000 Jews in the whole country this is highly likely).

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