

‘Materiality, Gender and Sensemaking: Religion and Secularity in Everyday Life’

Tuesday 10 and Wednesday 11 May 2022

Organizers

Jelle Wiering (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, the Netherlands), Eline Huygens (Ghent University, Belgium) & Nella van den Brandt (Coventry University, UK)

Location

Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, Oude Boteringestraat 38, 9712 GK, Groningen,
the Netherlands

Conference website: <https://www.rug.nl/research/centre-for-religious-studies/more-information/conferences/materiality-gender-and-sensemaking>

CONFERENCE PROGRAM & ABSTRACT OVERVIEW

CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Tuesday 10 May 2022

09:30 Welcome with coffee and tea

10.00 Introduction by the organizers: Jelle Wiering, Nella van den Brandt & Eline Huygens

10.10 Keynote lecture by David Geiringer (Queen Mary University of London)

Moderator: Eline Huygens

Response by Marco Derks (independent scholar of religion, sexuality, and gender)

11:00 Coffee/tea break

11.20 Keynote lecture by Mark de Rond (University of Cambridge, UK)

Moderator: Jelle Wiering

Response by Kim Knibbe (University of Groningen)

12:10 Lunch

13:10 Katie Gaddini (University College London)

Moderator: Nella van den Brandt

Response by Julia Martínez-Ariño (University of Groningen)

14:00 Three parallel reading seminars. Each seminar we will look extensively into two or three articles or book chapters written by the speakers (David Geiringer, Katie Gaddini & Mark de Rond). Locations: Zittingzaal (David Geiringer), 117 (Mark de Rond) & 123 (Katie Gaddini).

15.30 Coffee/tea break

16.00 Closing plenary discussion

17.00 Drinks

19.00 Dinner (at own expenses)

Wednesday 11 May 2022

08.30 Welcome with coffee and tea

09.00 Paper presentations: parallel sessions

Panel 1: Sensemaking, Gender and the Body (Room 117)

Chair: Manoela Carpenedo

Panel 2: Religion, Gender, Sexuality and the Body

Chair: Nella van den Brandt

10.30 Coffee/tea break

11.00 Paper presentations: plenary session

Panel 3: Religion, Postcoloniality, Gender and Race (Kim)

Chair: Kim Knibbe (University of Groningen)

12.30 Plenary session

13.00 Lunch

The conference ends at 14.00.

PAPER ABSTRACTS

--- Please note that each presentation should take no longer than 20 minutes ---

Panel 1: Sensemaking, Gender and the Body

Presentation 1: ‘Drinking Tea as Nonviolent Resistance: Prefiguring Change Through Everyday Practices of Contemplative Activism’

Suzanne Klein Schaarsberg (University of Groningen, the Netherlands)

Abstract: Scholars have started to consider the role of mind-body practices such as meditation and mindfulness within resistance movements. Others have looked at how lifestyle practices become forms of political expressions. Scholars have yet to consider, however, how the mindful practice of everyday activities such as doing the dishes, drinking tea and going for a walk in the forest become acts of changemaking for contemplative activists. This paper aims to fill that gap. I assess how drinking a cup of tea, going for a walk, or doing the dishes contemplatively become acts of nonviolent resistance. Engaging their senses -looking at the tea, smelling the tea, carefully tasting the tea - for my interlocutors become moments of pause that challenge the ever-quickenening pace of life. In particular, I study how such practices can be considered a form of prefigurative politics, in which the anticipated future is enacted in the present. I show how contemplation becomes a way to “resist” as daily practices allow my interlocutors to embody an alternative to problematic power structures. Engaging one’s senses through contemplation becomes a form of sense- and changemaking: it offers a way of being political in a complex world. I argue that taking seriously the provocation that drinking a cup of tea is a form of nonviolent resistance inspires us to rethink the concept of transformation. Perhaps change occurs simultaneously on both an inner and an outer level; is it felt, somatic and happening in silence. Thinking through the conceptual implications of contemplative activism as a form of prefigurative politics in this way, allows us to better understand how contemporary expressions of religion engage with and make sense of complex political realities.

Keywords: Contemplative activism; nonviolent resistance; everyday practices; transformation; prefigurative politics

Presentation 2: ‘Material Secularisms: A Biocultural Approach’

Mari Ovsepyan–van Emmerik (Oxford University, UK)

Abstract: A number of scholars of nonreligion and secularism have argued in recent years for the need to get beyond the neat binaries and the negative identities signalled by atheism and agnosticism (e.g., Taves, Asprem and Ihm 2018). However, these binaries are deeply ingrained in the landscape of ideas about the nature of mind/ body relationship and the nature of belief/ unbelief and are saturated by a level of "somatophobia" berated by Manuel Vásquez (2011: 89). In this paper I will employ 4E cognition paradigm, which views the mind as physically embodied, culturally embedded, socially extended and enactive as a psychological paradigm that contributes to a better understanding of how nonreligion and secularism happen materially. This approach is distinct in treating bodily structures, the experiences they afford, and the environmental factors as essential to cognition. I will then show how this embodied way of conceptualising the mind could be "married" with the new generation of social anthropological theories and materialist approaches to nonreligion and secularism, as I outline the theoretical foundations of the biocultural approach grounded in the materialist turn. I will engage with the sociological and anthropological approaches to secularisation represented in works of the seminal thinkers like Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, William Conolly, and J.K. Smith. There are three streams of engagement I will propose here:

1. Secular bodies and embodied cognition.
2. Social imaginaries and embedded/ extended cognition.
3. Secular liturgies and enactive cognition.

At the end of the paper, I will discuss of the building blocks for a new biocultural approach to nonreligion and secularism which incorporates the insights of 4E cognition and treats them as complex emergent phenomena.

Keywords: material religion; material secularisms; embodied cognition; nonreligion

Presentation 3: ‘Chaplaincy as a Space of Possibility: Accounts from Women Healthcare Chaplains’

Sonya Sharma (University College London, UK) & Sheryl Reimer-Kirkham, (Trinity Western University, Canada)

Abstract: ‘I was becoming aware of my priestliness’; ‘I went into chaplaincy at a time I’d begun to feel alienation from the Church institutionally’; ‘They’ll say “women are not imams,” but I’m doing the prayer and that’s what he needs’. In this paper we examine an overlooked group – women healthcare chaplains who are often subsumed into broader studies of chaplains, obscured by men who frequently outnumber them. Despite this, women chaplains are vital to the delivery of healthcare, as they attend to the marginalized, vulnerable patients and families, and over-worked staff. In their work, they deal with human fragility and wellbeing while contending with the intersections of faiths, values, communities, and cultures and all the while against a backdrop of questions about their legitimacy in light of financial pressures on healthcare systems and in an increasing secularizing society. Drawing from qualitative research on women healthcare chaplains in London, England, we explore how they grapple with intersections of gender and religion. We consider that although struggles and obstacles are posed by their religious institutions, the domain of chaplaincy has enabled them to live out their faith in ways not necessarily expected. For these women, it has not meant leaving their faith but staying with the struggle and chaplaincy offering a space of possibility and flourishing.

Keywords: women chaplains; gender; healthcare; religion

Presentation 4: ‘Elephantshit Jobs’

Jelle Wiering (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, the Netherlands)

Abstract: In 2013, Anthropologist David Graeber coined the notion of ‘Bullshit jobs’: jobs which even the person doing the job cannot really justify the existence of, but they have to pretend that there’s some reason for it to exist. Drawing on my preliminary fieldwork in Dutch Zoos, I am tracing the opposite idea of a bullshit job: a job which the person doing the job finds rather meaningful. I propose to call these jobs “Elephantshit jobs”. During my preliminary fieldwork, I was amazed to learn that the job of cleaning animal cages in zoos is rather popular, and that Zoos receive many emails of people offering to do this work voluntary. In this paper, I explore why people want to clean animal cages or conduct other (voluntary) work in the Zoo. The paper then argues that the popularity of Elephantshit jobs can be seen as an important critique regarding Graeber’s notion of bullshit jobs: the question of how a job is meaningful or not is a rather cognitive exercise in itself, which thus includes a risk of marginalizing the more embodied and sensorial – indeed smelling – features that constitute a job. The paper concludes by suggesting that one way of improving people’s joy and satisfaction in work could perhaps be found in taking more seriously the corporal and sensorial dimensions of our jobs.

Panel 2: Religion, Gender, Sexuality and the Body

Presentation 1: ‘**Embodying Pentecostal Femininity through Postfeminist and Neoliberal Lens**’

Mabel Agmada Alkali (Coventry University, UK)

Abstract: Within the field of sociology of religion, there is plenty of research on women’s faith lives and lived religion, but there have been limited engagement with women in African Pentecostal churches in diaspora. Women of African churches in diaspora occupy a unique position as they experience sometimes overlapping, and sometimes conflicting notions of femininity as ascribed by the ethnic, religious and societal groups they belong to. Therefore, this study examined femininity construction in African Pentecostal churches in the UK, and how Biblical scriptures are interpreted and used to construct and negotiate varying notions of femininity. Personal and church ideas about gender and ideal femininity were investigated. Results showed that, despite cultural and religious influence in the process of femininity construction, participants found ways to reinterpret and embody secular notions of post feminism and neoliberalism through Biblical scriptures in defining their femininity. Hence, women defined their femininity as strong independent African Christian women. Womanist theologies of liberation and mutuality were also evident in their own everyday theologies. The findings suggest that religion and culture are not rigid institutions, there are intersections between, religion, culture, and the secular in creating religious identities. However, a rereading of Biblical texts is needed in developing a more equitable and inclusive theologies in African Christian theologies.

Keywords: femininity construction; embodiment; post feminism; neoliberalism; African Pentecostalism; Womanist theology; Bible; United Kingdom.

Presentation 2: **'Being in the Body: A Call for a Body-Focused Theology after Trauma'**

Marie Hansen-Couturier (PTHU, the Netherlands)

Abstract: The importance of religious transformation through materiality/embodiment is highlighted in various ways in the case studies I am doing during my PhD-research. How do women make sense of their sexual trauma(s) in the aftermath of it? What do their bodies have to do with this, and how does their faith tie into that? This paper explores the role of theology for traumatized people. Is there a kind of transformation possible/desirable after having experienced (a) traumatizing situation(s)? Can theology aid such a transformation and if so, how? Based on (preliminary) results from participant observation and in-depth interviews, I demonstrate the importance of a focus on the material (lived) body. We will see that the turn to the body which has taken place in trauma theory, is of great importance for theology after trauma as well. Living in a way in which 'making sense after trauma' and 'theology' are tied together is, as I propose in this paper, a matter of living embodied.

Keywords: body theology; trauma; feminist theology; lived theology; sexual abuse

Presentation 3: ‘The ‘Queer Question’ of India: Women’s Sexual Identity at the Intersection of Gender and Religion in a Religious Society’

Shilpi Pandey (VUB, Belgium)

Abstract: India is known for its religiously diverse population and the highly religious public sphere. Until 2018, homosexuality was a criminal offense in India. This criminalization of homosexuality was not attributed to religion but correctly recognized as a colonial legacy. The Supreme Court of India decriminalized homosexuality in 2018. However, despite this verdict, the subsequent action/inaction of the government in enacting legislation supporting the LGBTQ+ community are consistently criticized. While the policy framework on the status of the LGBTQ+ community remains questionable, they also continue to face discrimination and isolation in their social contexts due to their religion and gender. This paper investigates the role of religion in how individuals identifying as homosexuals, experience their sexuality through an intersectional approach. To do this, the paper focuses on two leading religions in India, namely, Hinduism and Islam. Within this framework, it carries out a comparative analysis of the experiences of women who do not conform to the heterosexual norms of a highly religious society. The paper does a two-step analysis through an intersectional approach in the following manner: (i) it analyzes the role of religion in defining norms of sexuality, (ii) the paper will analyze how the social context of an individual impacts their religiosity, and consequently their experiences as homosexuals. Through this investigation, the paper investigates the role of religion in defining Queer women's experiences and answers the following question: If and how do Hindu and Muslim Queer women practice their sexuality because or despite their faith?

Presentation 4: ‘“Starting from their chromosomes”: Family, Gender, and Sex as Ethical Affordances in the Russian Baptist Church’

Igor Mikeshin (University of Helsinki, Finland)

Abstract: My paper addresses a big question: why are most conservative Christian moral narratives predominantly focused on family, gender, and sex? Russian Baptists are a moderately conservative evangelical community with a 150-year history in Russia. Although they share all universal evangelical tenets of faith, they have their own specific history, theology, and ideology formed under a century of oppression, marginalization, and isolation in the context of the dominance of the Russian Orthodox Church. Their moral narrative is likewise constructed as a response to both the modern Russian sociocultural context and Orthodox Christian theologies and ideologies. In my research project, I look at the ways Russian Baptists see gender issues, family values, and sex as the most mundane manifestation of their everyday lived Christianity. Even for the unmarried believers, their relationships with the opposite sex are, as anthropologist Webb Keane puts it, ethical affordances—moral potentialities that essentialize particular human experiences but do not strictly determine behavior. Gender and family relations are not intended to be regarded as a display of Christian ethics, but they are conveniently employed in this role. In my paper, I will briefly introduce the history of the interrelations between Russian Baptists and public morals. After that, I will discuss gender, family, and sex as ethical affordances of Baptist everydayness. Lastly, I will provide examples from my fieldwork to illustrate the everyday morality of Russian Baptists through the lens of complementarian values.

Keywords: gender; ethical affordance; Russian Baptist Church; Christian conservatism

Panel 3: Religion, Postcoloniality, Gender and Race

Presentation 1: 'Enhancing Methodological Complexities: The Feminist Concept of 'Lived Religion' and the Postcolonial Concept of "Double Critique"'

Sabine Grenz (University of Vienna, Austria)

Abstract: The concept of "lived religion" in feminist research of the religious is mostly used in the frame of an affirmative understanding of religion, whereas secularist feminists are repeatedly criticized for their lack of engagement with religion. However, in the last decade a body of literature on the religious right as part of the anti-feminist movement has emerged criticizing their gender-restrictive attitudes. This research so far seems to be more or less neglected from the side of religious scholars. This mismatch of feminist conversations is the background of my engagement with "lived religion". In this paper, I will bring these two different bodies of research together in order to further develop the concept's methodological capabilities. I will make use of a reflexive post-secularist perspective and introduce Khatibi's concept of 'double critique' into feminist research of the religious. I will theoretically explore, if this concept enables a critical perspective on gender-restrictive religious persons from a feminist perspective without ridiculing their religiosity but nevertheless seeing them as responsible for their views and actions. My goal is to contribute to research that aims to overcome the dichotomy between religion and secularity by bringing in feminist aims that overarch religion and secularity and to develop a more intricate power reflexive understanding of "lived religion". Hence, it would fit best into the section of sensemaking.

Keywords: lived religion; antifeminist movement; feminist theory; post-secularist; double critique

Presentation 2: ‘Sexuality, Embodiment and Moral transformation among ‘Judaizing Evangelical’ women in Brazil’

Manoela Carpenedo (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, the Netherlands)

Abstract: Based on an ethnography in a Brazilian Charismatic Evangelical church going through a dramatic Judaizing process, this study investigates how former Christian women (with no Jewish background) are revolutionizing their sexual lives when embracing the menstrual taboos and family purity laws inspired by Orthodox Jewish tenets. Drawing on the current debates on the anthropology of moralities and embodiment, this paper explores how Judaizing Evangelical women negotiate both, their bodies and their sexual desires by observing strict religious rules that impose long periods of marital sexual abstinence. The study suggests that by adhering to Jewish laws, Judaizing Evangelical women are able to construct their sexuality vis-à-vis the secular female Other. The latter is perceived as hyper-sexualized and objectified by the Brazilian culture. Even more important, Judaizing Evangelical women’s observance of strict religious laws directly challenges their previous Charismatic Evangelical cultures which enforce women’s role in maintaining a solid marriage via sexual availability and submission to male authority and desire. The paper concludes that while the Judaizing shift imposes strict sexual prohibitions for these women, it also promotes new ways for them to understand and relate to their bodies, their sexuality and their sexual desires.

Presentation 3: ‘Agency, Religious Practice and the Gendered Self: Girls’ Schools in Sri Lanka’

Jessica A. Albrecht (University of Heidelberg, Germany)

Abstract: The Sri Lankan education system consists of three structuring elements: it strives for academic excellence, the country’s top schools are separated by gender, and religion plays a crucial role in any school’s identity. Sri Lanka’s top girls’ schools are either former (Anglican) missionary schools, Catholic convents, private and state Buddhist schools or Hindu schools. However, scholarship on religion in Sri Lanka often dismisses the educational apparatus, as do scholars of gender who place the children’s most formative context in the home. Nevertheless, it is the schools in which children spend most of their time and, to quote them, “learn for life”. This paper will compare two of these schools, Ladies’ College and Musaeus College, both situated in the capital, Colombo, to gain insights into the structuring effects of religion on everyday school life and the constitution of racialized, gendered identities. The paper will draw on original archival and oral history material to investigate the personal narrations given by former students at these schools. These (auto-)biographical insights reveal the implicit and explicit effects of religion on their “most constituting years”. In particular, it will look at the ways in which religious practice and storytelling shapes their relationships with students from other religious backgrounds as well as their own constitution as girls and women in Sri Lanka. Vice versa, it is often not possible to separate these religious practices at the schools from other daily school practices. In this way, a specific notion of religion emerges, in which it is either used synonymously with religious practice or spirituality. This paper therefore touches on and challenges the scholarly discourse on religious practice and gendered identity by using the framework of Judith Butler’s theories on the formation of the self. In this way, it also deals with the problem of agency and religion in relation to gender.

Presentation 4: 'Time and Space in Roman Catholic Women's Religious Practices'

Anna Szwed (Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland)

Abstract: The religious practices of Catholics are usually identified with activities recommended by the institution of the Church, i.e. attending mass, receiving communion or conventional prayer. In my presentation on Roman Catholic women in Poland, I would like to propose a slightly different perspective on the problem of religious practices, embedded in the theoretical perspective of lived religion (Ammermann 2021). This theoretical framework focuses on religion as it is practiced, experienced and expressed by ordinary people in the context of their everyday lives (McGuire 2008). Religious practices are understood multidimensionally, as including embodiment, materiality, emotions, aesthetics, narrative, etc. (Ammerman 2021). Referring to the results of the qualitative research we conducted in 2019 and 2020 as part of a project on the religiosity of Polish women, I want to show how religion is practiced by educated, religiously committed Catholic women from large cities. I am particularly interested in the temporal and spatial dimension of practices that take place outside institutionally designated religious spaces such as churches, chapels, retreat centres, etc. As our research shows, a particular place where religious practices and other practices of everyday life intersect is the home. Constructing the home as a religious space involves different types of actions and strategies undertaken by women, such as sacralizing the living space, negotiating time and space for religious practices (the struggle for a spiritual "room of one's own") or constructing mobile places of practice with the use of new media and technologies. Looking at practicing of religion through the lens of time and place leads to broader conclusions regarding the forms of religious presence in the lives of metropolitan, educated women. Here, religion is integrated into the trajectory of everyday life and largely lived "in between" (work, taking care of children, cooking, cleaning, caring for the elderly, etc.).

Keywords: women; religious practices; time; space