

Studying Nones and Nonbelievers: Methodological Lessons from the Netherlands

A position paper by W.R. Arfman & A.I. Liefbroer

In this position paper we argue that if we want to understand the future of religion in Europe, we first need to understand the consequences of secularization. To achieve that, we need to look closely to those countries which have been at the forefront of the secularization processes in question. This concerns countries that have faced what Tomáš Halík has called hard secularization, involving state-imposed atheism, as well as those that have undergone processes of so-called soft secularization, with such top-down force being absent. The Netherlands can be argued to be a key instance of the latter type (Jonkers 2019). The question, then, is what we can learn from the Dutch situation regarding the challenges and opportunities of research into secularization in general, and into the study of nonbelievers in particular. Based on our own research projects, we argue that three types of lessons can be learned.

The first of these lessons concerns *what* we should be looking for. The problematic reflex to be fought here is that of tying religion too closely to specific religious traditions. We cannot assume that dominant religious traditions of the past will also provide the most relevant heuristic categories for the future. In addition to questioning the importance of religious affiliation, this also concerns the concept of belief and the related concept of (non)believer. With their focus on the cognitive dimension of religion, the categories of belief and (non)believer threaten to obfuscate other fundamental dimensions of religiosity that scholars of religion have been studying over the past few decades. The second lesson concerns *where* our investigations should take place. Such diverse spaces as hospitals, jails, cemeteries and beach-side bars are argued to be crucial sites for future research. The third lesson, finally, concerns *how* we should be conducting our research. In particular, we argue that new research questions ask for new and innovative combinations of research methods. Document analysis, surveys, interviews and traditional participant observation needs to be combined with conversation analysis, online research and digital ethnography.

In the sections that follow, we will illustrate how each of the three lessons follows from our own investigations into the consequences of secularization in the Netherlands. As indicated, the questions of what to investigate, where to investigate, and how to do so underpin these lessons. Along the way it will become clear that both more quantitative and more qualitative research projects are needed if we want to better understand how nonbelievers make and find meaning. As such, we will wrap this position paper up by translating the lessons learned into a research attitude we think is crucial for such future research projects.

Lesson One: What to Study

Starting from observations in Liefbroer's research, we argue that if our goal is to develop new research projects that set out to map the ways in which nonbelievers make and find meaning in their lives, these projects should not rely overmuch on suppositions derived from the study of existing religious traditions, such as the assumed primacy of matters of affiliation or belief. First, in a study among clients receiving spiritual care in a hospital setting by chaplains from various religious traditions, Liefbroer and Nagel (forthcoming) show that affiliating with the same religious tradition does not significantly relate to better client evaluations of spiritual care encounters. This finding questions the importance of affiliating with a certain religious tradition for addressing spiritual and existential themes in a secularized context like the Netherlands.

Second, in a study of so-called ‘multiple religious belonging’ among visitors of Dominican spiritual centers, Liefbroer, Van der Braak, and Kalsky (2018) report that respondents who combine elements from various religious traditions in their lives draw from a variety of sources, which are not only, or not necessarily, linked to religious traditions. For instance, these respondents place greater importance on sources such as nature, in-depth conversations, personal rituals or practices, and theological, philosophical or spiritual texts (other than religious texts such as the Bible, Qur’an, Bhagavad Gita) than do respondents who do not combine elements from various religious traditions. As such, this second study suggests that other aspects need to be addressed when studying the making and finding of meaning in a secularized context, and that these may include sources of meaning that are not linked exclusively to specific religious traditions.

Third, Arfman’s research (2014c) into an emerging field of collective commemoration in the Netherlands has shown that what is at stake in the Dutch secularizing context does not necessarily revolve around traditional doctrinal beliefs, or even around belief at all. Comparing annual commemorations for the dead in Catholic, Protestant and secular settings, it turned out to be social relations, emotions, experiences and ritual practices that took center stage in all three settings, rather than traditional matters of belief. An example from one of the secular commemorative projects will help to illustrate this point. In the longstanding art project *Allerzielen Alom* (or: All Souls All Around), artists, local funeral homes and volunteers worked together to transform a cemetery into an open commemorative space for one autumnal evening. Visitors were invited to stroll around the beautifully illuminated cemetery, encountering a variety of commemorative hotspots along the way (Arfman 2014c). For Ida van der Lee, the artist behind the project, her goal was to provide something meaningful to Dutch society without going into particular principles of faith (Van der Lee 2010). Underlining the relevance of her goals, survey research among visitors to *Allerzielen Alom* in 2007 showed that almost two-thirds (63,4%) of visitors were not religiously affiliated, the vast majority (93,6%) came primarily to commemorate the dead, while positive emotions and a feeling of togetherness dominated their experiences. In terms of afterlife beliefs the idea of death as a total end was by and large rejected, although traditional religious perspectives were called into question as well. Instead, vague senses of continuity dominated (Venbrux, Quartier & Arfman 2010). Similarly, participant observation showed that no belief in a specific type of life after death was assumed, or even encouraged, in any of the ritual practices on offer. Instead, the emotional evocation of past social relations was employed ritually and materially to create symbolic experiences of continuity and discontinuity in a temporary community setting (Arfman 2014c).

Taking these three observations together, it becomes apparent that traditional religious affiliation and beliefs were seemingly less important to understand the making and finding of meaning than were non-traditional sources and other than cognitive dimensions of religion, such as emotional (‘bonding’), behavioral (‘behaving’), and social (‘belonging’) dimensions (Saroglou 2011). We can see a clear link, here, between our own observations regarding the ways in which nonbelievers make and find meaning in the Dutch secular context and the dominant trend within the field of religious studies over the past half a century (Glock & Stark 1965; Bellah 1970) to move away from one-dimensional understandings of religion. The term nonbeliever is itself problematic in this regard, given its one-dimensional focus on belief as the leading characteristic of religiosity, or more precisely of religiosity’s broader counterpart in a secularized context which, for this position paper, we somewhat awkwardly dubbed ‘the making and finding of meaning’. The alternative category of “nones” has become increasingly popular (Vernon 1968), although it too is not without problem, given how it substitutes a focus on belief with a focus on affiliation. We see here how language is at the heart of the research problem we are facing. What we seemingly need more than anything else, moving forward, are innovative new conceptualizations delineating the *what* of our research field.

Lesson Two: Where to Look

In considering *where* our future mapping projects on the making and finding of meaning in secularized contexts should take place, we argue to look for places outside of the standard congregational settings (Cadge, Levitt & Smilde 2011). As seen in the first example above, one of these new types of places is the field of spiritual care or chaplaincy. Spiritual caregivers or chaplains are often trained at theological seminaries or faculties to provide spiritual care and, after being authorized or ordained by a specific religious or Humanist institution, they commonly work as formal representatives of that tradition (Ganzevoort, Ajouaou, Van der Braak, De Jongh, & Minnema 2014; Swift 2013). At the same time, while working in secular settings such as hospitals, the military, and prisons, they address spiritual needs of clients from a variety of worldviews, both religious and secular (Liefbroer & Berghuijs 2019). As such, these chaplains are experts in discussing spiritual and existential themes in a secularized context (Liefbroer, Ganzevoort, & Olsman 2019), and studying the content of their encounters and the practices they perform (e.g., rituals) when addressing clients' diverse needs may be a fruitful avenue for investigating how meaning is made and found in such contexts.

Arfman's research also put new types of places into focus. Religious collective commemorations still take place predominantly in churches, but secular commemorations can be found in a whole range of locations. We already saw commemorative art projects take place on cemeteries, but they were organized in local community centers as well. Other secular commemorations were held on town squares or in squatted churches, in nursing homes as well as in funeral homes, in museums and in concert halls, and even next to park lakes and in beach-side bars (Arfman 2014c). Of course, relevant locations weren't just limited to the (semi-)public spaces in which commemorations were actually held. Preparatory and evaluative meetings took place at the offices of the organizations involved, as well as at people home's and through online channels. Online spaces can be seen to be important in other ways as well. To a large extent, advertising the commemorative events in question took place online, as did archiving them, in particular through the sharing of experiences and photographs.

If our goal is to understand the ways in which nones and/or nonbelievers make and find meaning, all of the various places mentioned above should be taken seriously as contexts in which future mapping projects should take place. Traditional religious spaces are not to be ignored, of course, but they should be seen as only one type of research domain among many, some physical and others digital.

Lesson Three: How to Study It

Our final lesson concerns the question of *how* to study the ways in which nones and/or nonbelievers make and find meaning. A good example is the study conducted by Liefbroer and Olsman (forthcoming) on the way in which spiritual caregivers deal with religious and spiritual diversity in their daily practice. In addition to using quantitative surveys to investigate spiritual caregivers' and clients' perspectives on this issue (Liefbroer & Berghuijs 2019; Liefbroer & Nagel forthcoming), this research specifically aimed to identify and compare communication techniques spiritual caregivers use when addressing spiritual themes in their same- and interfaith conversations. To empirically study such conversations, audio-records of such encounters were collected, transcribed, and analyzed using conversation analysis. Using this—to our knowledge, new research method in this field of study (Liefbroer, Olsman, Ganzevoort, Van Etten-Jamaludin 2017)—led to an overview of communication techniques used, as well as a qualitative comparison between the groups. However, to compare communication techniques used in same- versus interfaith encounters on a larger scale, follow-up research would be needed that uses a mixed methods approach in which such qualitative conversation analysis is combined with other, quantitative methods (e.g., surveys, digital analysis).

The inclusion of new methods, in conjunction with more traditional ones, was also considered essential to the research conducted by Arfman. For parts of the project, standard modes of ethnographic fieldwork sufficed. Participant observation was conducted at both religious services and at secular events, such as the *Allerzielen Alom* project detailed above. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, albeit predominantly with event organizers, as the main focus of the research project was on how such organizers dealt with the challenges inherent in creating and maintaining rites in late modernity (Arfman 2014b). In order to really see the organizers at work, however, a less typical form of participant observation was employed as well, namely participant observation during preparatory and evaluative meetings of organizing teams. In non-ecclesial settings in particular, a wide variety of specialists were involved in the organization of a ritual event, most of whom were not trained ritual specialists. In addition to taking participant observation to new places, as discussed in the previous section, the methodological challenge of observing such meetings was trying to figure out what was really at stake, while those involved were doing the exact same thing themselves.

A more fundamental methodological shift, however, already took place in an earlier stage of Arfman's project on collective commemoration. In order to identify larger trends in the period from the 1990s to the 2010s, a database of collective commemorations was created (Arfman 2014a). The majority of the data for this database was acquired through online research into three types of websites: websites hosting relevant event calendars, websites of relevant news outlets and, most labor-intensive, the individual websites of organizing collectives like churches, funeral homes and artist collectives. Sites were identified through a snowballing set of archived google search strings. Where information was missing online, additional information was sought through e-mail communication. Possibilities for digital research do not end here, of course. For an upcoming project on the transmission of religious traditions in secular spaces, for example, Arfman will be using an approach called digital ethnography (cf. Varis 2014), a methodology revolving around participant observation in online spaces such as Facebook, YouTube or Reddit.

Taking these various methodological experiences in the Dutch context into consideration, we argue that new mapping projects ask for new and innovative combinations of quantitative and qualitative research methods, such as combining document analysis, surveys, interviews and traditional participant observation with conversation analysis, online research and digital ethnography. The major challenges for such mapping projects, moving forward, become clear when considering the most recent edition (Bernts & Berghuijs 2016) of the Dutch research project *God in Nederland* (or: God in the Netherlands). Taking place roughly every ten years since 1966, this survey project has seen the addition of qualitative interviews, as well as the addition of questions on new spirituality and related matters. It could be argued, however, that the most important development these new additions have brought to light is that a seemingly growing group of respondents is gravitating towards middle ground answers or "I do not know" options (Arfman 2016). New configurations of methodological approaches are required if we are to map the way this growing group of 'idunnos' (or: I don't knows) makes and finds meaning in secularized contexts.

From lessons to attitude

Summarizing the above, we can state that some potentially useful lessons can be learned from the Dutch situation. The first of these concerns the content of what is to be studied. From the research projects discussed, it becomes apparent that matters of belief and nonbelief cannot be studied separate from complex emotions, meaningful practices, non-ordinary experiences and social relations. The second lesson concerns the places where research is to take place. Here, we can see that even when considering only a small selection of research projects, a whole range of spaces needs to be

taken into consideration, including those places where the making and finding of meaning takes place outside of congregational settings. The third and final lesson concerns the methods employed to acquire data. Complex new situations ask for new combinations of approaches, including combining qualitative and quantitative methods, and using digital ones.

In closing, we argue that a specific type of research attitude emerges when taking these three lessons together. Put succinctly, this is an attitude of openness to multiplicity. Multiplicity in terms of the dimensions of religion, or meaning making and finding, that are considered salient, multiplicity in terms of locations deemed worthy of further exploration, and multiplicity in terms of the different and innovative methods that are employed together. It is only through a research attitude that is open to multiplicity that we can come to develop new research projects that aim to map the ways in which nones and/or nonbelievers make and find meaning in their lives.

References

- Arfman, W.R. (2014a). Innovating from Traditions: The Emergence of a Ritual Field of Collective Commemoration in the Netherlands. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29(1), 17-32. doi: 10.1080/13537903.2014.864799
- Arfman, W.R. (2014b). Liquid Ritualizing: Facing the Challenges of Late Modernity in an Emerging Ritual Field. *Journal of Religion in Europe* 7(1), 1-25. doi: 10.1163/18748929-00701001
- Arfman, W.R. (2014c). *Ritual Dynamics in Late Modernity: The Case of the Emerging Field of Collective Commemoration* (Doctoral dissertation, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands). Retrieved from https://research.tilburguniversity.edu/files/4023381/Arfman_Ritual_10_09_2014.pdf
- Arfman, W.R. (2016). De opkomst van de religieuze kweenies. Retrieved from <https://leidenreligieblog.nl/articles/de-opkomst-van-de-religieuze-kweenies>
- Bellah, R.N. (1970). *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Bernts, A.P.J., & Berghuijs, J. (2016). *God in Nederland 1966-2015*. Utrecht: Ten Have.
- Cadge, W., Levitt, P. & Smilde, D. (2011). De-Centering and Re-Centering: Rethinking Concepts and Methods in the Sociological Study of Religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50(3), 437-449. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-5906.2011.01585.x
- Ganzevoort, R. R., Ajouaou, M., Van der Braak, A., De Jongh, E. & Minnema, L. (2014). Teaching spiritual care in an interfaith context. *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, 27(2), 178-197. doi:10.1558/jasr.v27i2.178
- Glock, C. Y. & Stark, R. (1965). *Religion and society in tension*. San Francisco: Rand McNally
- Jonkers, P. (2019). The Consequences of Secularization in the West. Retrieved from <http://www.krestanskaakademie.cz/projecttempleton/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Peter-Jonkers-The-Consequences-of-Secularization-in-the-West-revised-paper-10-Dec-2019.pdf>
- Liefbroer, A.I. & Berghuijs, J. (2019). Spiritual care for everyone? Personal and organizational differences in interfaith spiritual care. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, 25(3), 110-129. doi: 10.1080/08854726.2018.1556549
- Liefbroer, A.I., Ganzevoort, R.R. & Olsman, E. (2019). Addressing the spiritual domain in a plural society: what is the best mode of integrating spiritual care into healthcare? *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 22(3), 244-260. doi: 10.1080/13674676.2019.1590806

- Liefbroer, A.I. & Nagel, F.A. (forthcoming). Does faith concordance matter? A comparison of clients' perceptions in same versus interfaith spiritual care encounters.
- Liefbroer, A.I., Olsman, E., Ganzevoort, R.R. & van Etten-Jamaludin, F.S. (2017). Interfaith spiritual care: A systematic review. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 56(5), 1776-1793. doi: 10.1007/s10943-017-0369-1
- Liefbroer, A.I. & Olsman, E. (forthcoming). Spiritual talk: Addressing existential themes in interfaith encounters.
- Liefbroer, A.I., Van der Braak, A.F.M. & Kalsky, M. (2018). Multiple Religious Belonging among Visitors of Dominican Spiritual Centers in the Netherlands. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 33(3), 407-426. doi: 10.1080/13537903.2018.1535362
- Saroglou, V. (2011). Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging: The Big Four Religious Dimensions and Cultural Variation. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 42(8), 1320–134. doi: 10.1177/0022022111412267
- Swift, C. (2013). A state health service and funded religious care. *Health Care Analysis*, 21(3), 248-258. doi: 10.1007/s10728-013-0252-5
- Van der Lee, I. (2010). *De muze van het herdenken: Vijf jaar Allerzielen Alom*. Zoetermeer: Meinema.
- Varis, P. (2014). Digital Ethnography. *Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies* 104. Retrieved from https://research.tilburguniversity.edu/files/30479758/TPCS_104_Varis.pdf
- Venbrux, H.J.M., Quartier, T. & Arfman, W.R. (2010). Het Nieuwe Allerzielen: Buitenkerkelijke Dodenherdenking en Religiositeit. In G. Bosma & C. van der Leest (Ed.), *De Dood Leeft! Wat betekent ons denken over leven na de dood voor ons leven vóór de dood* (195-210). Kampen: Kok.
- Vernon, G.M. (1968). The Religious "Nones": A Neglected Category. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 7(2), 219-229. doi: 10.2307/1384629