

Panel proposal

NGG conference *Lived Religion: studying religious practice*
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Panel title:

Catching what matters: empirical methods and challenges in studying contemporary religion, sacrality, and spirituality

Speakers (representing the NOSTER network group New Spirituality):

William Arfman MA/MPhil, Tilburg University
Ir. Joantine Berghuijs MPhil, Utrecht University
Cyril Kuttiyanikkal MA, Tilburg University
Lieke Wijnia MA, Tilburg University

Panel abstract (144 words)

Researching contemporary lived religion, spirituality, and sacrality raises many practical issues on how to actually conduct the research and get results from the gathered data. This panel addresses the research methods of participant observation, interviews, and questionnaires. In the presentations, Kuttiyanikkal deals with the complexity of different worldviews in performing participant observation in a Hindu community, while Arfman addresses the reciprocal character of the relationship between ritual scholars and ritual experts in the newly emerging ritual field he studies. Wijnia looks at a way of connecting the methodology to the field and the theoretical framework in her research on a festival regarding music and sacrality, and Berghuijs presents a variety of empirical approaches and their implications in exploring the variety of manifestations of spirituality. All four presentations relate methodological issues and challenges to the actual performance of their research and fieldwork for academic purposes.

Panel proposal (393 words)

Researching lived religion, spirituality, and sacrality raises many practical issues on how to actually do the research and how to get results from the gathered data. This panel addresses the methods of participant observation, interviews, and questionnaires. All four presentations relate methodological issues and challenges to the actual performance of their research and fieldwork for academic purposes. The order of the presentations reflects a methodological spectrum with at the one end the individual, personal considerations of the researcher and at the other end a more quantitative empirical approach to lived religion.

The first paper of Kuttiyanikkal deals with the complexity of different worldviews in performing participant observation. Rather than diving into the methodology itself, Kuttiyanikkal reflects on his own experiences and the problems he encountered during his fieldwork in a Hindu community. These experiences and problems are manifested on two levels: conceptual and spiritual. The paper of Arfman concentrates on the reciprocal character of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. By studying the field, the researcher becomes an expert on those ritual practices. At the same time, those in the field are actually keen on incorporating that same expertise into their practices. Wijnia presents her research in the field of the festival *Musica Sacra Maastricht*. In her paper, a performative stance is explored as a way of finding connections between the performance of her ethnographic research method, the performativity of the practices in the field and the performative dimensions of the concept that she aims to study: sacrality. In the final paper, Berghuijs presents a number of empirical approaches and their implications for exploring the variety of expressions of contemporary spirituality. Looking at the many manifestations of spirituality, the danger exists that spirituality can start to mean anything. Berghuijs presents different empirical methods in questioning a group of informants and the implications of these methods.

The presentations in this panel run from dealing with the individual concerns of the researcher with regards to the field to the reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the researched and from the connection between researcher, field, and theoretical framework to the exploration of a fuzzy concept by means of a variety of methods. It aims to critically assess a broad range of challenges that arise when studying lived religion, and contribute to the understanding of what it means to actually “do research” on these topics.

Abstracts (max. 150 words)

Universal application of participant observation: problems of different worldviews

Cyril Kuttiyanikkal MA
Tilburg University

Participant observation is a method researchers use in order to gain an objective understanding of the life of a target group. Using this method to study a group, which has a different worldview, has posed problems for me as a researcher. The problems are on a conceptual level and on a spiritual level, which stem from the framework. On a conceptual level, it is difficult to transcend one's own concepts and frameworks. On a spiritual level, the people of different frameworks grasp the meaning of spirituality differently. Can we understand things independently of our own frameworks, without reference to what we already know?

Expert amongst experts: being a ritual scholar in a newly emerging ritual field

William Arfman, MPhil/MA
Tilburg University

Since the early 1990s, the Netherlands have witnessed the emergence of a new ritual field of collective commemorations. This emerging field is part of a larger reevaluation in the Netherlands of the importance of ritual behaviour. This reevaluation has led to an increased demand for new ritual experiences, which in turn means there are people actively catering to these demands. Doing my fieldwork amongst such ‘ritualisers’ in the ritual field of collective commemorations, some interesting methodological issues surfaced. Being considered an expert amongst other ritual experts, my ideas and opinions on rituals were actively sought after. This paper discusses the kinds of research encounters in which the researcher not only learns from those involved, but where the reverse is equally true. How should we deal with these encounters? Can and should they be prevented? Or should we simply accept that we are part of the field we study?

Performing ethnography, music, and sacrality

Lieke Wijnia MA
Tilburg University

Sacrality is a notion that can be studied and explored in innumerable ways. The point of departure in this paper is that the sacred is a construct that can be actively attributed or experienced. In other words, it is continuously performed. Therefore, to study the sacred is to study these acts of attribution and experiences, while they take place, or the accounts of them given afterwards. To study the field, those places where these practices are performed, ethnography is a frequently used method. The field in this paper is that of the annual festival *Musica Sacra Maastricht*. In addition to the concept of sacrality and the method of ethnography, a third performance-related dimension is found here: music. This paper then explores from a performative approach, how the research method of ethnography regarding a field of musical performances can contribute to the study of the concept of sacrality.

Mapping the fuzziness of spirituality

ir. Joantine Berghuijs MPhil
Utrecht University

'Spirituality' is a popular but also quite commercialised term, with an increasing range of understandings. Its manifestations are clearly not exclusively related to religion. In my research I have applied different empirical approaches to capture the variety of spiritual understandings, ideas, experiences, and practices in the Netherlands. These approaches include a representative survey where I asked respondents for a description of spirituality, their self-definition of being a 'spiritual' or 'religious' person, and their affinity with a large number of spiritual and/or religious expressions. In addition, in a number of interviews, it was possible to explore the background of respondents' spirituality in more detail. I will discuss the outcomes of the different approaches, and what we can learn from each of them, and from combining them.

Paper proposals (max. 400 words)

Universal application of participant observation: problems of different worldviews

Cyril Kuttiyanikkal MA
Tilburg University

In this paper I would like to discuss some difficulties that puzzled me while attempting to acquire a 'local knowledge' that is, an objective understanding of the spirituality of a different (half alien) worldview in its own terms applying the method of participant observation. Without going into the details of the method, I would like to focus on the issues I had to deal with.

One of the important aims of participant observation is to enable the researcher to experience the world in the same way as the people he/she studies. But this very endeavour raises some questions. In my encounter, I had problems on a conceptual and on a spiritual level. On a conceptual level, I came across people of different worldview. Hindus have a different understanding of an individual, religion, spirituality, God, world and culture. Is it possible for a non-Hindu to leave his/her worldview behind in order to enter into another culture and worldview? Can the researcher be committed to two worldviews at the same time? And if he/she is able to immerse him/herself in another culture to the point of becoming a 'native'¹ will he/she become the subject or object or both at the same time? Will his/her conclusions then be subjective or objective? I realized that it is difficult to transcend one's own concepts and frameworks to adopt those of the 'other' in such a way as to know what his/her world is. Human beings understand new information by relating to what is already known.

On the spiritual level, it can be said that the Western model of spirituality is not compatible with the Indian view of spiritual life, which follows, among other things, from different worldviews. However, the study of spirituality faces a particular complication because it is neither fully objective nor fully subjective. Even when spiritual actions are observable and imitable, there is still a gap between the experience of the participant (from a different worldview) and that of those who have always lived it. Indeed to locate spirituality at the level of language, rituals, symbols, or other forms of representations is devaluing the very concept of spirituality. Can we study the spirituality of the people at the deathbed by participant observation? How can we become participant when

¹ I am aware that going native to the extent of researching losing his interest in analytical research is considered negative. However to what extent this is true remain contested.

membership is inherently limited to ethnicity, lineage or race? Are we not transposing our own cultural backgrounds and our own cultural baggage into our translation and interpretation of others' spirituality and beliefs?

Expert amongst experts: being a ritual scholar in a newly emerging ritual field

William Arfman, Mphil/MA

Tilburg University

Since the early 1990s, the Netherlands have witnessed the emergence of a new ritual field of collective commemorations. Crematoriums organize commemorative meetings, funeral homes work together with artists to host ritual walks on an illuminated cemetery, while churches are experimenting with outward oriented projects to showcase their own commemorative traditions. All of this, of course, is part of a larger reevaluation in the Netherlands of the importance of ritual behaviour. This reevaluation has led to an increased demand for new ritual experiences, which in turn means there are people actively catering to these demands. Doing my fieldwork amongst such 'ritualisers' active in the ritual field of collective commemorations, some interesting methodological issues surfaced. These issues, and what they entail for the impact of researchers on current religious development, constitute the subject of this paper.

Firstly, a brief overview will be given of the kind of fieldwork encounters that made up the research that I conducted, such as interviews, participant observation during ritual events and as all kinds of preparatory meetings. In addition, attention will be given to the type of encounters currently promoted by universities under the heading of 'research validation', such as giving presentations or writing about your research for a non-academic audience.

Next, I will try to give some insight into the variety of experts encountered during my fieldwork. What are their backgrounds? What are their goals and what are the challenges they face if they want to achieve them? And what kind of methods do they use to overcome them? And on a more fundamental level: what is their attitude towards the concept of 'ritual'? What do they think rituals *should* look like, feel like or achieve?

The final step of my paper is inspired by Catherine Bell's work on another new breed of secular ritual experts, i.e. scholars interested in ritual studies. She argues that their role is not a neutral one, but has in fact had a huge impact on how non-scholars perceive ritual. Our findings, she says, have turned into self-fulfilling prophecies.² To gauge whether my own research is such a self-fulfilling prophecy, I will have a closer look at a few of my own fieldwork encounters. To wrap things up I will try to evaluate whether influencing one's own field can be prevented and more importantly, if that is even needed.

Performing ethnography, music, and sacrality

Lieke Wijnia MA

Tilburg University

Sacrality is a notion that can be studied and explored in innumerable ways. The point of departure in this paper is that the sacred is a construct that can be actively attributed or experienced. In other words, it is continuously performed. Therefore, to study the sacred is to study these acts of attribution and experiences, while they take place, or the accounts of them given afterwards. To study the field, those places where these practices are performed, ethnography is a frequently used method. The field in this paper is that of the annual festival *Musica Sacra Maastricht*. In addition to

² Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997).

the concept of sacrality and the method of ethnography, a third performance-related dimension is found here: music. This paper then explores from a performative approach, how the research method of ethnography regarding a field of musical performances can contribute to the study of the concept of sacrality.

First, three aspects of doing ethnography are explored: participant observation, sensory ethnography, and having conversations. These aspects stood out during the conduct of fieldwork during and around the annual festival. An additional challenge is the brevity of the moments of encounter with the field. The field only takes place for four days a year. Moreover, the researcher needs to be aware of its own performative role in the field.

Second, the notion of music will be addressed. Music, as the “organization of sound and silence within a particular time and space”³ offers a highly experiential means to study sacrality. The acts of attribution and experience can also be related to music, implying active involvement and engagement. Musicologist Christopher Small theorized this approach with the term “musicking” (1998). Everyone involved in a musical concert is contributing to the meaning of that performance and thus becomes a performer. The different degrees of participation, attributions, and experiences of sacrality within the musical performances at the festival will be explored.

Finally, the value of a performative approach to doing ethnography, to the notion of music, and that of sacrality will be contemplated. Despite the presence of familiar ingredients, every performance is different and new – a musical performance as well as an experience, or attribution afterwards. Whether and how sacrality is experienced and attributed is thus highly dependent on the properties of each performance. The performative stance creates a fundament, or common ground, in connecting the field, the method, and the theoretical framework in this research.

Mapping the fuzziness of spirituality

ir. Joantine Berghuijs MPhil
Utrecht University

‘Spirituality’ is a popular term that has increasingly conquered the market. ‘Spiritual’ books, lectures, workshops and courses, objects, and even ‘spiritual’ holidays are on offer. Simultaneously, it becomes increasingly unclear what ‘spirituality’ means. Its manifestations are clearly not exclusively related to religion. How can researchers get a grip on this phenomenon?

Formulating a definition is a straightforward but rigorous and top-down method. It has been shown that even if it were possible to construct a definition that covers all the manifestations of spirituality, it would be too broad. If spirituality can mean anything, it means nothing. In the definition discussions, little attention is paid to the question if the definitions suggested by scholars are in agreement with common speech. To empirical researchers and social and health workers it may be very helpful to be aware of the whole variety of understandings, experiences, and practices. It will help them attune to their respondents or clients when talking about spirituality, because a shared understanding cannot be assumed. Therefore, we chose a bottom-up approach, more specifically, a number of different bottom-up approaches to map the understandings and contents of the term.

Firstly, we asked a representative sample of the Dutch population in an open question what spirituality means to them. A disadvantage is that descriptions only consist of one or a few sentences, and give no opportunity to explore the background of respondents’ spirituality in more detail.

³ As formulated by Prof. John Harper during the conference *Performances of religious music in medieval and late modern times* (November 2013, Tilburg University).

Therefore, secondly, we conducted interviews with ten people who self-identified as 'unaffiliated and spiritual'. Of course a limited number of interviews can never be representative. Therefore, in our third approach, we combined a top-down approach with a bottom-up approach. We presented the same survey sample with a long list of items describing spiritual and/or religious ideas, experiences, and practices, and we studied their affinity with these expressions. Principal components analysis revealed that two sets of coherent items can be distinguished, one of which can be understood as new spirituality, and the other as traditional religion. A complication is that we do not know if respondents associate these beliefs, experiences, and practices with their own spirituality or religion, because we avoided those terms in the wording of the items. Therefore, in the fourth place and finally, we also asked for respondents' self-definition as a 'religious' or a 'spiritual' person. I will discuss the outcomes of the different approaches, and what we can learn from each of them, and from combining them.