

RELIGION / IMAGINATION

November 5-7 2025 Utrecht

www.ngg2025.nl



Utrecht
University



Nederlands Genootschap
voor Godsdienstwetenschap



noster

Netherlands School for Advanced Studies
in Theology and Religion

Contents

5 NOVEMBER.....	4
14:00 – 15:30: Parallel Sessions 1.....	4
1A: Pathways to Knowledge in the Study of Religion: Ludism, Experiment and the Imagination (<i>Drift 13, 0.04</i>).....	4
1B: Paneldiscussie Nederlands levensbeschouwelijk onderwijs: een spagaat tussen religiewetenschappelijke vorming en persoonsvorming (<i>Drift 25, 0.03</i>).....	4
1C: Immersion in the (Religious) Worlds of Others (<i>Drift 25, 2.03</i>).....	5
16:00 – 17:30: Keynote Lecture “ <i>Secondhand Sacred: Collecting imaginations at play</i> ” – James Bielo (Northwestern University) (<i>Drift 13, 0.04</i>).....	7
6 NOVEMBER.....	8
09:30 – 11:00: Plenary Round Table “Religion and/as Imagination: In conversation with Wouter Hanegraaff” (<i>Drift 13, 0.04</i>).....	8
11:30 – 13:00: Parallel Sessions 2.....	8
2A: Imaginations of religion and violence (<i>Drift 25, 0.03</i>).....	8
2B: Ecologies of popular culture and religion (<i>Drift 13, 0.04</i>).....	10
2C: Mobilizing the imagination: Religion and the dynamics of social and private life (<i>Drift 25, 3.01</i>).....	12
2D: World-view, World-making, world-building: The worlds (non)religions shape (I) (<i>Drift 25, 2.03</i>).....	14
2E: Imagining Islam in Turkish Through Books: A Vernacular History (<i>Drift 13, 0.03</i>)...	16
14:00 – 15:30: Parallel Sessions 3.....	19
3A: Imaginations and the intimate self (<i>Drift 25, 0.03</i>).....	19
3B: The Religious Middle Ages in the 21st-Century Imagination (<i>Drift 13, 0.04</i>).....	21
3C: Cosmology and the imagination (<i>Drift 25, 3.01</i>).....	22
3D: The politics of worldview (<i>Drift 25, 2.03</i>).....	23
3E: The Imagination and Religious Narrative: Building Religious Worlds (<i>Drift 13, 0.03</i>).....	25

16:00 – 17:00: Keynote Lecture “Ways of Knowing: The Significance of Religious Imaginaries beyond Western Secularities” – Sertaç Sehlíkoglu (University College London) (<i>Drift 13, 0.04</i>)	26
7 NOVEMBER.....	27
09:30 – 11:00: Plenary Reimagining Religion (<i>Janskerkhof 2-3, 0.13</i>)	27
11:15 – 12:45: Parallel Sessions 4.....	30
4A: Theorizing religion and imagination (<i>Drift 25, 0.03</i>)	30
4B: Influencers, nuns and TikTok: Christianities and digital media (<i>Janskerkhof 2-3, 0.13</i>).....	31
4C: Sacred histories and the recognition of self and other (<i>Drift 25, 3.01</i>)	34
4D: Beyond the Categorical: Social Imaginaries of Cultural Heritage (<i>Drift 25, 2.03</i>) ..	36
4E: Prefigurative Imagination and the past/present/future of religion (<i>Drift 13, 0.03</i>) ..	38
13:45 – 15:15: Parallel Sessions 5.....	40
5A: Re-imagining religious heritage-making (<i>Drift 25, 0.03</i>).....	40
5B: The stories we live by: academic by training, human by default? (<i>Janskerkhof 2-3, 0.13</i>).....	42
5C: Mediating religion and power (<i>Drift 25, 3.01</i>).....	44
5D: World-view, World-making, world-building: The worlds (non)religions shape (II) (<i>Drift 25, 2.03</i>)	46
5E: The Roundness of Loss: Relating artistic, spiritual and ritual imagination to experiences of grief (<i>Drift 13, 0.03</i>)	48
15:45 – 17:15: Final Plenary Panel “Theming, designing, selling: Religion and the experience economy” – Margreet van Es (Utrecht University), Ernst van den Hemel (Meertens Instituut / Utrecht University) and Jeremy Stolow (Concordia University) (<i>Janskerkhof 2-3 0.13</i>)	50

5 NOVEMBER

14:00 – 15:30: Parallel Sessions 1

1A: Pathways to Knowledge in the Study of Religion: Ludism, Experiment and the Imagination (*Drift 13, 0.04*)

In this roundtable, we reflect on the role of methodological ludism and experimentation in the (religious) imagination and the ways we research this. In the current research of the convenors, experiment has become a productive lens through which to view the ways people engage with religious materialities and possibilities. By allowing the possibility of experimentation, we can perhaps better grasp the ways people imagine possibilities: what if I approach life, or this particular situation, ‘as if’ God exists, ‘as if’ a spirit is connected to this object, ‘as if’ a fictional character is going through the same thing?

Kim Knibbe (RUG) will reflect on methodological ludism 15 years after her publication with André Droogers. How has the (anthropological) study of religion evolved since this proposal, what pathways opened up? **Birgit Meyer (UU)** discusses her involvement in a collaborative research project on the provenance of a missionary collection of spiritual artefacts kept in the Übersee-Museum Bremen. She will address one of the most pressing questions this research entails for her: what on earth is a spirit, and how to come to terms with it as a scholar? **Welmoed Wagenaar (RUG/UAntwerpen)** reflects on her research among fans of fictional (trans)media and their subjunctive, playful practices. What does it mean to engage in imaginary worlds and characters as if they are real? What opportunities open up from this and when may it become harmful—and how do people navigate this? **Rebecca Laura Anne Davis (RUG/UMünster)** will reflect on her research among ex- evangelical women and how they shifted their sense of embodied morality through experimentation. How does a subjunctive ‘what if’ approach allow for moral transformation especially during religious exit? **Marleen de Witte (UU)** shares her experiences with collaborative research-theatre experiments around African religious heritage in Dutch museums. How can play bridge tensions between ‘secular’ and ‘religious/spiritual’ epistemologies and practices in engaging with spiritually loaded heritage? **André Droogers (VU)** will provide closing remarks.

1B: Paneldiscussie Nederlands levensbeschouwelijk onderwijs: een spagaat tussen religiewetenschappelijke vorming en persoonsvorming (*Drift 25, 0.03*)

NGG-werkgroep Religiewetenschap en onderwijs

Binnen de vakdidactiek is een belangrijke vraag: ‘Wat moeten leerlingen leren en waarom?’ Deze vraag is voor alle schoolvakken ingewikkeld, maar lijkt voor het vak Godsdienst/Levensbeschouwing (GL) nog moeilijker dan voor andere vakken. Eén groep docenten en opleiders ziet graag een schoolvak dat verankerd is in de academische religiewetenschap. Voor deze groep is daarom de belangrijke vraag een vakdidactische: welke religiewetenschappelijke kennis en vaardigheden kiezen

we in het voortgezet onderwijs en met welke methoden kunnen we deze kennis en vaardigheden effectief en boeiend overbrengen? Een andere groep docenten en opleiders werken persoonsvormend en willen leerlingen helpen om hun eigen levensbeschouwelijke identiteit te ontwikkelen. Voor deze groep speelt inleiding in de inhoud van een vakgebied een ondergeschikte rol en staat de godsdienstpedagogische vraag voorop: hoe ondersteunen we kinderen in hun levensbeschouwelijke ontwikkeling en welke werkvormen helpen hierbij?

In dit panel gaan **Markus Altena Davidsen (Leiden University)**, **Juliëtte van Deursen-Vreeburg (Tilburg University)** en **Gijs van Gaans (Leiden University/University of Amsterdam)** in gesprek o.a. over de vragen ‘Hoe verhouden religiewetenschappelijke competenties en persoonsvorming zich tot elkaar?’, ‘Wat maakt beide benaderingen maatschappelijke relevant?’ en ‘Waarop moet de focus liggen in het voortgezet onderwijs?’

1C: Immersion in the (Religious) Worlds of Others (*Drift 25, 2.03*)

From theme parks and VR simulations to museum exhibits, immersive theatre, and cinematic franchises, people today are increasingly invited to inhabit the (religious) life-worlds of real or imagined ‘others’. While scholars of religion have long examined how individuals become immersed in traditions they recognize as their own, this panel shifts the analytical lens towards immersive encounters with religious difference.

Menno Kramer (Utrecht University)

My research examines how the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU) presents religion through religious-based tourism within a multireligious context. The IRCU, which represents various Christian communities and the Islamic Council, acts across diverse social domains as an interreligious intermediary by presenting an inclusive image of religious coexistence. By using qualitative methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and discourse analysis, this study explores how Religion (as a conceptual category) is presented at the intersection of spirituality, tourism, and interreligious coexistence. My research addresses the role of religious and social imaginaries in constructing tourist encounters and how traces of colonial and missionary frameworks still influence these representations. It also examines how the IRCU mobilizes media, ritual, and aesthetics to promote harmony and inclusion between faith communities. Thus, how interreligious institutions like IRCU use tourism to promote religious relevance for society, religious coexistence and social cohesion.

“Making Immersive Worlds: Religious Envelopment in the Experience Economy” - Benjamin Kirby (University of Bayreuth)

Contemporary cultural producers are engineering environments that stage therapeutic renewal, wonder, and escape through immersive experiences, addressing late-modern anxieties about disconnection, distraction, and disenchantment. This paper advances an analytic of immersivity not

simply as a static spatial property, but as a dynamic socio-technical form and cultural idiom: a pervasive mode of organising attention and modulating affect across diverse global contexts.

The paper considers two case studies: (1) Therme Euskirchen, a German wellness spa whose immersive rainforest installation draws on Amazonian spiritual cosmologies; and (2) Volcano Bay, a Universal Studios water park themed around a fictionalised Polynesian culture and mythos. In both venues, designers deploy immersive techniques whose efficacy relies not only on sensory or technical effects, but also on the evocation of religious or spiritual others. More specifically, these techniques mobilise fantasies and projections about indigenous religious and spiritual practices, alongside broader intuitions about the capacity of religiously-coded forms to stage presence, modulate affect, and induce transformation.

My analysis makes two contributions. First, it advances immersivity as a critical analytic for understanding how religious forms are manufactured and reworked within contemporary experience economies, where religion blends with secularly-coded terrains of wellness, entertainment, art, and marketing. Second, it positions religion as a strategic vantage point for interrogating the cultural appeal, design mechanics, and social power of immersive environments.

“To Stage a Spirit: Curatorial Immersion and the Limits of Modern Imagination” – Larissa Platz (Cultural Geography Chair Group, Wageningen University & Research)

Across cultures, mediumistic figures, often termed “shamans” by anthropologists, have acted as a psychic conduit between worlds. In the colonial encounter, such figures became cyphers for the religious “Other,” refracted through Western ideas of meaning and mediation. How can curatorial practices today attend to the cosmological frictions and colonial latencies embedded in these histories? And how do we begin to narrate from the perspective of an entity that is liminal to the very question of meaning?

In addressing these questions, this paper - an interplay of a visual essay and a standard academic text - explores minor deities and ancestor spirits as mediators between indigenous cosmologies and the modern colonial imagination. It focuses on the Anito - an ambient, ancestral spirit Anito central to Tao cosmology on the island Pongso No Tao in Taiwan. Situated at the frictional intersection of colonial modernity and indigenous spirituality, the Anito emerges as a liminal figure - mediating past and present, benevolence and malevolence, tradition and modernity, indigenous cosmologies and imposed Christianity, and ultimately, symbolic life and death.

Ultimately, this paper proposes a curatorial mode of immersion that mobilizes indigenous cosmology and ritual as acts of cultural invention, providing grounds from which to rethink the politics of religious representation and imagination and consider resistance at sites of extraction and commodification.

“Culture Safari in East Africa” – Erik Meinema (Utrecht University)

Cultural entrepreneurs, museums, and travel agencies often invite tourists who visit African countries to immerse themselves in the authentic cultural life of African people and/or pristine

natural experiences. This is also the case in the religiously diverse context of coastal Kenya, which has experienced several waves of tourism in recent decades. While the majority of Kenya's population is Christian, the aesthetics of tourism-related sites (hotels, curio shops, attractions, museums, events) generally thematize the cultural lives of various religious 'others', such as Swahili Muslims or the Mijikenda people, some of whom continue to value and practice their own indigenous traditions. Next to the tropical beaches and nearby nature reserves, the opportunity to meet these cultural and/or religious 'others' is indeed what draws many tourists to coastal Kenya.

Focusing on Mijikenda people in particular, this paper explores the different politico-aesthetic frames through which Mijikenda traditions are presented to tourists. It does so through a focus on three interrelated dimensions: (1) the commodification of Mijikenda tradition as it is translated, packaged, sold, and experienced by tourists who wish to immerse themselves in an authentic experience of African culture; (2) the relation between 'cultural tourism' and wildlife/nature tourism; and (3) the politics of time that are involved in representing Kenya as a place where visitors can experience African nature or authentic cultural experiences that have been untouched by development or modernity.

16:00 – 17:30: Keynote Lecture “*Secondhand Sacred: Collecting imaginations at play*” – James Bielo (Northwestern University) (*Drift 13, 0.04*)

What do collecting and exhibiting teach us as research methods in the study of religion? In this address, I embrace this question from the vantage point of an ongoing anthropological project: *Secondhand Sacred*. This work explores the circulation of Christian material culture through resale economies, vestiges of lived religious practice that have been cast off as discard or donation. *Secondhand Sacred* pivots on harmonizing a series of methodological inspirations – scholarship on material religion and the social life of things; logics of excitement from the experiential design industry; ethnographic dialogues with collectors and resellers; and, the imaginative work of Joseph Cornell, a Christian Science assemblage artist whose creative labor used secondhand materials to produce a "metaphysics of ephemera." Ultimately, I use collecting and exhibiting to explore the multidimensionality of sacred waste: as divested matter, as divergently valued commodity, and as heritage-in-question.

6 NOVEMBER

09:30 – 11:00: Plenary Round Table “Religion and/as Imagination: In conversation with Wouter Hanegraaff” (*Drift 13, 0.04*)

The concept of the imagination and of religion as an imaginative formation is a recurring theme in the work of the distinguished scholar of religion and esotericism, **Wouter Hanegraaff (University of Amsterdam)**. This round table brings together Hanegraaff and a panel of respondents. How does Hanegraaff see the development of his thinking about imaginative formations? What is the merit of theorizing the imagination as a core concept in and for the study of religion? How to pursue this further? What might hamper this project? Hanegraaff will address these and other questions in his presentation. The respondents, **Justine Bakker (Radboud University)**, **Christian Lange (Utrecht University)** and **Birgit Meyer (Utrecht University)**, will comment on Hanegraaff’s thoughts about religion and imagination.

11:30 – 13:00: Parallel Sessions 2

2A: Imaginations of religion and violence (*Drift 25, 0.03*)

“Imagining Trauma: renewed attention for historical witch trial victims” - William Arfman (Tilburg University) and Romy de Vos (Vrije Universiteit)

In the early 17th century, the mid-sized Dutch city of Roermond was home to the most deadly witch trials in the history of the Netherlands. Today, a theater group aims to not just commemorate the victims of the atrocities that took place here, but also to use their performance to help liberate the energy of the victims that might still be stuck here. Only a few hundred meters away, during carnival, an effigy of a witch is burned every year, as the embodiment of all that is negative. Meanwhile, next to the cathedral on the other side of town, a committee is planning to erect a national monument for all the victims of the witch trials. This was the site where torture took place. It is also one of the stops on a guided witch tour organized by a local Wiccan. Numerous more examples exist of the dynamic ways in which a (religious) atrocity from the past keeps being (re-)imagined. This paper firstly aims to bring the various archetypal images of the witch that are employed here to the forefront. Then it will use Maria Tumarkin’s concepts of Traumascape and Sites of Conscience as an analytical lens to analyze these phenomena with. An argument will be made that it is impossible to understand these phenomena without considering the way use is made of the interplay between imagination and religion by the various stakeholders involved.

“Imaginations of Home among Mixed Jewish-Christian Couples Today” – Lieke Schrijvers (School of Religion and Theology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, VU Amsterdam)

This paper explores how Jewish-non Jewish couples in the Netherlands navigate differing imaginaries of 'home' in the context of Israel's genocidal war on Gaza. It is based on ongoing qualitative research with couples where one partner identifies as Jewish and the other with a Christian family background, while often self-identifying as nonreligious. Over the past years, the partners experienced an increased sense of mixedness as aspects of their identities became contested and highlighted. Scholarship on 'mixed' couples often points to the intersections of race, religion and nationality, as well as to the ways mixedness is context-bound and related to societal issues. Mixedness is also related to the politics of home. Many Jewish participants had a family connection to Israel and some were born there but left the country because of the political situation. For others, although not all, Israel had long functioned as a symbolic homeland. This sense of home has been destabilized by the violence, political polarization and global responses to the genocide. At the same time, many also experience being at home in the Netherlands as precarious and conditional, with the current context leading to increased anxiety about antisemitism and concerns over the ways Jewishness is mobilized in populist discourse. Even though many were born and raised in the Netherlands, their experience is increasingly diasporic. In contrast, the white Christian partner largely relates to 'home' in the Netherlands as uncontested national belonging, rarely marked by family histories of marginalisation or migration. Although it can lead to misunderstanding, the everyday lives of these couples also show how they navigate different experiences of home and try to make a home for themselves in a polarised context. The paper argues that the mixedness of these couples cannot (only) be understood as 'interreligiosity' in the sense of ritual practice or beliefs, or as 'interracial' in the sense of belonging to a racialised minority or majority. Mixedness must be understood through the lens of imagined and contested homelands—symbolic and material—interwoven with religio-racialised positionalities and divergent family histories.

“Religious imaginary in times of war and destruction: Ritual photography in the Bosnian War (1992-1995)” - Dženita Karić (University of Amsterdam)

This paper will focus on ritual photography and other visual material created during the Bosnian War (1992-1995). The Bosnian War happened under the full attention of world media; the war itself led to the production of a range of textual and visual objects used for documentary and propagandistic purposes. In the Bosniak context, some of these visual objects center on Islamic rituals, primarily the Hajj, but also prayer (namaz) as well as a range of local rituals such as mawlid (celebration of Prophet's birthday), tawhid (mourning rituals), and khatm (Qur'anic) ceremonies. By looking at photography and other visual material (paintings, drawings, caricatures) in Bosniak print of the period, as well as private and library photography collections, I want to explore the intricate connection between the creation of visual objects related to the ritual and the wartime context in order to understand how ritual imagery gets reshaped and repurposed for new circumstances. By analysing the role of gender, age, and disability in presentation of the human body in ritual photography, I intend to show how religious imaginary of the wartime period revolved around the idea of sacrifice and spiritual victory. Finally, the paper will tackle the effect which this type of religious imaginary had on the Muslim public in the wartime and post-war period.

“Imagining Evil and Violence: The Persistence of the Blood Libel Legend in Current Conspiracy Theories” – Lucien van Liere (Utrecht University)

The 2024 conviction of a former police officer in the Netherlands for spreading conspiracy theories about satanic child abuse in Bodegraven-Reeuwijk reflects a resurgence of age-old moral panic narratives. Their historical roots in Western Europe draw a rich history of social fears of heretics, witches, Jews, and others. Furthermore, many modern varieties of elite conspiracy theories still contain the element of ritual murder.

Current research on conspiracy theories emphasizes contextual social factors such as social insecurity, political instability, moral panics, the spread of fake news, social conflicts, and distrust towards governmental institutions. What is less emphasized is understanding the core of the ritual abuse narrative: the ‘hunger’ for children’s blood. How come that, especially this narrative and the many varieties it has generated, has become part of so many theories on elite conspiracies?

In addition to symbolizing evil threats, child sacrifice also reflects sharp social divisions between safe and unsafe, sane and insane, good and evil, allowed and taboo, devotion and violent destruction, inside and outside. I will argue that this sensational theme adheres to diverse conspiracy narratives and recycles deep-seated fears, while it is sustained through secularized versions of religious imagery. Based on several current cases, will show how the narrative of ritual murder encompasses both a religious scenario of evil practices and an ongoing social concern for the well-being of the community. This combination makes the theme powerful enough to be retold again and again.

2B: Ecologies of popular culture and religion (*Drift 13, 0.04*)

“Dune And Avatar: Visions Of Religion In Contemporary Science Fiction” - Mathilde van Dijk (University of Groningen)

In 2021, the fourth attempt to adapt Frank Herbert’s classic science fiction novel Dune led to the very successful Dune-franchise. In the meantime, Denis Villeneuve directed two films, which will be followed by a final part, to be released in 2025. In 2022, Avatar: the Way of the Water was released as a second instalment of the Avatar-franchise, directed by James Cameron and begun in 2008. Both franchises tell a tale of colonization, in which an indigenous people has to deal with an invasion by off-worlders. In keeping with the nature of their genre, science fiction, religion plays a crucial but radically different role. Cameron imagines a nature religion, focused on a female deity, worshipped by a people in sync with their world; Villeneuve points to the danger that religion brings. In Dune, it leads to war and unfathomable cruelty. In my paper, I would like to explore these two interpretations of religion, in the context of changing visions of religion, colonization, indigenous peoples and nature.

“Snow and water. Religion, nature and sacrality in Tintin and Habibi” – Kees de Groot (Tilburg University)

This paper is written from the perspective of sociology of religion and addresses shifting representations of religion and nature, and their sacralization, in western culture through the study of comics and graphic novels. It compares the representations of oriental religion and nature in Tintin in Tibet (Hergé 1960) and Habibi (Thompson 2011) and relates these representations to two types of modernity (cf. De Groot 2018).

Tintin in Tibet has been influential in the western conception of Tibetan Buddhism. The monastery, the monks, and the faith in the paranormal interact with the awe-inspiring and reverential natural environment of the white, empty Himalayas. The post 9/11 graphic novel Habibi was included by the BBC (2019) among the 100 most influential novels. Rather than presenting a construct that refers to one sociohistorical context, it refers to conflicting stereotypes, has a Muslim woman as the main narrator, and thus invites the readers to deconstruct their images of Islam (GhaneaBaziri 2024).

I analyzed the two works in a semi-inductive way, starting with broad categories, using open coding, and creating thematic clusters. References to religion are accompanied by presentations of nature (mountains, desert, water) in a sacral way: visually by giving them focus, verbally by using a sacral idiom (demons, abominable, paradise). In this light, it is suggested that comics invite readers to experience religion and sacrality through the act of reading visual language. It is argued that rather than just representing religion, comics and graphic novels are ways in which religion is present in contemporary culture (cf. De Groot 2024). Therefore, comics should be considered when discussing how religion affects cultural notions on nature.

“Digital and Material Re-Forming of Chinese Goddess Mazu- The Political Clout of Collective Imagination” – Kai Shmushko (University of Amsterdam)

This paper discusses the place of collective and curated imagination of the sea goddess Mazu, based on observations from Meizhou Island, the birthplace of the goddess. The small fisherman island, located in Fujian province, China, had become, over the past decades, a tourist and pilgrimage destination, visited by 2.5 million people annually. Through an expanding network of temples and learning centers, 3D mapping light and shadow shows, and the recently added digital film installation "First Sight of Mazu", the Mazu island park is creating a new interpretation and contribution to Mazu heritage formation and culture.

The study turns to ask: What does the new visual and material reproduction of Goddess Mazu add to its corpus of legends and more broadly to its heritage? In what ways does the planning and management of the island plays a part in the political dynamics between China and Taiwan? How does this particular site impact the cross- strait community of Mazu worshipers?

In the present day, alongside tension between the two Chinese political entities (China and Taiwan), Mazu is subject to political instrumentalization by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Questions of localization and authenticity regarding the spiritual and material heritage of the goddess are subject to politicization. It has been suggested that under Xi Jinping, China is using the popularity of Mazu worship among Taiwanese as a tool in its “peaceful reunification” agenda with Taiwan (Pomfret & Lee 2023). The case of Meizhou Island and its particular Mazu culture aims to shed light on this

issue. The paper explores curated imagination as a driving force centered in the nexus of cross-trait diplomacy, religious heritage management, and cultural and communal identity formation. The study shows how digital media serves as a creative tool in reshaping a collective experience for the island visitors and beyond. Furthermore, it proposes that despite China's atheistic nation-state structure, this case study challenges Anderson's framework of nationalism as modern imagined communities (1983) in which religion plays no structural role.

2C: Mobilizing the imagination: Religion and the dynamics of social and private life (*Drift 25, 3.01*)

“Urban Imaginaries: Pentecostal Architectures of Power in Singapore” - Katja Rakow (Utrecht University)

The paper explores how imagination operates at the intersection of religion, architecture, and urban planning through the case study of New Creation Church (NCC) and its landmark building, The Star, in Singapore. Officially designated as a secular cultural and retail complex, The Star also serves as the main worship venue for NCC, Singapore's largest megachurch. Drawing on the concepts of “architecturations of Pentecostal power” (Katsaura 2023) and “infrastructuring religion” (Burchardt 2023), the paper argues that The Star, as a material structure, shapes religious imaginaries of success, divine favour, and urban belonging while also navigating and transcending the constraints of Singapore's tightly regulated urban space.

The building's iconic design, strategic ambiguity, and symbolic naming allow it to function simultaneously as a secular venue and a religiously infused space. Through visual elements, media representations, and embodied practices, The Star becomes a site where religious imagination is activated and made tangible. It is imagined by church members as a divine gift and spiritual home, while also being framed in public discourse as a futuristic cultural hub. This duality reflects broader dynamics of control and freedom and visibility and invisibility related to urban planning of religious sites in Singapore's.

By examining how The Star is imagined, seen, and experienced, this paper contributes to our understanding of how religious communities use architecture and media to claim space and visibility and to shape identity in the context of plural societies with highly regulated urban spaces. It highlights the creative and strategic ways in which religion participates in world-making, not only through doctrine and ritual, but through the built environment of contemporary urbanism and the affective power of architecture and images.

“The Formation and Imagination of Catholic Hospitality” – Daniel Ellwanger (Leipzig University)

This paper examines the role of imagination in the formation of religious bodies within the Catholic lay association Hospitalité Notre Dame de Lourdes (HNDL). While Lourdes is often associated with

miraculous healings, its daily operations rely on thousands of volunteers whose practice of “Catholic hospitality” is shaped through a multiyear formation process. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and archival research, this paper explores how the HNDL cultivates a shared religious imaginary—one that allows volunteers to perceive and enact hospitality not only as service but imagined as a sacred vocation. At the core of this paper is the notion of formation of volunteers, understood by the HNDL not as a purely cognitive or spiritual exercise but as an extended pedagogical process involving the whole person. Volunteers are gradually introduced to theological and spiritual concerns while also being trained in bodily comportment, sensory awareness, and the rhythms of ritual service. Through repeated acts—walking in procession, offering physical support to impaired pilgrims, praying in group settings—volunteer helpers internalize a specific way of seeing, feeling, and inhabiting their role. Full members of the HNDL wear distinctive clothing and, at times, medals that signify their position within a symbolic and practical hierarchy. Rather than serving merely as markers of status, these items reinforce the embodiment of a particular spirit: one of humility, availability, and disciplined presence. This case offers insights on how local Catholic lay institutions, within a wider Catholic infrastructure, shape religious imagination not only through doctrine or liturgy, but through sustained bodily and mental formation. It contributes to current discussions on religion and imagination by showing how shared visions of service, care, and vocation emerge through the shaping of embodied knowledge, bodies, and belonging at Lourdes.

“The Dynamics Of The Imagination Of Social Life And The Role Of Religion Among The Yoruba People Of Southwest Nigeria” – Akinwumi Ambrose Akindolie (University of Bonn)

The Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria possess a rich cultural heritage where religion permeates every aspect of their lives. There is a considerable corpus of literature on Yoruba religion and social organisation, however, there is limited adequate research on the interplay between the religious imagination and social life, particularly on how religious beliefs, rituals, and symbols actively shape and reflect communal structures, ethical codes, and personal identity in both traditional and contemporary Yoruba settings. This paper investigates how the Yoruba people conceptualise, narrate, and enact their social realities through a blend of cosmological beliefs, oral traditions, and ritual practices. Drawing on anthropological, sociological, and religious studies, the study emphasizes that material conditions do not merely shape Yoruba social life but are actively imagined and reimagined through religious worldviews. Religion, particularly the indigenous Yoruba religion, along with Islam and Christianity, functions not only as a spiritual system but also as a key social institution that regulates behaviour, reinforces ethical norms, and preserves cultural heritage. Deities (*Orisa*), ancestral spirits, and divination systems such as *Ifa* play profound roles in guiding personal and collective actions, embedding ethical values, and constructing shared meanings. The paper concludes that in the Yoruba context, imagination is not an abstract process but a lived, performative act deeply interwoven with religious thought and practice, offering a unique lens through which to understand the cultural production of social life.

“Unpleasant Meditations. Imagination and the Senses in Jan Mombaer’s Rosetum” – Thor-Oona Pignarre-Altermatt (Catholic University of Louvain, Group for Early Modern Cultural Analysis (GEMCA))

This paper examines the role of imagination and the senses in late-medieval meditative practices through a close reading of the *Rosetum exercitiorum spiritualium et sacrarum meditationum* by Jan Mombaer (1460-1501), a canon regular of the congregation of Windesheim, the monastic branch of the Modern Devotion. The Rosetum is a collection of spiritual exercises that summarizes the teachings and practices of this spiritual movement, which emerged in the Northern Low Countries in the late fourteenth century. A pivotal work bridging the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, the Rosetum was published four times until 1620 and significantly influenced figures such as Erasmus, Luther, and Ignatius of Loyola. The Rosetum exemplifies broader late-medieval trends such as meditations on the Passion of Christ, death, and the torments of hell. These themes were rendered vivid through hypotyposes, lifelike descriptions that paralleled the focus on the suffering body of Christ in the visual culture of the period. In medieval conceptions of the human mind, imagination was the faculty of the soul that created images, tied to sensitivity. Spiritual authors harnessed its capacity to represent absent things as if they were present, integrating it into the framework of spiritual exercises. This reveals how this faculty could be used as a tool to achieve specific spiritual goals. Though not a theoretical treatise, the Rosetum offers rich insight into how imagination was conceived and mobilized in meditative practice. Contrary to the modern understanding of meditation as fostering a state of impassivity, often associated with Zen and well-being, medieval meditation sought to arouse intense emotional responses such as fear, sorrow, and horror. Imagination was central to this affective goal. By analyzing the Rosetum's exercises, this paper clarifies the meanings and uses of this faculty in meditation, emphasizing the role of unpleasant meditations in cultivating transformative spiritual experience.

2D: World-view, World-making, world-building: The worlds (non)religions shape (I) (*Drift 25, 2.03*)

In recent years, scholars have returned to the possibility of studying religion and non-religion through the lens of worldview – the ontological and axiological commitments that may underline human action. Others, frustrated with apparently passive relation to the world implied by worldview, have preferred to focus instead on world-making – from rituals and spiritual practices to transformations of the landscape. In parallel to these developments, studies of trans-media franchises and their fandom have put the emphasis on world-building – the recurrence of figures and motifs in different media that enable credible, immersive experiences. This panel proposes to bring these theoretical, methodological and disciplinary vocabularies together to discuss how they shed light on each other and how they may form the basis of future interdisciplinary studies of religious and religious-adjacent phenomena.

“Bible Translation in Amazonia in/as world-building, world-making , and world-view” – Victor Cova (University of Groningen)

In this paper I propose to look at the same activity (Bible translation into the Shuar language) through the lens of world-building, world-making and world-view. This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Evangelical mission town of Macuma, Ecuador with North American missionaries and Shuar people in 2011-2012 and in the provincial capital of Morona-Santiago, Macas, in 2015 to 2017. The argument is two-fold: first, that looking at the same phenomenon through these three world-concepts and their interactions contributes to a better understanding of the way Evangelical Christians shape the world they live in; and second, that it may help us clarify the meaning of these concepts and the light they shed on religions and their worldliness.

“The world-building practices of media fans: imaginary worlds, play, and subjunctive possibility” – Welmoed Wagenaar (University of Groningen & Antwerp)

Fantasy worlds, intergalactic realms, and alternative universes, each with stories to tell and heroes and antagonists to follow; in the contemporary media landscape, they are fuel for (shared) imaginations. Media scholars describe the existence of these fictional, imaginary worlds in terms of transmedia world-building: the creation of compelling environments spread across multiple media platforms, aimed at drawing audiences in and offering multiple points of entry to experience the world and the narratives in it. Large media conglomerates and their mega-franchises are an important driving force behind these worlds. But they are not alone. Audiences, too, engage in world-building through their practices and speculations, and none more so than fans. In this presentation, I delve into the world-building practices of media fans who are involved in transformative works, such as fan-created narratives (fanfiction) and artworks (fan art). Based on ethnographic research, I illustrate how these fans expand and elaborate their favorite story worlds through their fan practice. Specifically, I argue that fannish explorations involve and cultivate processes and features that are characteristic of ‘the subjunctive’: a mode of imagination and potentiality that encapsulates the human ability to deal with multiple ways of ordering reality at once, and that scholars have also associated with (religious) ritual and play. How are media fandom and the subjunctive mode related? What insights can fans provide on how people navigate ‘as if’ worlds in relation to the world ‘as is’? What parallels can be drawn when we center the subjunctive in various world-building practices—and to what effects?

“Making Scientology Real: Interpretive Drift and transmedial world-making” – Daan Sikkens (University of Leiden)

How does Scientology become plausible to people? How do aspirant scientologists learn to think, act, and experience the world in the Scientological way? In this paper, I examine the practices (such as auditing), interpretive devices (such as the ARC triangle), and texts (websites, instruction videos, and books) that aspiring Scientologists are confronted with, and analyse how exposure to all of this propels a process of what Tanya Luhrmann labelled ‘interpretive drift’. In Scientology, interpretative drift involves three interrelated dimensions: aspirant members are (i) exposed to experiences (of everyday and traumatic situations), and (ii) trained to interpret these experiences in particular ways that continuously reinforce a Scientological worldview. Furthermore (iii) rationalisations – such as appeals to Hubbard’s charisma and the scientific nature of Scientology – justify the truth and value

of the Scientological worldview. Henry Jenkins' theory of transmediality will be employed to account for the Church of Scientology's use of different media (websites, literature, books, and oral training), and of both non-fictional and fictional works by Hubbard, to create a transmedial and serialised 'world' or 'hermeneutic horizon' that Scientologists can (learn to) inhabit.

2E: Imagining Islam in Turkish Through Books: A Vernacular History (*Drift 13, 0.03*)

The longstanding emphasis on scripture, canonical texts and Arabic in the history of Islam has pushed vernacular, lived experiences of Muslims to the margins. Such approaches have also reinforced modern, binary categories such as orthodoxy versus heterodoxy, treated Muslim histories as neatly divided into fixed sectarian identities (Sunni, Shii, Alevi), or relegated nonconforming expressions to Sufism. This panel proposes to move beyond these limitations by focusing on the imaginations of Muslims in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. The papers foreground imagination not merely as individual creativity but as a form of collective, mediated world-making that shaped diverse visions of Islam across genres, sects, and borders. The panel aims to contribute to broader discussions of "what is Islam?" by offering an alternative history of Turkey – one that brings together and highlights actors and texts that have remained largely invisible in dominant narratives, but that offer invaluable insights for the future study of Islam.

"The Survival and Evolution of *Risāla-i Hüsniya* (Hüsniye) in Modern Turkey: Tracing Alevi Literary Heritage Through Ottoman and Republican Transitions" - Yusuf Ünal (Utrecht University, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies)

This paper examines the remarkable persistence and transformation of Hüsniye, a significant Shii-Alevi polemical text that has survived despite centuries of censorship during both the Ottoman and Republican periods in Turkey. Hüsniye features a fictitious female protagonist who defeats Sunni ulama in theological debates, translated into Turkish in 1274/1857-58. It gradually evolved from a censored Shii publication to become one of the most widely read texts in modern Alevi canon. Drawing on archival documents in Ottoman and modern Turkish, this research reveals continuities in state policies toward religious "heterodoxy" across seemingly disparate political regimes. While the Turkish Republic adopted a secular framework and ostensibly broke from the Ottoman religious legacy, it maintained an anti-Shii orientation, continuing to surveil and suppress Shii publications. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA) played a central role in efforts to integrate Alevis into the national-religious framework, issuing decrees that both acknowledged Alevi citizens and banned the circulation of texts deemed "noxious," such as Hüsniye. Despite these official efforts, multiple modern Turkish adaptations of Hüsniye have been published since 1957, demonstrating how official censorship failed to prevent its circulation and influence. The enduring appeal of Hüsniye among both rural and urbanized Alevi communities can be attributed to several factors: its capacity to imagine and articulate a distinct Alevi identity vis-à-vis the Sunni majority; its depiction of a strong female protagonist, resonant with Alevi valorizations of women's roles; and its adaptability to shifting

social norms—evident in modern editions that omit references to mut‘a (temporary marriage) and present an unveiled Hüsniye. This case study addresses broader questions about religious minority literary traditions, state regulation of religious discourse, and how sacred texts evolve as communities navigate modernity, urbanization, and shifting identity politics. By tracing the evolution and reinvention of Hüsniye, it contributes to rethinking the boundaries of religious authority, sectarian identity, and literary canon in modern Turkey.

“Mourning for Karbala with Turkish Literature: Fuzûlî and Hadîkatü’s-Suadâ” - Bahar Gökpinar (Yeditepe University, Department of Turkish Literature)

Mourning for Karbala is predominantly associated with Shii Islam. This study seeks to move beyond that paradigm by focusing on Hadîkatü’s-Suadâ, a literary work by the 16th-century Ottoman Turkmen poet Fuzûlî (d. 1556). While Fuzûlî is renowned for his contributions to high Ottoman literature and his advocacy of sophisticated poetry, some of his works outside this elite literary tradition have gained broader popular acclaim. A prominent example is Hadîkatü’s-Suadâ, which recounts the events of Karbala and came to be revered as a sacred text. It was regularly read aloud in Sufi convents (tekkes) during the ten days of Muharram as a ritual. More than 200 manuscript copies of the work are known to exist in libraries around the world, the earliest dated to 1546. Fuzûlî explicitly stated that his motivation to write this text was to make this religious narrative accessible to Turkish-speaking audiences, noting that although there were works on Karbala in Persian and Arabic, none existed in Turkish. He interpreted the Karbala tragedy as a divine sorrow meant to foster an understanding of destiny, linking the narrative to his own sense of exile from Anatolia. Living in the city of Karbala, which he saw as a spiritual blessing, Fuzûlî reimagined the event in a transformative light, as reflected in the title Hadîkatü’s-Suadâ: “The garden of those who attain divine happiness”. In this paper, I will explore how Fuzûlî envisioned Karbala and how he connected it to his personal experiences, to the Ottoman imperial context, and to broader Islamic thought. I will also examine the ritualized readings of the text in Sunni Sufi circles, as well as among Bektashis, and analyze the book’s continued circulation in printed form during the 20th century. Overall, this study aims to demonstrate how Fuzûlî’s vision transcended sectarian boundaries and shaped broader cultural and religious imaginations surrounding the mourning of Karbala.

“Being Antinomian and “Truly” Islamic: Imagining the Shuttar Community and their Common Path of Aşk” – Gökçen B. Dinç (Utrecht University, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies)

The choice of concepts and categories to define antinomian tendencies in the history of Islam has been a controversial issue. In this presentation, I engage with the historiography of the prominent Turkish Sufi scholar Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı (1900-1982), who notably refrained from employing Western concepts and categories such as syncretism, heresy or heterodoxy in his analysis of antinomian Muslim groups and figures. As the author and translator of 119 books still being reprinted, Gölpınarlı developed a distinctive approach to Islamic nonconformist movements and regarded them not as deviants but as “true” Muslims who refused to submit to state authority, wealth or fame. He referred to them as “Shuttar” to describe a broad community (şuttar tâfesi) encompassing

diverse antinomian Sufi groups such as Qalandars, Abdals, Mevlevis, Bektashis and Hamzavi-Malamis. These groups, in Gölpınarlı's reading, all renounced both Sharia-based legalism and normative ritual practices such as dhikr, believing that aşk (divine love) alone was the true path to reach God. Although their rituals (erkan) differed, what united them was their shared emphasis on aşk as the essence of their spiritual journey. While there is a Sufi order in India known as the Shuttar, I argue that Gölpınarlı as a socialist Muslim was instead inspired by the grassroots, lower-class Ayyar and Shuttar groups of Abbasid-era Baghdad, who are predominantly depicted in the literature as bandits. In contrast, Gölpınarlı imagined them as a long-standing, evolving tradition that persisted in various forms into the twentieth century. Although Gölpınarlı did not explicitly use Shuttar as a formalized concept, I will trace his usage of the term across his books that still circulate in public as religious media, to ask whether it holds a conceptual potential. Might Shuttar, as Gölpınarlı envisioned it, contribute not only to broader debates in the study of religion and Islam but also to postcolonial efforts to provincialize dominant, Eurocentric epistemologies?

“The Âşık of the Republic of Turkey: The Invisible Alevi and Bektashi Identity of Âşık Veysel” – Urum Ulaş Özdemir (İstanbul University, Department of Musicology)

Âşık Veysel (1894-1973), a local Alevi-Bektashi singer-poet, an âşık, was discovered at a folk poetry festival in the early 1930s. Veysel was embraced by early Republican cultural policymakers as the prototype of the authentic Turkish folk poet tradition that had survived from antiquity to the present. This role assigned to Veysel also led to his transformation into a figure who was religiously disassociated from Alevism. Releasing records from the 1930s until his death, Veysel became both a popular musician who contributed to the music industry and a composer who produced songs. Veysel began publishing his own books in the 1940s, and popular books written about Veysel created an acceptable âşık identity that aligned with the imagination of the leading figures of the Republic. Âşık Veysel was inscribed on UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in Turkey in 2009, and the 50th anniversary of his death in 2023 was commemorated as the UNESCO Âşık Veysel Year in Turkey. However, Âşık Veysel's religious worldview, and especially his Alevism, has not been discussed outside the limits accepted by the state. In this presentation, I will first briefly explain the âşık figure and its significance in the Alevi-Bektashi tradition. I will then discuss the secular narratives around Veysel and examine the cultural and political imaginations through which Âşık Veysel was accepted as a national Turkish âşık from the early days of the Republic to the present. Finally, I will explore Veysel's own understanding of what it meant to be an âşık and how religion and Islam in general, and Alevism and Bektashism in particular, were integral to this identity. The analysis is based on books and archival sources from the period, supported by Veysel's audio recordings.

14:00 – 15:30: Parallel Sessions 3

3A: Imaginations and the intimate self (*Drift 25, 0.03*)

“In God’s Image: Imagining the Self in the Marketing of Christian Coaching” – Jedidja van Boven (Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Tilburg University)

In the last ten years, coaching has grown into a booming industry, both in the Netherlands and globally. The popularity of coaching raises questions for researchers and practitioners alike: how does coaching differ from other forms of care? What is the appeal of the often subjectively oriented self-improvement focus of coaching? And, to speak in Weberian terms, what does its popularity say about how the modern individual views him- or herself in relation to this new type of religious specialist?

Scholars of religion have not yet extensively engaged with the coaching industry, even though a variety of religious backgrounds is represented in the field. In the Netherlands, aside from large groups of secular and broadly spiritual coaches, the number of Christian coaches has also grown considerably. How are imaginations of the self that are informed by the rationale of coaching – which carries certain messages about the autonomy of the client and the importance of individual authenticity – mediated by this Christian lens?

This paper examines how the self is imagined in Christian coaching by conducting a thematic analysis of the websites and accompanying social media platforms maintained by Christian coaches in the Netherlands. Rather than emphasizing coach-client interactions, it aims to understand how the self is imagined in marketing-oriented content that informs potential clients about a particular coaching business and that contains particular imaginations of the self.

“Imagined Marriage: Legal Consciousness and Lived Realities Among Syrian Men in Sweden” – Martin Eidrup (University of Gothenburg)

This paper examines how Muslim men of Syrian origin in Sweden invoke Islamic legal, religious, and ethical frameworks to imagine and interpret marriage, and how these imaginaries interact with reality and societal norms. Drawing on approximately 20 in-depth interviews with Syrian men in the Gothenburg area, the paper investigates how participants conceptualize marriage and how this shapes their expectations of gender roles and spousal responsibilities. Using legal consciousness as a theoretical framework, the study explores how individuals perceive and relate to law in their everyday lives, finding that participants express a view of marriage not merely as a religious institution but as a structured legal relationship that organizes spousal obligations and gender roles. These imagined legal forms are adapted through personal experience and exposure to a purportedly secular and egalitarian majority context. By centring the perspectives of Syrian men, the paper challenges common assumptions about gender and religion, and shows how men engage in active processes of legal and religious meaning-making. Through imagination, negotiation, and reflection, participants reshape their understanding of marriage in response to their lived realities. By conceptualizing this as a legal consciousness, it becomes possible to see how religious ideals, legal

reasoning, and social norms intersect—producing tension and conflict as well as re-evaluation and adaptation. Rather than framing this process as a clash between conflicting social norms, this study contributes to broader discussions on religion, law and society by demonstrating how Islamic legal imagination functions as both a normative framework and a flexible resource in diasporic life. It thus invites deeper engagement with how religious actors conceptualize law not only as external regulation, but also as an internal structure of moral and relational order.

“To Name, To Belong: Race, Religion, Secularism, and the Imaginative Labour of Parenting in Christian-Muslim Intimacies” - Deniz Aktaş (VU Amsterdam and KU Leuven)

Far from a private sphere insulated from public discourses, the family is a vital site where the politics of imagination and national belonging are enacted through everyday, affect-laden practices that both reflect and, to varying degrees, reshape broader social formations. Such imaginaries and configurations of belonging are especially heightened, whether reproduced, unsettled, or contested, within “mixed” relationships where each partner embodies varying degrees of societal normativity, particularly along and through the intersecting axes of race, religion, and secularism. To explore how such imaginaries and modalities of belonging are negotiated at the intersubjective micro-level within “mixed” relationships, this paper draws on ethnographic insights from Christian-Muslim couples in the Netherlands, specifically attending to the dynamics of parenting as a charged domain where questions of reproduction, (in)visibility, and world- and future-making come into sharp relief. To do so, it engages with narrative accounts, of how decisions around child-rearing, such as naming, religious upbringing and socialization, and ritual observance, are navigated, and mediated, within a “secular” Dutch cultural archive shaped by deeply sedimented hierarchies of religious legitimacy, cultural citizenship, and racialized belonging. By attending to these dynamics in relation to the current and intensifying societal polarization, the consolidation of ethno-nationalist and securitized imaginaries, and the normative distinctions that sustain them, this paper underscores how such intimate decisions, particularly those concerning “the sovereign subject yet-to-be,” i.e., the child, are deeply entangled with broader struggles over legitimacy, recognition, and the right to imagine and inhabit forms of life that defy dominant cultural scripts. In doing so, it highlights the ambivalent aspects of imagination as both a terrain of normative power and a site of transformative negotiation, while remaining deeply embedded and reverberating across various ambits of political life.

“Religion, Sexuality, and Feminist Reimagining in Western Europe” – Eline Huygens (KU Leuven and Utrecht University)

A growing body of scholarship on religion and sexuality explores how religious individuals in Western Europe navigate and negotiate intimate and sexual life within the context of both religious teachings and secular social and cultural expectations. This scholarship often challenges the dominant assumption that secularity inherently promotes sexual emancipation, and employs concepts such as agency and lived religion to highlight the complexity of everyday intimate experiences. Feminist theory and gender studies have frequently informed these analyses, particularly in interrogating the tensions between religious norms and sexual autonomy. In this paper, I propose to take an opposite approach and ask how narratives of religious people, which at first glance may appear conservative,

can serve as a creative and imaginative force for feminist thinking about sexuality. Feminist scholarship in recent years has increasingly engaged with the issue of consent and the discussion of defining sexual and intimate boundaries, particularly in the wake of #MeToo. To support this exploration, I draw on empirical data from two qualitative research projects. The first examines the intimate lives of Catholic women in Belgium; the second focuses on (Christian) mothers in the Netherlands. I analyze how participants in both projects engage in discussions about sexuality and boundaries. In particular, interviewees indicated that they are able to talk very openly about sexuality with their partners— some even suggest that their ability to talk about intimacy surpasses that of their secular peers— precisely because some intimate topics are considered very important in their religious tradition, such as sex before marriage or contraception. Contextualizing and analyzing these findings, I argue that religious conservatism has transformative potential in these cases and provides a robust vocabulary for articulating sexual ethics and intimacy.

3B: The Religious Middle Ages in the 21st-Century Imagination (*Drift 13, 0.04*)

The 21st-century creative field of the Low Countries increasingly engages with the medieval religious culture of its own region, from novelists inspired by the mystic Hadewich to visual artists turning to iconic artworks from the medieval past. The diverse ways in which this religious heritage is reinterpreted form a fruitful case to rethink critical engagement with the religious culture of the past that can be understood in the context of the ‘subjective turn’ (Taylor 1991) of our postsecular society in which secularization goes hand-in-hand with a renewed interest in spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead 2005). By turning to the religious imagination of the medieval past, artists and authors act as mediators in cultural transfer, imaginatively recontextualizing the past to explore complex identities and spiritual, psychological, and societal values in the 21st century. In this roundtable discussion academics, cultural heritage professionals and artists will provide their perspectives on creative engagement with the medieval religious past, both from theoretical expertise and practice-based knowledge. Why do artists and writers turn to the religious literary canon, canonical artworks (e.g. Merel Jansen’s re-use of the Ghent Altarpiece), and iconic religious figures in medieval art (e.g. Delphine Somers’ engagement with the art-historical tradition around Mary Magdalene), and how do they appropriate that past? How do heritage institutions work with artists to provide new perspectives on the religious past that go beyond academic knowledge and require a more imaginative approach? What values are found or rejected in the medieval religious imagination, and in what ways do contemporary artists reinterpret these values to inform the evolving conception of a postsecular society?

Suzan Folkerts (curator Athenaeumbibliotheek, Deventer) on the project ‘Hanze Art’, in which artists produced new work inspired by the library’s heritage collection. **Veerle Fraeters (Utrecht University)** on the reception of the medieval mystic Hadewijch in contemporary Dutch literature and Cultural Transfer Studies. **Merel Jansen (visual artist, Arnhem)** on her work inspired by medieval artworks by e.g. Van Jan Eyck and Jheronimus Bosch. **Dr Lieke Smits (Leiden University)** on creative reception of medieval artworks in modern and contemporary visual arts from a postsecular

perspective. **Delphine Somers (visual artist, Brussels)** on her engagement with folklore, myths, and rituals, and specifically her work around the figure of Mary Magdalene (online participant)

3C: Cosmology and the imagination (*Drift 25, 3.01*)

“The Story of “Nyame Ne Abrewa:” A Portal into Akan Children’s Imagination” - Bismark Agyapong (Department of Comparative Study of Religion, University of Groningen)

The social life of Akan rural communities is upheld by its traditions of imaginative stories and wisdom words. Among the plethora of Akan folktales in particular is the narrative about “Nyame Ne Abrewa” (God and old woman), an imaginative folktale every Akan rural child is quite familiar with, because of its captivating imaginations. Socio-cultural norms in the Akan rural communities seems to be more viable than what is observed in Akan urban communities inhabited by Akan people and other ethnic groups. The question then is what exactly accounts for such significant differences regarding moral conceptions between Akan rural communities and urban communities inhabited by Akan and other ethnic groups, with emphasis on the imaginary role the story of “Nyame Ne Abrewa” plays in the consciousness of Akan children. Akan folktales are generally hoarded with imaginary characters with unique roles to depict the Akan religion and cultural heritage. Contextually, the socio-cultural values of the Akan communities are deliberately communicated into the consciousness of Akan children through imaginative stories. As a methodology, this paper considers existing literary scholarship on the story of “Nyame Ne Abrewa,” with a particular focus on how the idea of imagination which is captured in Akan folktales contributes significantly to the Akan communal identity. It is argued in this paper that the imaginaries in the story of “Nyame Ne Abrewa” are not regarded as mere presentations but apprehended as social learning process of the Akan socio-cultural values and norms for children living in Akan communities. In sum, this paper contributes to understand how imagination captured in stories, with the specific case of the story of “Nyame Ne Abrewa”, plays a central role in the constitution of the Akan society.

“Bridging the World: Elemental Beings and the Ecological Imagination in Early Modern Europe” - Tjalling D. Janssen (University of Amsterdam)

Around the time of the German Peasants’ War (1524/5), the Swiss alchemist, botanist and lay theologian Paracelsus (1493–1541) introduced elemental beings—salamanders (fire), sylphs (air), undines (water) and gnomes (earth)—in his writings on natural philosophy. Building on precedent in ancient and medieval cosmologies of Neoplatonic and Hermetic signature, elemental beings populate Paracelsus’s four elements, and account for purported preter-/supernatural agency in these domains. While these intermediaries surely have a preter- or supernatural origin, they are simultaneously bound to the world, or “nature,” residing on the cusp of the manifest and the occult, matter and spirit, the senses and imagination. Like many of his contemporaries and following church fathers like Augustine (354–430), Paracelsus believed that the Fall of Man had ontological consequences, distorting relations between humans and their (natural) surroundings. Engaging with

elemental beings supposedly mended this damaged link, as they combine humanoid traits with intimate knowledge of the elements in which they reside. While elemental beings at their inception predate epistemic frameworks involving “the environment” by almost four centuries, their position in the cosmology of Paracelsus (and many later figures) can nonetheless be seen to belong to the “ecological imagination,” especially when we consider that the relevance of elemental beings stretches into the ambit of mining manuals and forestry. In this presentation, I want to offer insight into the ways in which elemental beings are a very salient cosmological expression of the “human-nature” relationship in early modern European culture, and occupy a surprisingly prominent place in the worldview of leading thinkers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and even beyond into the period of (post-)Enlightenment. Besides an analysis of Paracelsus’s relevant works, I will also trace some of the early-modern ecological reception of elemental beings and the evolving imaginaries to which they belong.

“Imagining Spirituality: A Critical Rereading of a Classic in the Field of SBNR Research” – Jonas Slaats (Radboud University Nijmegen)

In recent decades, scholarly interest in the phenomenon of individuals self-identifying as “spiritual but not religious” has grown significantly. This trend is frequently framed as evidence that spirituality constitutes “an emergent new cultural category that challenges the binary opposition of the religious and secular realms of life,” as Boaz Huss once put it. However, at the same time, contemporary critical religious studies have increasingly called into question the very conceptual dichotomy of the religious versus the secular. This development inevitably complicates the notion of SBNR. Can SBNR truly be understood as a third position when the categories it ostensibly bridges are themselves contested? Or does this classification obscure rather than illuminate contemporary forms of religiosity? One of the most influential works in SBNR research remains Robert C. Fuller’s *Spiritual, but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (2001). Despite its publication over two decades ago, Fuller’s historical and sociological analysis of SBNR—what he also termed “unchurched” spirituality—continues to be widely cited and referenced. Yet how well does his framework hold up in light of the critical reassessments of the secular-religious binary? Did Fuller address the conceptual ambiguities in the field, or did he inadvertently reinforce them? Do the movements he describes truly represent a new cultural category or was he only imagining a new form of spirituality? A thorough reassessment of his classic seems to suggest the latter.

3D: The politics of worldview (*Drift 25, 2.03*)

“Worldview” has become prominent in the past few decades not only in religious studies, but also in education (where it offers to complement or replace religious education) and in politics and law (where Latin American calls to “decolonisation” want to adapt liberal institutions to indigenous “worldviews”). The politicization of worldview is not new. Indeed, the concept Weltanschauung remains intrinsically tied in German history with the rise of what Max Weber called Weltanschauung

parties, and ultimately with the Nazi party in which Weltanschauung was institutionalized. This was already the case when the elaboration of a scientific worldview became central to the apologetics of secularist movements of the mid-19th century. Reciprocally, “worldview” might offer a new perspective to study politics as an alternative to ideology that foregrounds the different ways that political movements re-draw or trouble the distinction between the secular and the religious. We invite papers that analyze political movements and moments that mobilize the concept of “worldview” (eg: the Nazi party, the schoolstrijd, contemporary debates around “worldview education”) but also papers that use the concept of “worldview” to make sense of politics and political movements.

“From German Culture Wars to European Struggle of Worldview” – Todd Weir (University of Groningen)

This paper examines how the position of the National Socialist Party within the German culture wars of the interwar period shaped its own definition and politics of Weltanschauung. It then examines how the party used state power to monopolize use of worldview, as part of its efforts to coordinate German society, only to turn the “Kampf der Weltanschauungen” into its mode of understanding European politics during the war. Finally, the paper explores the efforts of American cold-war intellectuals to denigrate Weltanschauung as a philosophical project, in their efforts to found a political consensus in postwar Western Europe around pluralism and pragmatism.

“A pragmatic approach to ontological diversity for policy-making in the Anthropocene” – Ana Fernandez- Aballi (University of Groningen)

In the face of escalating ecological and sociopolitical crises, a pragmatic framework for integrating ontological diversity into policy-making is proposed. Ontological diversity is defined not merely as a plurality of beliefs but as the coexistence of distinct systems of reality-making—each with its own epistemological, axiological, and praxeological logics. Drawing on political ontology, four presuppositions are presented: the singularity of the material world, the need for axiological translation over belief homogeneity, the relevance of ontological plurality in participatory governance, and the recognition of multiple “worlds” as valid interpretations of reality. A conceptual tool is introduced to map ontological positions across material, anthropological, and cultural layers. This enables the operationalization of ontology in policy-making, even in contexts of polarized belief systems, by translating ontological commitments into shared principles without imposing epistemic conformity. Rather than obstacles, divergent ontologies are framed as generative forces for more inclusive and regenerative governance. Ultimately, policy-making is reimagined as a form of world-building that engages with human and non-human lifeworlds in ways that are coherent, participatory, and transformative.

“From « cosmovisión » to « cosmovision » via the rise of Indigenism” - Victor Cova (University of Groningen)

This paper explores the historical trajectory of the Spanish translation of the concept *worldview* as *comsovisión* from 1920 to 2020. For most of that history, the concept was

used in Latin America to refer to political ideologies such as socialism or nazism. From the 1970s onwards, however, it becomes increasingly associated with Indigenous people, first as objects of study, and later as legal, political and religious actors. Key to this shift was the mobilization of the concept by Indigenous activists in Guatemala and Mexico in the 1980s and 1990s. This association has produced such a semantic shift that the word has entered the English language as *cosmovision*, where it is usually defined as the religious or spiritual worldview of Indigenous Peoples. It also features in a number of treaties, declarations, human rights jurisprudences and constitutions. This paper will follow this trajectory, emphasising the move from political life to academic knowledge-production and back to political and religious life.

3E: The Imagination and Religious Narrative: Building Religious Worlds (*Drift* 13, 0.03)

Recent approaches in narratology have moved into terrain relevant for the study of religious narratives and the religious imagination. Unnatural narratology, for example, has investigated fantastic content and unnatural modes of narration, and diachronic narratology has applied narratological methods to the study of premodern literature. This panel aims to bring recent approaches in narratology into dialogue with the study of religion. On the one hand, we will explore how analytical ideas and concepts from narratology may deepen the analysis of religious narratives and religious worldmaking. On the other hand, we will examine how confrontation with religious material and with theories on the religious imagination may enrich narratological theorizing and challenge central narratological concepts, such as narrator, fiction, and unnatural narrative.

“Storytelling God(s): Metaleptic Relations between Author, Narrator and Character in Religious Hymns” – U.e Holmsgaard Eriksen (University of Uppsala)

Writing fiction has theological connotations: the author creates a world *ex nihilo* over which he has complete power and control – and imbues it with values, logic, characters, settings, and emotions. The author’s choices – the ‘authorial design’ – that lie behind fictional narratives have since the 1960s been studied within the field of narratology. But narratology has focused on the modern novel and many of its essential analytical concepts become unstable when applied to religious narratives where metaphor is taken literally, so to speak, and where God(s), for example, may not merely be presented as characters in a story but also as creators of the entire world that the story is about. In this presentation, I will show how narratives in the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian tradition, especially hymns, seem to permeate and transgress distinctions and borders between creation and creator. In a very literal sense, God(s) are at one and the same time both authors and receivers of religious narratives: invoking the Muses or praying to God, the human author ultimately places the source of her imagination in the divine realm, lending authority to the discourse produced – whereby God(s) become the storyteller and the human author merely their scribe. At the same time, the discourse is often addressed to the divine agents, who are thus also the intended audience of the discourse. Even more confusing, divine agents are main characters in religious narratives, such as

hymns. My focus will be on the concept “metalepsis”, coined by Gérard Genette. Metalepsis happens when an author enters a fictional world or a character enters the world of the author – whenever, in Genette’s words, the “sacred frontier” between the creator’s world and the created world is transgressed. The emphasis will be on the author or creator’s deliberate interference with her created world to highlight the role of God(s) as storytelling agents.

“Creating Belief through Religious Worldmaking: The Example of Late-Antique Hagiography” – Klazina Staat (VU Amsterdam)

This paper investigates the power of religious narrative, particularly late-antique hagiography, in creating different forms of belief through religious worldmaking. Scholarship has highlighted the strong nexus of religion, imagination, and beliefs. Narratives are crucial means in religious worldmaking: not just by construing worlds in text, but also by exerting effects in the perceivable reality, including human actions, emotions, and beliefs. The question of how religious narratives evoke belief through processes of religious worldmaking is particularly pertinent to hagiography, a discourse that is deeply invested with religious themes but also blurring the boundaries between the imaginary and perceived reality. How, then, are hagiographical stories made believable for the audience? Taking its cue from classical and postclassical narratology and ancient rhetorical theory, this paper singles out belief-inducing strategies in three areas: direct indicators of historical truth on the level of the hagiographer’s presentation of the story (logos), strategies of realism or *evidentia* at the level of audience reception (pathos), and techniques evoking belief in the protagonists’ moral character (ethos). The paper argues that the combined use of the three sets of strategies is crucial for the efficacy of religious worldmaking in hagiography, as it enables authors to present the audience with a narrative that, despite its fictionalised nature, still appeals to truth and credibility because it evokes real emotions and beliefs within the perceived reality.

16:00 – 17:00: Keynote Lecture “Ways of Knowing: The Significance of Religious Imaginaries beyond Western Secularities” – Sertaç Sehlíkoglu (University College London) (*Drift 13, 0.04*)

What if John Berger's revolutionary "Ways of Seeing" only captured half the story? This keynote challenges the foundational assumptions of Western visual culture studies by introducing *takhayyul*—a sophisticated epistemological framework from Classical Arab Scholarship that shatters the artificial boundaries between material and immaterial, perception and imagination, individual and collective knowing. Where Berger's gaze remains trapped in dualist thinking, *takhayyul* offers a trialist epistemology: the sensible, the imaginable, and the intelligible operate as interconnected realms where imagination is not fantasy but a mediating force that enables access to unseen truths (*haqiqah*). Through ethnographic analysis of contested heritage sites

and religious communities, I demonstrate how *takhayyul* creates collective epistemological communities that transcend Western academic assumptions about what counts as "real" knowledge. This is not relativism but rigorous alternative scholarship that decolonises how we understand knowledge production itself. *Takhayyul* transforms anthropological methodology by recognising imagination as constitutive of reality rather than opposed to it. In our polarised world where different communities seem to inhabit incommensurable realities, this framework offers urgent tools for understanding how shared imaginative references create meaningful exchange across epistemological differences. The implications extend far beyond religious studies—into political action, environmental crisis, and the future of academic knowledge production in a decolonizing world.

7 NOVEMBER

09:30 – 11:00: Plenary Reimagining Religion (*Janskerkhof 2-3, 0.13*)

Thinking through the nexus of religion and imagination requires that we reflect on the ways in which scholars imagine 'religion' and how we can study it. This panel brings together four early-career scholars who offer fresh angles to reimagine religious studies. Responding to the challenges of our times, the speakers question some of the taken-for-granted imaginaries that have characterized religious studies in the past, while envisioning new possibilities for the future. How can we conduct the study of religion when we put the 'imagination' as a social and political force central to our investigations? What kind of bodies do we (implicitly) imagine when we conduct the study of religion from a material or corporeal angle? How to account for the imaginative structures of religion, beyond merely 'bracketing' and potentially ignoring religious imaginations? How can 'religion' be imagined as a relational process that enmeshes people with extra-social entities? By addressing these and other questions in their presentations, the speakers will reimagine what is at stake in the study of religion. The presentations will be followed by a plenary discussion.

"Imagining the extra-social: a new definition of religion" – Arjan Sterken (Radboud University)

Defining religion is one of the central issues of the study of religion. Many scholars have tried their hand at it. While this has not led to the widespread acceptance of any definition, it similarly has not deterred any scholar from attempting to formulate a novel definition of religion. In this paper I wish to pay homage to specifically previous neo-Tylorian definitions (adaptations of 'religion is the belief in spiritual beings') but develop it further through several innovations. The new definition of religion that I propose is 'religion enmeshes the extra-social in the social world'. The first innovation is that this definition breaks with the ontological character of many earlier definitions. Such definitions utilize alternative terms for the spiritual or supernatural, such as 'superhuman' (Lawson and McCauley, Spiro, Riesebrodt, Martin, Jensen, Tweed, Thomassen), meta-empirical (Platvoet, Hanegraaff), transempirical (Davidsen), extra-natural (Sutherland) or other ontological references (Harvey, Boyer). This new definition, in contrast, focuses not on the ontological status of the beings

postulated by religion, but rather on their functioning within a social context by dubbing them ‘extra-social’. Secondly, rather than describing religion as a static phenomenon (religion *is* something), it focuses on the processual aspect of religion (religion *is doing* something), namely incorporating extra-social entities within the human social world. This definition, rather than religion being the result of enmeshing the extra-social in the social world, stresses that religion is a process in which lived worlds are continuously being shaped and negotiated. Next to clarifying this argument, this paper will also demonstrate ways in which this definition can be productive, as well as discuss its particular pitfalls.

“Imagining a Crip Study of Religion” - Martha Gabriela Sánchez Martínez (Utrecht University)

Broadly, the study of religion has taken many turns, and I believe it should now turn towards disability. Most recently, religion has been largely influenced by a shift to focus on lived religious experiences, often through the lense of the objects, spaces, and social networks that make up religious structures. While this has been called the material and corporeal study of religion, I’ve found little expansion on which ‘corpus’ is the object of study. The accompanying normalization of standardized bodies and minds must be resisted in future research, as this is exclusive towards individuals with disabilities or impairments. Further aspects taken for granted include the increased importance of community and dependence on technology for disabled people, which, when incorporated, offer a new perspective into religious and disabled entanglements. Lastly, disability provides insight into fluidity of identity, such as how bodies and capacities can change over time, often leading to changes in religious practice, identity, and/or accessibility. Incorporating these three key aspects of living with a disability can benefit the study of religion overall, as it offers a dimension of human experience that is often overlooked and unimagined. To streamline this project, I present an overarching theory and method to act as a backbone to future research in this realm. Crip theory, I posit, is sufficiently extensive as to offer the basis for this new perspective. Finally, using Barad’s onto-epistemology, that is, knowing in being, as a method allows for a deep entanglement between body and mind that should form the basis of this study. In sum, incorporating more inclusive theory into academia allows us to substantially and productively push the boundaries of how we imagine “religious” and/or “disabled” actors, and thus how these experiences are approached in future research.

““I Would Prefer Not To”: Religion, Propaganda, society as Gesamtkunstwerk and love” – Isabelle Duval (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

Viewing society as a Gesamtkunstwerk acknowledges it as a complex, dynamic creation shaped by collective imagination. As radical imagination theorist Cornelius Castoriadis argues, this imagination is not private fantasy but the collective force through which societies create their laws, norms and narratives. Imagination is not merely within society but constitutes society itself as an ever-evolving symbolic construction that can be challenged and reimagined. Religion, then, is more than just a belief system, it is one of the foundational institutions of the social imaginary, providing symbolic and ethical structures that help shape collective life. Drawing on Castoriadis’s concept of the social imaginary and Jonas Staal’s exploration of propaganda as institutional art, I investigate how religion functions both as a pillar of the symbolic order and a potential site of disruption. Both thinkers reject

the idea of institutional neutrality, framing institutions as mutable constructs that are subject to reinterpretation or subversion. Religion, in this sense, can serve as a catalyst for the creation of counter-institutions.

The concept of love is a particularly poignant site for the clash of divergent imaginaries. Referencing Byung-Chul Han's critique of the "pornographication" of love, alongside with Benedict XVI's Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (2006), I argue that this struggle reaches its peak in our neoliberal age. Moreover, I contend that the distortion of the concept of Agapé poses a profound threat to both love and the very foundations of civilization, and that religion can play a vital role in resisting this dangerous slippage between love and power, in alignment with Castoriadis's view of the social imaginary as a collective force that can actively create alternative visions of society. In this light, Herman Melville's *Bartleby*'s iconic phrase "I would prefer not to" emerges as a metaphor for subtle acts of resistance embedded within counter-narratives that oppose any totalizing logic of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

"Reimagining the study of religion" – Daan Oostveen (University of Humanistic Studies)

The distinction in the study of religion between "insider" perspectives of theologies and the "outsider" perspective of the so-called "scientific study of religion" has become increasingly untenable. This distinction has been sustained by both the desire of faith-communities to devote academic capital to the study of their so-called "traditions" as well as to the desire of scholars of religion to distance themselves from such parochial endeavors and be properly "scientific". However, as a result of this political carve up of scarce academic legitimacy, both approaches are equally inapt to grasp the imaginative frame that the study of religion implies or points us.

In this paper I argue for the abolishment of tradition-based theology from the academy, while at the same time abolishing "the scientific study of religion". Rather I think that we, as scholars of religion, should work together to rephrase what is at stake in the study of religion. This is fundamentally positional: every scholar of religion enters the field with its own hermeneutical perspective. It is from the encounter of the hermeneutical multiplicity of scholars of religion that we should reimagine our subject of study and why it matters. "Tradition-based" technology is too limited and uncritical in its understanding that religions are "traditions". Though this might be a valid hermeneutical understanding of religious diversity, it cannot justify an entire discipline, since the existence of religious traditions as a social reality is far too questionable. The "scientific study of religion", on the other hand, confounds objectivity and science. By only focusing on "empirical data", the imaginative structures of religion are bracketed and ignored.

I think we should critically review the ontological discourses that legitimize the methods of the respective disciplines of tradition-based or Christian theology as well as the scientific study of religion. This would enable us to imagine religion for our posthuman future in which metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics are intimately entangled.

11:30 – 13:00: Parallel Sessions 4

4A: Theorizing religion and imagination (*Drift 25, 0.03*)

“Imagination as bridge between leisure and spirituality: Pieper meets Bachelard” – Johan Bouwer (Titus Brandsma Institute, Nijmegen)

This paper explores the role imagination plays in offering individuals and communities a pathway to contemplation, transcendence and meaning-making through leisure and spirituality. Leisure is often associated with non-work, recreational and consumption activities performed in free time, while in essence it denotes a devotional or spiritual practice/experience which could be sensed as ‘something holy’ (Blackshaw/ Pieper). Spirituality, in turn, seen as detached from traditional structures and theories about religion, also involves personal, existential experience of what is deemed to be sacred, transcendental or ultimately meaningful. Scholarly research suggests a close, dynamic and reciprocal connection between leisure and spirituality, but fails to address the (mediating) role of imagination. This paper will examine how the philosophies of Josef Pieper, a German philosopher of leisure, and Gaston Bachelard, a French philosopher of imagination (amongst other), illuminate the role of imagination in connecting these two domains. Pieper, building on Aristotle’s *scholē*, argues that leisure opens up the possibility of transcending the utilitarian and engagement with the sacred, while Bachelard holds *reverie* (a time category) to be a contemplative, imaginative, mode of consciousness that opens up a pathway to the transcendent. The paper concludes with the statement that leisure, infused with imagination, could be denoted as precondition, fertile ground, for spiritual experience/transcendence, while spirituality, in turn, infused with imagination, could enrich leisure choices and imbue leisure experiences with ultimate meaning. In this dynamic, imagination apparently functions as a bridge. Understanding this connection could have profound value for addressing the ‘crisis of resonance’, which is fundamentally a ‘crisis of meaning’ (Byung-Chul Han/Hartmut Rosa), contemporary accelerated/accelerating society currently faces.

“How imagination is mobilized to make the unseen really real” – Hermen Kroesbergen (University of Pretoria)

Imagination is an essential part of religion. We recognize something as religious by noticing the presence of the imagination. In this paper, I will argue that this does not imply that religious people take this imagined world as real. On the contrary, they use and embellish their imagination to get in touch with something beyond this imagination, to be touched by something real.

In my paper, I build upon and expand upon ideas from the book *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* by anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann. Luhrmann emphasizes that religion, even for believers themselves, is not simply real. Luhrmann’s approach to religion consists of three parts, to which I would like to add an all-important fourth. In Luhrmann’s research, it is emphasized that: 1. Imagination is central to religion; 2. Believers are aware of the imaginary aspect of their faith; and 3. Religion requires work, Luhrmann calls this work ‘kindling’.

I argue that, with these three aspects of approaching religion, we have not yet reached the point where God becomes real for believers, as Luhrmann's book title suggests. She neglects the point that, although religion requires effort by the believers, 4. Believers experience religious reality when it feels beyond their own effort.

In contrast to what is suggested by Luhrmann: a. The kindling is not intended to support the faith frame, but to encounter religious reality; and b. Beyond their own activities, the believer is focused on the passive aspect of their faith – that is, where they feel they encounter the religious reality.

“Philosophical Belief, Religious Imagination, and Group Identity” – Roomet Jakapi (University of Tartu, Estonia)

Neil Van Leeuwen's book "Religion as Make-Believe: A Theory of Belief, Imagination, and Group Identity" (2023) is a highly influential work in the field of philosophy of religion. In this talk, I will critically examine the main thesis of the book and reflect on its social implications. Van Leeuwen argues that what we typically refer to as religious beliefs are actually mental states of a different kind: credences that are rooted in imagination and pretense. He compares the attitudes and behaviours of religious people to those of children playing make-believe games, pretending the existence of imaginary beings rather than genuinely believing in them. Additionally, he claims that religious credences, as he understands them, guide ritualistic actions that serve to signal loyalty to a religious community. I will argue, firstly, that the philosophical concept of belief that Van Leeuwen relies on needs to be reformed to include both voluntary and imaginative components. By revising this concept, the strict dichotomy between factual beliefs and religious credences, which is characteristic of Van Leeuwen's theory, would be replaced by a continuum of various doxastic attitudes towards religious contents. Secondly, I will argue that Van Leeuwen's descriptions of the group identity and communal life of religious people overlook or underestimate the presence of metaphysical assumptions inherent in religious practices. I will support both of my claims with empirical evidence gathered during fieldwork in Northeast India in January 2025. Specifically, I conducted the fieldwork in the villages of the Khasi tribe in collaboration with two Estonian folklorists of Indian descent.

4B: Influencers, nuns and TikTok: Christianities and digital media (*Janskerkhof* 2-3, 0.13)

“Tolerance as saviour of plurality or tool for undermining it? – An analysis of the use of the term “tolerance” in Christian right-wing social media contents, its theological justifications and possible counterparts” - Liv Steinebach and Kinga Zeller (PThU, Utrecht)

Tolerance is commonly imagined as a solution to conflicts in pluralistic and heterogeneous democratic societies by fostering peaceful communal life – despite all differences. Protestant Christian theology holds resources that strengthen this image. At the same time, we observe that the

term “tolerance” is employed by right-wing Christian influencers as a rhetorical device for polarisation. The (in most cases left wing, “woke”, etc.) “other” is accused of hypocrisy when Christian right-wing positions are excluded from dialogue. Do they have a point? In this paper we explore from a Protestant theologian perspective how the image of tolerance can be used both in an inclusive way and as a tool for polarization in shaping an image of society. We present and analyse the use of the term “tolerance” by Christian right wing influencer in Germany. We disclose the (potential) dogmatic and ethical foundations and contrast them with alternative concepts of tolerance and their theological underpinnings. In doing so, we demonstrate that Christian theology is compatible with various concepts of tolerance and that the theological imaginations brought into play make a difference for peaceful coexistence in a pluralistic, democratically constituted society. By showing this ambiguity of the image of tolerance associated with religious worldviews (one grounded in academic sphere and the other in public social media discourse), which follows (in both cases) the assumption that tolerance is useful for the normative framework of a society, we argue in a dialectical manner that it is important to recognize that a label reading “tolerance” does not necessarily guarantee its presence. This recognition is a prerequisite for developing defensive tolerance that is not just an academic construct. Finally, we also critically ask ourselves: Do right-wing influencers have a point, or is the refusal to engage with them justified for good reasons?

“Bro, Literally Just Read the Verses Before lol 🤔🧠: Anti-Protestant Catholic Apologetics on TikTok” – Arjen Spijker (University of Amsterdam and Utrecht University)

This paper explores how anti-Protestant Catholic apologists utilise the digital platform TikTok. TikTok is a relatively new platform, which is mostly used by adolescents under 25. Furthermore, its possible effects on the formation of religious self-identification are not well studied.

During three months, I conducted digital ethnographic research on the platform. Utilising the walkthrough method, I trained the algorithm to show a specific type of content on the FYP. Based on this initial training phase, I identified five topics that are often discussed by Catholic apologists on the platform. The research data, videos and comments, were collected using the programmes Zeeschuimer and 4Cat.

The five identified topics are: sola scriptura; Catholic versus Protestant aesthetics, papal primacy and unification with Rome; Marian veneration and the eucharist. For each of these topics, 20 videos were gathered and analysed, including the comments for each video. The videos were analysed by providing an ethnographic vignette for one video per topic. Using this vignette as a basis, I provided an in-depth analysis of the topics and debates discussed in the videos. Using computational methods, I visualised the comments by selecting the top 100 used words, including emojis, and organised them in a word cloud.

The analysis shows a continuity within the content of Catholic apologetics. However, the affordances of TikTok vastly change how apologetics is conducted. The main points are the incorporation of general internet culture within apologetics, using audiovisual methods as the central mode of communication and disregarding both traditional church authority and the diversity within Catholic

Church teachings. Special attention should be given to the algorithmic mediation which seems to push extremist and triggering content. This potentially creates a conservative pipeline.

“Godfluencers: The Christian Influencers Shaping Christian Identity Worldwide” – Gabriela de la Vega (Erasmus University Rotterdam)

This paper explores how Christian social media influencers use content creation on social media platforms to render their faith visible, tangible, and emotionally resonant. Building on digital ethnographic research, I examine how these influencers produce and share content that blends lifestyle aesthetics, theological messaging, and intimate storytelling to cultivate religious authority, community, and culture. As Christianity evolved, from printed sermons and televised televangelism (Horsfield, 2015) to today's micro-celebrity culture (Abidin, 2017), the boundaries between the online and offline have become increasingly blurred (Campbell, 2010; Evolvi, 2021). My theoretical approach rejects these boundaries, and builds on material religion (Meyer et al., 2010) perspectives. Material religion sees faith as a deeply embodied practice, and objects as acting meaningfully upon human actors (Morgan, 2021). This material turn underscores the importance of studying not just what religion signifies but how it is made tangible and lived through things, bodies, and practices. This paper argues that Christian social media influencers effectively harness the creative affordances of platforms like Instagram and YouTube to materialize the divine, offering audiences a curated, emotionally affective experience of religion that collapses the boundaries between public and private, sacred and mundane. Through immersive digital ethnography, I found that these influencers curate personal narratives and day-to-day depictions of religious life, where the digital platforms themselves, through their algorithms, visual aesthetics, and interface design, materialize belief and ideology. This dynamic creates content that is not only intellectually persuasive but also deeply affective and physically embodied. I theorize that the seductive appeal of their messaging arises from its capacity to evoke authentic emotional experiences and foster a palpable sense of community, making their views both credible and intimately relatable.

“Push out the demon: A case study of Catholic nuns in videos on Pornhub” - Lisa Pais (Utrecht University)

Scholars working in the field of popular culture and pornography have been attentive to the historical appearance of the *eroticised* nun as a trope (see for examples Douglas Cowan's *The Forbidden Body* or Frances Dolan's "Why Are Nuns Funny?"). Yet, contemporary porn platforms have largely been ignored as sites for scholarly investigation into the intersection of religion, sexuality and popular imagination. This paper aims to bridge this gap in the literature, by shedding light on the representation of nuns in porn videos on Pornhub.

Content analysis of ten Pornhub videos featuring nuns reveals some interesting tendencies. Strikingly, the videos rarely show a nun having sex of her own account. In many videos, the nun central to the video is either governed by a priest or by a demonic force. Alternatively, in many videos the nun turns out not to be a 'real' nun.

I offer three potential explanations for this pattern. First, building on analyses of Daniel Cutrara and Frances Dolan, it is possible that the plots of the videos exhibit historical anxieties about sexually active nuns as threats to (patriarchal) society. By controlling them and removing the nuns' agency, this threat might lose its urgency, echoing previous studies that found Pornhub to be reinforcing heteronormative perspectives on sex. Second, recent diversification of online porn content, as identified by Antoine Mazières et al., may explain the addition of other tropes and elements that feed people's imagination, such as plot twists, plumbers or horror elements, complementing the appeal of the 'transgressing nun'. Third, following Rebecca Sullivan, I suggest that the religious elements in these videos might perhaps best be considered commodified, empty memories of the past, serving to superficially attract attention.

4C: Sacred histories and the recognition of self and other (*Drift 25, 3.01*)

“Imagining Martyrdom: Improvised Rituals, Sacred Narratives, and the Semi- Consecration of the Missing in Post-Genocide Bosnia” – Amina Hadziomerovic (University of Amsterdam)

This paper explores the imaginative and ritual responses to unresolved absence and presumed death in the aftermath of Bosnian genocide by focusing on Bosnian Muslim (Bosniak) communities who lost kin to the mass atrocities of Srebrenica and Prijedor. In many cases, victims' remains were never found or were recovered only in fragments from secondary and tertiary mass graves. The absence of bodies disrupted conventional mourning practices and demanded new ritual forms. Based on long-term ethnographic engagement with survivor communities, relatives of the missing and traumascapes of their loss, this paper examines how post-genocide Bosniaks have imaginatively reconfigured mortuary rites and sacred narratives to make sense of disembodied loss.

To ritually and spiritually contend with the unresolved deaths and disembodied absence of the missing Muslim victims, the Bosnian Islamic Community, drawing on Qur'anic authority, declared them *šehidi* (martyrs)—not dead, but living in the sight of God and granted eternal reward in Paradise. I conceptualize this process as martyrdomisation: a ritual and narrative elevation of the missing that enables survivors to reframe atrocity as divine sacrifice and redemptive meaning. I theorize this as an immortality ideology, in which the martyr functions as a sacred figure whose elevation restores moral order and supports communal continuity in the face of annihilation. These practices reflect a responsive engagement with Islamic tradition and ritual form, where sacred narratives are drawn upon to transform trauma into a spiritually grounded and theologically coherent worldview. Drawing on theories of death ritual (van Gennep, Hertz, Bloch & Parry), sacred imagination (Eliade, Bell), and Death Terror Management (Becker), I argue that this ritual creativity represents an adaptive religious response to mass death and existential rupture. These sacred imaginaries do not merely offer solace; they reconstitute social identity, moral order, and collective cohesion in the aftermath of atrocity.

“Imagining Female Saints: Gendered Hierarchies and Religious Imagination in Southern Morocco” – Abdelmonim Elmoutassim (Ibn Zohr University, Agadir, Morocco)

This paper examines how religious imagination in southern Morocco constructs and sustains gendered hierarchies through the veneration of saints, with a focus on female sanctity among the Soussi people. While male saints dominate the region's religious landscape, female saints continue to occupy active yet marginalized positions within local devotional practices. Drawing on historical hagiographies, ethnographic observation, and contemporary ritual practices, this study explores how communities imagine the intercessory power of female saints, the symbolic meanings of their shrines, and the ritual engagements—such as pilgrimage, supplication (du‘ā’), and healing—that form around them. I argue that although female saints are regularly sidelined in formal religious discourse, they remain central to the spiritual lives of many devotees. Their sanctuaries are vibrant sites where people seek healing, fertility, justice, and personal transformation. Yet these figures are often framed through patriarchal imaginaries that render their sanctity secondary to that of their male counterparts. This paper asks: What religious imaginaries sustain the limited visibility of female sainthood? How do oral traditions and ritual performances reinforce or resist these narratives? And how do women—as saints and as devotees—navigate, challenge, or internalize these hierarchies? In addressing these questions, the paper sheds light on the complex interplay between gender, power, and religious imagination in contemporary Moroccan sainthood, revealing both the constraints and the possibilities inherent in the veneration of female saints.

“Who Gets a Pogrom? Sacred History and the Racial Economy of Recognition after the Amsterdam Riots” – Markha Valenta (Utrecht University)

On November 8, 2024, the mayor of Amsterdam declared that the violence surrounding a football match involving Maccabi Tel Aviv supporters constituted a “pogrom.” Within hours, the language of Jewish victimhood and European moral collapse was activated, amplified by politicians, media, and international observers across the West. And within days, it became clear that this declaration had been premature: the Maccabi supporters had acted with aggression, racial insult, and destruction. Yet the word had already done its work.

This paper is less about what “really happened” and more about how some bodies summon history, while others remain illegible in their suffering. It is about how the Western conscience continues to perform its moral awakening through the image of the Jew—now purified of contradiction—while the Muslim remains the spectral threat, the ungrievable presence, the one whose rage is always pathological, never historical.

Drawing on Chiara Bottici’s theory of the imaginal, I argue that “pogrom” here is not a word—it is a structure of recognition, a colonial mechanism by which the West continues to narrate its ethical self-image. It is not the memory of violence, but violence by memory: the weaponization of sacred history in the present, secular tense.

To understand this moment, we must see not only what was said, but what was excluded: the silenced colonial histories, the governance of religion as race, the living geographies of dispossession that do not qualify for moral alarm. We must ask: who gets a pogrom? And who gets a riot? Who gets to invoke Europe’s past, and who remains trapped in its future?

“Resilience and Adaptability: Reimagining the Kwakore Abosomfie in Contemporary Ghana’s Religious Landscape” – Harriet Boateng Aduako (Utrecht University)

This study examines the resilience and adaptability of African traditional religions, with a specific focus on the Kwakore Abosomfie in Ghana, within a complex religious landscape. By tracing the historical evolution and contemporary practices of Kwakore, the research highlights how traditional religions have not only survived but thrived through the strategic appropriation of elements from community networks, particularly trans-regional ritual innovations from across Ghana and beyond. In an attempt to remain viable and visible, Kwakore finds innovative ways to revitalize and often create strands outside the same traditions. Although Kwakore does not encourage the use of social media to promote its work to the public, oral narratives about its miraculous exploits circulate widely. Utilizing ethnographic methods, the study reveals the dynamic interplay between traditional practices and global influences through a multi-stage ties throughout Ghana, emphasizing the importance of community networks, ritual innovation, and cultural resistance in maintaining the relevance of Kwakore amidst ongoing religious diversification. This work invites a reimagining of African traditional religions as fluid and transformative institutions that continue to shape spiritual experiences in contemporary Ghana.

4D: Beyond the Categorical: Social Imaginaries of Cultural Heritage (Drift 25, 2.03)

This panel connects with a recent interest in the relevance of ‘imaginaries’ in [the making of] cultural heritage, as well as with conceptual approaches that understand heritage itself as an imaginary (Astudillo and Salazar 2024). We propose to move beyond seeing heritage merely as a site of representation, preservation, or constructed memory, and instead approach it as a dynamic social imaginary—one that has real impact on shaping collective identities, political practices, and lived social worlds. We argue that cultural heritage functions both as an imaginary in its own right and as a mediating platform through which other imaginaries are legitimized, mobilized, politicized, and performed. We also seek to critically examine the categorical and often binary classifications of cultural heritage, imposed by nation states and institutions—such as “tangible,” “intangible,” “national,” “indigenous,” “imperial,” “ancestral,” or “religious.” Drawing on ethnographic and historical research, the papers in this panel will look at the reworking of social imaginaries in the creation of categorical cultural heritage and examine the forms of political-cultural life these categories may come to assume.

“Fetih Ruhu ve Ecdad:” Neo-Ottoman Imaginaries of Heritage – Ayşenur Korkmaz (Meertens Institute)

This paper explores the idea of “Ottoman heritage” as a popular social imaginary in contemporary Turkey, which has shaped the country’s dominant socio-political culture over the past twenty years. Neo-Ottoman imaginaries of heritage emerged as a bottom-up oppositional imaginary in the 1980s

and 1990s in Turkey, conceived as an alternative to the cultural landscape long dominated by Kemalism. Neo-Ottomanism drew large crowds to commemorations, reenactments, and celebrations centered on the Ottoman past. With the arrival and rise of the AKP governance since the 2000s, neo-Ottomanism became the official imaginary of the Turkish state, becoming widely popularized across various political and cultural domains, from domestic politics and international relations to TV dramas, museums, theme parks, and culinary activities. In this presentation, I look at how “Ottoman heritage” as a social imaginary builds on affects and convictions around the “spirit of conquest” (fetih ruhu) and ancestors (ecdad) while shaping the contemporary Turkish-Muslim subjectivities in Turkey. I particularly explore these imaginaries of Ottoman heritage in their embodied forms, reenacted and performed by the public and cultural heritage institutions like panorama museums and digital experience museums.

“Beyond Representation: The Role of UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Constructing Latin America's Catholic Social Imaginary” – Martín Andrade-Pérez (Meertens Institute, Reinwardt Academy)

After more than 15 years since its establishment and with 667 inscriptions from 146 countries, the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity has become a platform for showcasing cultural practices and traditions that represent the diversity of regions and nations worldwide. However, the list does more than simply catalog cultural heritage—it plays an active role in shaping the social imaginary of the regions and countries that inscribe elements on it. This presentation argues that, in the case of Latin America, where most countries are officially secular, the intangible heritage inscribed on this list contributes to the construction and representation of a collective identity steeped in Catholicism. While many Latin American countries may be secular by law, the cultural practices inscribed on this UNESCO list consistently evoke religious traditions that reinforce the region’s deep ties to Catholic values and practices. A closer analysis reveals that many of the region’s heritage inscriptions—such as religious processions, saint celebrations, and carnivals—are linked to Catholicism, underscoring its centrality in Latin American identity. By including these religious practices, the UNESCO list does not just represent a historical or cultural reality; it actively shapes the social imaginary of Latin America as a region where Catholicism is an essential marker of collective identity. This process not only affects how the region is viewed globally, but also how Latin Americans perceive their own cultural heritage—reinforcing the idea of Catholicism as a foundational cultural and religious force in the region.

“Amsterdam Arboreal Heritage. Rooted Imaginations of History and Identity” – Irene Stengs (Meertens Institute, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

In 2012, the European Arboricultural Council awarded Amsterdam the title 'European City of Trees'. Since 2007, the award is given annually to a city that develops leading activities in policy, management and citizen participation aimed at trees in an urban environment. The honor was bestowed on Amsterdam because of its special population of elms, its efforts to preserve its green character and its active citizen involvement. The award articulates a broader 21st development of, under conditions of ongoing secularization, people engaging with trees and forests in new ways.

Building on ancient imaginaries of the mythical, religious and spiritual power of ‘the tree’, perceptions of specific trees as instances of cultural heritage are gaining currency. Evoking the moral imagination (Fernandez 1996), in particular older, monumental, veteran or champion trees, may become regarded as arboreal heritage. In the words of the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency: ‘It is important to show the heritage values of old trees. Trees tell stories and everyone knows a tree that is meaningful. These stories are valuable for future generations’ (2024). Exploring imaginaries transforming particular trees or tree species into ‘arboreal heritage’, this presentation will focus on this growing body of arboreal heritage in the city of Amsterdam, and Amsterdam as ‘the city of trees.’

“Kings, Goddesses, and the Fatherland: Religious Heritage and the Imaginary of the Vietnamese Nation” - Thao Nghiem (Groningen University)

In recent decades, a number of religious festivals in Vietnam - once condemned as backward superstition and thus strictly prohibited - have been actively promoted by the state, both domestically and internationally. These festivals have become important instruments through which the party-state defines and projects the meanings of national identity and cultural belonging. This paper examines how the Vietnamese state reconfigures the past through the heritagization of two case studies: the Phu Giay Festival (the center of the Mother Goddess worship) from superstition into national heritage, and the Hung Kings Anniversary from mostly a local festival into a state-level ritualized ceremony. I argue that cultural heritage in Vietnam has become a dynamic conduit through which hegemonic narratives of the “great national unity” (dai doan ket) are legitimized, performed, and reproduced. In these cases, religious pasts are selectively reinterpreted to align with changing political requirements and dominant discourses of the nation. For the Hung Kings, this involves cultivating a myth of shared origin and sacred ancestry; in the case of the Mother Goddesses, the state mobilizes imaginaries of inter-ethnic harmony and a home-grown, “authentically Vietnamese” religion. By juxtaposing these two examples, I highlight not only the divergent trajectories of religious heritages but also the varied actors and institutions involved in their production. Taken together, these case studies demonstrate that religion was not extinguished under socialism, but instead forcefully rearticulated and absorbed into the framework of state-sanctioned heritage, revealing the creative and mediating power of cultural heritage in shaping collective memory and imaginations of national future.

4E: Prefigurative Imagination and the past/present/future of religion (*Drift 13, 0.03*)

“Temporality, Eschatology, and Anti-Imperialism in the Gospel of John” – Suzan Sierksma-Agteres (Protestantse Theologische Universiteit)

John’s gospel is not known for its eschatological focus or anti-imperial agenda. This paper, however, proposes that the concept of ‘time’ in the narrative points to the religious community’s self-

understanding as a revelation and prefiguration of the coming divine reign. Not only is ‘time’ an important theme accentuating the growing urgency within the developing plot, but it also structures the narrative following the yearly rhythm of Jewish festivals while simultaneously reconfiguring their meaning. Thus, it shapes the identity of the (real or constructed) ‘Johannine community’ vis-à-vis other more dominant religious and imperial temporalities. By comparing John’s use of time to Graeco-Roman (end-)time narratives and by using the lens of ‘prefigurative politics’ – a political-philosophical concept – it is argued that the gospel’s author uses the notion of ‘time’ to set up its religious community as a heterotopia drawing the divine future into the present.

“Prefiguration as Subversive Religious Imagination in Orthodox Theology” – Peter-Ben Smit (Utrecht University / Oud-Katholiek Seminarie)

In recent years, (Byzantine) Orthodox theology has become known for its proximity to, for instance, the Russian government. However, this paper seeks to highlight another dimension of this tradition, drawing on the work of the Romanian Orthodox theologian Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993) and his politically subversive interpretation of his tradition. Stăniloae is widely regarded as the 20th-century’s preeminent Romanian theologian. Using a descriptive approach, it will be shown how Stăniloae, drawing on both patristic and later liturgical and theological sources, creatively reimagines especially the construction of time. In doing so, he interprets the liturgy of his tradition as making present already, in the mode of prefiguration, a different and future kind of world than what presents itself as social mainstream – in this day and age: the Ceausescu dictatorship. In doing so, his reimagination of time and his argument that the church lives, as it were, in a future already that is different from the status quo, undercuts any absolute claims to power.

“The (de)valuation of academic theology in the present Western social imaginary” – Marieke van der Linden (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

Academic theology in the West is increasingly devalued, as evidenced by the decline of theology faculties, student enrolments, educational programmes, and research funding. Secularisation is an obvious explanation, as less religiosity could account for declining student rates and perceived relevance of studying religion. Furthermore, secularisation influences the Western social imaginary, the background understanding from which sense is made of the world, resulting in a hesitation to, or even suspicion of anything related to religion. However, secularization cannot account for the broader trend of the devaluation of the humanities. Scholars point out various dynamics that negatively affect the prosperity of the humanities, e.g. developments of quantification, marketization and the equation of societal value to economic value. The humanities can only partly, if at all, accommodate these demands, given the predominantly qualitative nature of research output, absence of large scale industries to which they can ‘sell’ their services, and their influence on economic development which is more indirect, rather than direct.

Despite ongoing calls to revalue the humanities, the present predicament seems not to have remotely changed. Western societies appear to remain entrenched in an immanent social imaginary which prioritizes measurables and economic value, and thus in which theology and the humanities keep struggling to prove their societal value. Social imaginaries dictate the human encounter with

the world, and form expression of experience, social practices, and institutions. Social imaginaries also include value systems, and thus is a particularly relevant concept to explore the present (de)valuation of theology and humanities. Therefore, this paper will utilize this concept, which is theorized by among others Castoriadis, Ricoeur and Taylor, as to sketch a broader picture of what lies at the foundation of the devaluation of academic theology in Western societies.

“The Insular Presence of Dionysus in Greece: Imaginary, Performativity, and Religious Identity inside and within the Contemporary Greek Orthodoxy” – Maris Anastasios, (Utrecht University)

How does the Dionysian imaginary, as well as aesthetic-somatic practices, exist and survive within the contemporary Orthodox religious/social context of insular Greece, and specifically on the islands of Skyros and Ikaria? This is the central question of my research proposal that I will present. Although the relationship between Dionysus and Christ has been extensively studied theoretically, so far missing is an ethnographic approach that captures the lived experience of islanders, regarding how they assign meaning to and whether they reproduce possible Dionysian elements within and through their contemporary cultural tradition. My main research question is: *In what ways does Dionysus persist beneath the surface of Contemporary Orthodox Greece, specifically in insular Greece, and what can this reveal about modern Greek cultural and religious identity?* Based on a theoretical framework from analyses such as those of Otto, Meyer and Harrison (and many other researchers), this question will be investigated through interviews, participant observation, and audiovisual ethnography, focusing on the contemporary experiences of local inhabitants, festival organizers, as well as participants, with emphasis on emotion, on the rituals taking place on these islands, and on the possible collective Dionysian imaginary that may survive.

13:45 – 15:15: Parallel Sessions 5

5A: Re-imagining religious heritage-making (*Drift 25, 0.03*)

“Catholic curating: The Early Modern Catholic church as collector and museum curator, and its impact on challenges facing museums today. A proposed research project” - Helena Wangefelt Ström (Utrecht University)

The project to be presented investigates the Catholic Church’s foundational role in shaping early curatorial practices and the development of the European museum format between the 1570s and early 18th century. Through archival research in Italy, it examines how early modern Catholic curators—such as Francesco Bianchini and Athanasius Kircher—organized collections and exhibitions, and how these were shaped by Catholic ideas of time, materiality, and sacredness. The project questions whether these religious views are embedded in the modern museum model, traditionally regarded as objective and scientific, but increasingly challenged for reflecting colonial legacies and normative biases. Key aims include mapping historical actors and institutions tied to Catholic collecting, analyzing the Church’s curatorial influence on today’s museum practices, and

building a multidisciplinary research network focused on religion, heritage, and museum studies. The project draws on theories of musealization, heritagization, and curatorial authority, and uses early modern written sources and material culture as primary sources. It situates itself within ongoing global debates about decolonizing museums and reevaluating their histories of acquisition and display. Previous research, such as by Findlen, Brevaglieri, Sölch, and Wangefelt Ström, has explored aspects of early Catholic curating but has not fully interrogated the Church's systemic role in shaping modern museum structures. This project aims to fill that gap, offering a deeper understanding of how Catholic worldviews may have influenced museum practices and classifications, and how these historical legacies impact today's culturally diverse and critical audiences. Ultimately, the research seeks to provide tools for museum professionals to critically reflect on and adapt their institutions in a postsecular, global context—bridging heritage, religion, and museology in innovative ways.

“The power of resonance and loss. Understanding social imaginaries including religion and religious diversity” – Christoph Baumgartner (Utrecht University)

In societies like Germany and the Netherlands, one can observe a politicization of culturalized and heritagized Christian forms, such as church buildings, Christian holidays and festivals like the Passion. Such societies, it appears, are imagined as culturally Christian by a significant portion of their members. Furthermore, conservative parties as well as right-wing political movements fight attempts to remove Christian forms from the public sphere, or to increase the public presence of minority religions. This contribution proposes an explanation of attitudes, affects, and politics related to the social imaginary of culturally Christian societies. My analysis focusses on those (positive and negative) experiences that relate to factual or imagined transformations of the material religious landscape. To achieve this, I use two concepts from recent social theory: resonance and loss. Resonance is conceptualized by Hartmut Rosa as a complex state involving experiences of being touched, responsiveness and self-efficacy. It can explain why and how people ascribe value to Christian forms in relation to their own self-understanding, even if they do not identify as Christians in a religious sense. Loss, as defined by Andreas Reckwitz, is an experience that interprets the disappearance of something as negative in relation to a person's self-understanding. The concept of loss can help us understand feelings of people who deplore an (anticipated) transformation of the public domain in a way that renders Christian forms less prominent. Conceptualizing people's relations to culturalized and heritagized Christian forms in terms of resonance and anticipated loss allows us to understand certain emotions and sentiments, which are mobilized in the political arena. As I will also demonstrate, however, explaining such emotions, and rendering them plausible within specific social imaginaries is not the same as ascribing justificatory value to such imaginaries. Rather, so I suggest, it indicates a need for alternative and positive visions of the future and social imaginaries, with new social structures of resonance.

“Living with the past: Religious heritage-making and new monasticism at the Sint- Agatha monastery” – Wouter Kock (Radboud University)

Religion is increasingly valued and experienced as heritage—a process known as heritagization. Designating religious elements as heritage implies a migration of the sacred: once reframed as heritage, these elements are no longer primarily valued for their theological or spiritual significance, but instead for their historical importance, aesthetic qualities, or symbolic function as lieux de mémoire within civil society. In this sense, the re-imagination of religion as heritage goes hand in hand with a de-imagination of the religious. In recent years, scholars of religion have challenged this view, convincingly arguing that “something religious” often persists within processes of heritagization—e.g. when heritage sites serve as spaces of meaning-making or allow secular visitors to experience “small transcendences.” This paper examines how competing logics within heritagization (i.e. cultural valuation, religious marginalization, and spiritual reinvention) not only interact, but are increasingly brought into dialogue in efforts to foster a mutually reinforcing relationship between heritage and religious life. I explore this through a case study of monastic heritage: the Sint-Agatha monastery. This monastery—the oldest still-inhabited in the Netherlands—houses the archives of over 100 Dutch religious orders and congregations, and also functions as a museum with regular exhibitions on religious life. At the same time, it boasts more than 650 years of continuous religious presence, as it still serves as the motherhouse of the Crosier Order. In recent years, moreover, the few remaining Crosiers have come to share the monastery with both the heritage center and a newly formed community of laypeople. Klooster Sint-Agatha is thus re-imagined as heritage, a process that also entails a partial de-imagination of its religious significance for contemporary society. Yet the emergence of a new religious initiative within this very context demonstrates that, in the midst of heritage re-imagining and religious de-imagining, a space opens up for religious re- imagination. Here, heritage not only signals an end to religious life, but also becomes a condition for its attempted transformation.

5B: The stories we live by: academic by training, human by default?

(Janskerkhof 2-3, 0.13)

In religious studies and more widely in the humanities and social sciences, the so-called ‘narrative turn’ has been underway for a few decades. Such approaches assume that taking serious narratives and stories might provide important insights into how people give meaning to their lives: “experiences [are] essentially entangled with stories and stories essentially entangled with experiences” (Popp-Baier, 2021). But what happens when we realize that storytelling isn’t simply something our interlocutors do, but also something that we scholars engage in? This panel explores researchers’ stories to gain insight into the complex interplay between a researcher’s professional and personal life. Through firsthand autobiographical stories, the panel will examine how personal and professional lives are both intertwined and distinct, how a researcher’s personal journey and life experiences influence theoretical decisions and the direction and outcomes of their research. By illustrating these dynamics through personal narratives, the panel aims to provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship between a researcher’s professional and personal worlds, between theory and practice, abstract concepts and embodied experiences.

“Playing with Fire: Becoming a Firefighter, but at What Cost?” – Jelle Wiering (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

The fire brigade bar was alive with laughter and the clinking of beer bottles. Around me, firefighters swapped stories about how much money they made in their day jobs, showed photos of massive fires they'd faced during training, and debated which company to hire to fix their windows. Then Edwin leaned in, eyes twinkling. “So, when are you starting the training, Jelle?” Heads turned. Suddenly, all eyes were on me: a rare moment, since I usually have little to contribute to the typical fire brigade banter. I shifted in my seat, feeling the weight of the unspoken line between me and the rest of them. “I’m still thinking about it,” I said, trying to soften the blow. A few nodded. Others looked away. The disappointment was subtle but real. I’ve weighed the risks: the danger, the PTSD, the exhausting nights. But mostly, I’ve thought about my time. As a young dad, free time is rare and precious. Still, the younger Jelle in my head whispered: If you don’t join, you’ll never truly belong. You won’t feel the rush, speak their language, or become one of them. You’ll miss the real stories... and these people seem genuinely kind. I smiled awkwardly and offered to buy the next round.

“Sankofa After Babel: Exile, Memory, and the Stories That Survive” – Amisah Bakuri (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

At the heart of my work is my experience as a human navigating complex worlds. My life is shaped by faith, migration, and the enduring impact of colonial legacies, and these forces intersect with my roles as a mother, daughter, wife, friend, colleague, as well as being a Black migrant in the Netherlands. These overlapping experiences inform my research, guiding the questions I ask, the methods I choose, and the narratives I explore. I draw on the biblical story of Babel, which highlights the fragmentation of histories and languages shaped by diaspora, alongside the Akan principle of Sankofa, which calls for the ethical recovery of what has been lost, suppressed, or devalued. Together, these frameworks guide a reflexive approach to storytelling that acknowledges both fracture and reclamation. My personal life and academic work are inseparable, shaping the ethical and methodological choices I make. By focusing on this connection, I demonstrate that the stories I tell, as well as those I choose not to tell, are shaped by relationships, ethical considerations, and the interplay between my experiences and my research.

“Hybrid Troubles. Why does my background keep creeping into my analyses, and why can't I shake it off?” – Lucien van Liere (Utrecht University)

To what extent are the academic paths we follow based on actual scholarly interests arising from our analyses? I am a 58-year-old white man with an exaggerated fascination for everything related to the justification of violence. Or do I want to understand my father's violence? Is my benign analysis of perpetrators a way to excuse him? Still? I am fascinated by conspiracy theories and everything based on unproven beliefs. That seems to pose a threat to our democratic constitutional state and is therefore particularly important to study, right? Or do I want to understand why, between the ages of 15 and 20, I was part of a very closed Pentecostal community in which all kinds of unproven things were claimed and spiritual hierarchy unarticulated but dominant? To what extent are our paths in research guided by our desire to understand the world better, and to what extent are these paths

determined by our desire to understand ourselves and the way people have related to us? I will try to be honest in this session, but I cannot promise that I will truly be so. Why should I? Like you, I hide things, although I will try not to do so and to articulate the relevant questions.

“How a theater play got me back into academic writing (and how my mom gave me access)” – William Arfman (Tilburg University)

It started with a poster by the road. A poster advertising a theater play about "The Witch of Almen". A theater play about the first woman in the Netherlands to burn on the stake due to witchcraft allegations. A theater play about a woman with the same first name as my mom, from the same village as my mom. A theater play I had to go and see. A theater play, I immediately wanted to analyse and write about when I saw it. A theater play I couldn't study and write about, because I was in the middle of an undiagnosed burn-out and accompanying writer's block. A theater play that I thought was so important to write about, that it made writing fun for me again. It started with a poster and I am very grateful that it did not end there.

“Black magic and leaking boobs: transversing worlds, transversing selves?” – Suzanne Klein Schaarsberg (Tilburg University)

“Don’t think about the baby, don’t think about the baby” I whispered quietly to myself. This was not because it was my first time ‘back on the job’ again after my maternity leave – in fact technically I was still off- but because I could feel the pressure of the milk supply slowly building up in my chest. My nipples were pressing against the fabric of my nursing bra. One thought of that cute, innocent smile and my milk reflex would kick in. Read: leaking boobs in the middle of this fieldwork event. I had just struck up a conversation with the lady sitting next to me in the large theatre hall. She thought I was a student – something I ran with: yes, please explain the field to me like I know nothing at all, thank you – and started telling me about her friend’s experiences with black magic. I desperately did not want to make an awkward exit, trying to find the nearest toilets to pump when we were just entering the world of black magic. As a fieldworker, it is my job to enter such worlds. But what happens when my world enters theirs? In this contribution I focus on the entanglements of different aspects of myself with the field specifically and academia as an institution more broadly. I reflect on the one major transformation of my self that I have experienced the last few years: motherhood.

5C: Mediating religion and power (*Drift 25, 3.01*)

“Imag(in)ing the Hajj in the Netherlands: Visual Representations of Mecca in the Dutch Late Colonial Press” – Rukayyah Reichling (University of Amsterdam)

Though Mecca remained physically inaccessible to non-Muslims, Dutch readers in the early twentieth century repeatedly encountered the closed Muslim city – through the medium of press photography. This paper investigates how Mecca and the Muslim pilgrimage were visually narrated to Dutch lay audiences between 1885 and 1942, with particular attention to photographic material that

circulated in the Dutch press during the interwar period. Long the object of colonial fascination and unease, Mecca occupied a distinctive place in the European imagination. At the same time, the hajj held deep political relevance for the Dutch colonial regime: it intersected with concerns about Islamic unity, political stability in the Dutch East Indies, epidemic control, and imperial economic interests tied to pilgrimage travel. Drawing on a corpus of hajj-related images from Dutch newspapers and four illustrated magazines, I analyse how drawings and, increasingly from the 1920s, photographs shaped public perceptions of Islam, Muslim mobility, and religious colonial subjects. The representations were structured by recurring motifs, such as the Ka'ba, the mahmal (a ceremonial palanquin), and pilgrims' modes of transport, especially camels. My material shows that rather than simply informing readers, the press played an active role in framing how Mecca was imagined. Using three analytical lenses – (1) the content, origin, and circulation of visual materials, (2) the interaction between text and image, and (3) the political dimension of the visual hajj reportage – I explore the ways these images framed the public discourse on the hajj and Muslim pilgrims. While they often reinforced Orientalist stereotypes, at times the visual material also opened space for new and more nuanced imaginaries about Mecca. Ultimately, my analysis exposes how visual media operated as a tool of colonial power, shaping how Mecca, the geographical and devotional focal point of Islam, was imagined and understood by the Dutch public in the late colonial period.

“Donning a Turban, Discarding a Turban: On LW De Laurence and “Hindoo” identity” – Justine M. Bakker (Radboud University Nijmegen)

In the early decades of the twentieth century, hypnotist and occultist Lauron William De Laurence (1868-1936) spearheaded a successful mail-order business, which shipped occult books and products to practitioners across the United States, the Caribbean, and West Africa. In advertisements in newspapers, his catalogue, and the books he sold, De Laurence frequently included an image of himself donning a turban. When pressed about this in court a few years later, De Laurence would deny ever posing as Hindu, however: the turban was simply a gift from a friend, and he would be open to “cut out” all that “Hinduism and everything.” This paper traces and theorizes De Laurence’s ambiguous relationship to early twentieth-century American imaginations of “Hindoo” identity. I argue that De Laurence, spurred on by the fascination with assumed Hindu mental powers in esoteric milieus, initially endeavored to “pass” as Hindu. This was possible because legal, scientific, common, and popular understandings of “Hindu” as racial- religious category were ambiguous and conflicting (see Rocklin 2016; Kanwar 2023). Scholars have shown that such ambiguity allowed Black and Brown people the possibility to assume a “Hindoo” identity to escape the horrors of white supremacy, thereby destabilizing the dominant white-black racial schema (Rocklin 2016; Dorman 2020; Deslippe 2014). De Laurence’s passing, in contrast, did not destabilize the American racial matrix. It is, rather, built into the system (see also Modovoi 2024). After all, the court case demonstrates that De Laurence could and would continue to capitalize on the affordances of whiteness. Whiteness signifies, as Cheryl Harris argues in a still-influential article, the capacity to possess, which implies also the capacity to use, trade, and discard (1993). This is precisely what happened in court. This paper concludes, therefore, that very fact that De Laurence

could capitalize on the mutability of race ultimately reinforces, rather than undermines, the power of race as a technology of white supremacy.

“Dreams for diverse thriving: first stages of Coloring white habits” – Amy Casteel (KU Leuven) and Sarah Verbeeck (KU Leuven)

Christianity has inspired art in various forms throughout its history in Belgium. That art might be inspirational, representative, or even provocative. And yet it is marked by the time in which it was created in materials, in style, in content. Even in these images the phenomena of racism, whiteness, and diversity are already present. Art is one mode through which it is possible to ways that race, whiteness, and diversity were (dis)regarded. Through the creation of art it is possible to express and explore ways that Catholic parishioners foresee race, whiteness and diversity interacting in their parish in the future. Using this impulse, the project Coloring White Habits seeks to co-create artistic expressions in cooperation with 4 parishes in Flanders, Belgium that address the theme of diversity and whiteness. Using material spaces, material spaces and culture as well as practices of the parish as a starting point, this presentation will cover the methods and initial results of a process of dreaming together. This dream of ways that each parish can be a place where diversity can thrive will be visualized through story, photo voice and collage.

5D: World-view, World-making, world-building: The worlds (non)religions shape (II) (*Drift 25, 2.03*)

“Fichte on the relation between worldview (Weltansicht) and faith (Glaube)” – Hugo Hogenbirk (University of Groningen)

One new approach in religious studies is reconsidering the field as worldview-studies, or applying the worldview concept in place of religion (Taves, 2019; Stenmark, 2021; Davies 2022; Strhan, Lee, Shilitoe, 2024). In such an approach, usually, religion is itself, as a category, reduced in importance in these encounters with worldview. Worldview talk can reduce the difference between the religious and the non-religious to differences between worldviews, leaving a plenum of worldviews in its wake.

Enter the historically first theory of worldview, which also subsumes religion underneath the worldview concept, namely, Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s theory of Weltansicht which he expounds in his 1806 “The way towards the blessed life; or, The doctrine of religion”. Fichte’s theory provides a theory of worldview and faith which not only subsumes religion under worldview but also attempts to explain worldview in terms of religion. According to Fichte, worldview is a category that helps us understand the coherent systems of belief that people hold.

In this talk I will introduce Fichte’s theory of worldview in some detail. The first upshot of this is historical, it provides an insight in a historical forerunner of current trends in religious studies. The second upshot is that Fichte’s, admittedly mystical and idiosyncratic, theory of worldview, suggests us ways to remain interested not only in the question what is worldview-y about religion; but also, what is religious about worldview.

“Shifting Spirituality: From Modern to Postmodern to Metamodern Secular-Religious Worldviews” – Dave Vliegthart (Maastricht University)

Since World War II, the meaning of “spirituality” has undergone significant shifts. The worldviews of people who today identify as “spiritual, but not religious” (SBNR) have shifted from predominantly modern right after the war to predominantly postmodern at the end of the twentieth century to predominantly metamodern at the beginning of the twenty-first century. SBNR worldviews have continuously entangled “secular” and “religious” beliefs and practices, but in significantly different ways at different times.

Based on the three historical examples of the (modern) New Age Movement, the (post-modern) movement around Osho, and the (metamodern) post-Osho Satsang Network, this talk delves into ideal typical differences in their secular-religious entanglements. It concludes with a reflection on an important distinction between views of the world and worldviews, as unconscious “structures of feeling” versus conscious belief systems that provide (individual) meaning and/or (collective) unity. In sum, modernism, post-modernism, and metamodernism are views of the world that have tacitly shaped shifts from modern to postmodern to metamodern worldviews within (SBNR) spirituality.

“Two Ways of Looking Back: Illustrations of different Christian worldviews in the Netherlands, 1853–1939” – Annelies Abelmann (University of Groningen)

This paper explores Roman Catholic historical memory as it evolved in tension with the dominant Protestant narrative in the Netherlands during a time of growing secularisation. Through an interdisciplinary lens, the study contrasts two distinct Christian worldviews—one sacral-historicist, the other confessional-national — and explores how these perspectives were conceptualized, articulated, and materially embodied in church architecture and interior decoration of the period.

The Catholic sacral worldview drew on a long memory of medieval patronage and collective suffering—both from the suppression following the Reformation in 1580 and the internal schism of 1723. This historical consciousness found concrete expression in the Neo-Gothic churches designed, built, and adorned by the Saint Bernulphus Guild, established in Utrecht in 1869. By the early twentieth century, such forms of religious spaces and spatial practice came to support a confident Catholic nationalism, one shaped more by historical pride than by grievance.

The Protestant confessional-national worldview emphasized a narrative of victorious resistance and the enduring union of faith and state. It was expressed through the reappropriation (naasting) of former Gothic churches and the construction of new Protestant temples—acts that asserted continuity with a national, sovereign Protestant identity. However, the re-establishment of the Catholic hierarchy in 1853 disrupted this perceived dominance, provoking a widespread reaction, most notably in the April Movement of that same year.

These competing retrospective narratives—Protestant triumph and Catholic endurance—would come to shape divergent ideological trajectories within Dutch Roman-Catholic thought. While one strand leaned toward defensive integralism, another moved increasingly toward modernist adaptation, secular engagement, and eventual ecumenical openness.

5E: The Roundness of Loss: Relating artistic, spiritual and ritual imagination to experiences of grief (*Drift 13, 0.03*)

*Our departure point will be the exhibition *The Roundness of Loss*, a contemporary art exhibition about grief and life after loss, building on the successful book by Hanne Hagedaars published under the same title in 2023 (in Dutch *Missen als een ronde vorm*). During the excursion, participants explore how loss, religion, and imagination are entangled in this contemporary art exhibition and how such entanglements can be studied and understood through a variety of scholarly approaches.*

What can the entanglement of religion and imagination in a curatorial setting tell us about the manifestation of religion? Artists are usually several steps ahead on the zeitgeist, they have a knack for topics and images that become common use years later. What kind of visions do they offer in the exhibition about dealing with topics like the transcendent, energies, life after death, ritual and divine intervention? Do these visions tell us anything about the place of religion in today's world?

“*Becoming Earth: Human Composting, Closure, and the Imagination of Continuity*” – Brenda Mathijssen (Groningen University)

In contemporary Dutch discourse on death, closure is often imagined as a definitive end—of life, of illness, of suffering. Yet anthropological research has long shown that death rituals rarely settle for finality. Instead, they evoke continuity, transformation, and the perseverance of life beyond death. This presentation explores how the emerging funerary practice of human composting—also known as natural organic reduction—invites new ways of imagining the relationship between life and death. Drawing on explorative qualitative research into the symbolic meanings attributed to human composting by its advocates and pioneers in the Netherlands, I examine how this form of body disposition reconfigures socio-cultural understandings and ritual expressions of death. I argue that in this practice, the body is no longer a site of disposal but of generative transformation. Death, here, does not mark the end of life, nor the transition to an otherworldly afterlife, but becomes an embodied, organic process of becoming—what Dutch practitioners call *ver-aarden* ("to be earthed"). By foregrounding the imaginative, material, and affective dimensions of this practice, this talk reflects on how human composting reanimates religious and ecological imaginaries of return, regeneration, waste, and sacredness.

“*Practicing Palliative Theology with Benhuset*” - Daniel A. Siedell (Stockholm University)

“Son of man, can these dry bones live?”—Ezekiel 37: 3

Contemporary Christian theological reflection often tends to function as a form of cultural heritage preservation. There are certain concepts and images that have over time fallen apart and exist only in fragments, even ruins. And whether practiced from orthodox, progressive, or more radical positions, theological discourse seeks to preserve or even renovate portions of these crumbling

discursive structures, trying to bring them up to date. Loss is thus at the heart of contemporary theological discourse, whether or not it acknowledges this trauma. My work as a theologian—or rather, as a curator who thinks theologically—is to “curate decay” (Caitlin Desilvey) and to practice a kind of palliative theology, one that is less concerned about preserving or renovating or keeping alive something called “Christian theology” than attempting to salvage, scavenge, and perhaps even preserve bits and pieces that might find their way into new discursive constructions, allowing “Christian theology” to fade away. I will experiment with this palliative curation of theology with the help of a unique cultural institution in the heart of Stockholm, called Benhuset. It was built in the early eighteenth century as an ossuary, a bone-house, on the grounds of Katarina Church (Church of Sweden). It fell into disuse in the twentieth century, being used as a storage shed for groundskeeping equipment. About ten years ago it was refurbished and transformed into an exhibition and performance space. In this paper I introduce Benhuset as a cultural institution where art and religion intersect in a church cemetery, and which has the potential to disturb common Swedish distinctions between sacred and secular, faith and doubt, public speech and private beliefs. And where death, loss, grief, and remembrance provide fertile soil in which art can thrive. I then use Benhuset as an image or model for how a Christian theology that acknowledges its own death, its own loss of relevance, might improvise its way creatively through a post-Christian and increasingly complicated post-secular landscape in Sweden, and where it might behave more like art criticism and art curation than religion.

“Curating Life after Loss: Imagination as a Necessity” - Lieke Wijnia (Stedelijk Museum Schiedam / Groningen University)

In this paper I explore how artistic, spiritual, and curatorial imagination shaped the exhibition *The Roundness of Loss* at Stedelijk Museum Schiedam. This exhibition consists of two parts. The first is curated by Hanne Hagedaars, who wrote the book of the same title, about how contemporary artists processed grief and loss in their work. The second part consists of a participatory project in which ten Schiedammers share their experiences of loss and process these creatively, under guidance of the museum’s city programmer, a grief counsellor and an artist. For Hagedaars, the book and exhibition are not so much about grief, as about continuing life after loss. The subtitle of the exhibition is *The Art of Living On*. Many of the selected artists have spoken about a sense of connection to a larger whole, which they needed in order to live on. Through such connection their works emerged, linking their creative practice with spiritual exploration. They developed their own ritual work methods, experienced the presence of their lost ones while making their work, or turned their loss into works meant as societal statement. Uniting all the works in the exhibition is a sense of urgency, making art about and through experiences of loss as a necessity for living on. In addition to artist motivations, this paper also reflects on the curatorial process of the exhibition and the applied translation strategies towards a larger audience. How are museum visitors encouraged to relate their life worlds to the artists’ experiences? I will argue that also in this process imagination plays a crucial role, with the aim of lifting individual life stories to a level of universal human experience, turning the museum not only into a site of reflection but also a site that nurtures the preconditions for life after loss.

15:45 – 17:15: Final Plenary Panel “Theming, designing, selling: Religion and the experience economy” – Margreet van Es (Utrecht University), Ernst van den Hemel (Meertens Instituut / Utrecht University) and Jeremy Stolow (Concordia University) (*Janskerkhof 2-3 0.13*)

This plenary explores how religion is imagined, materialized, and experienced within the dynamics of the contemporary experience economy. As identified by Pine and Gilmore in the late 1990s, the experience economy marks a shift in which experiences—not just goods or services—become central to economic value creation. Today, across diverse sectors, commercial enterprises design immersive, affective, and sensorial experiences aimed at engaging consumers’ imaginations and emotions. Religion is not outside of this shift. In fact, religion is impacted by the experience economy in many ways.

The aim of this plenary is to critically engage with the many ways religion intersects with this economy of designed experience: from evangelical theme parks to spiritual retreats and halal dining. These settings reveal how commercial actors not only draw on religious symbols, narratives, and practices but also shape the very conditions in which religion is performed, consumed, and reconfigured. What kinds of religious subjectivities and affiliations emerge through commercially curated experiences? How do market logics mediate or transform religious expression? And what might greater scholarly attention to commerciality—beyond critiques of commodification—reveal about religion in neoliberal, plural, and (post)secularizing contexts?

Although scholars of lived religion have long focused on embodiment, materiality, and affect, the commercial dimensions of these experiences remain undertheorized. This panel suggests seeing commercial settings as key sites for the ongoing transformation of religion in contemporary life and argues for new analyses of how religion and commerce are entangled.