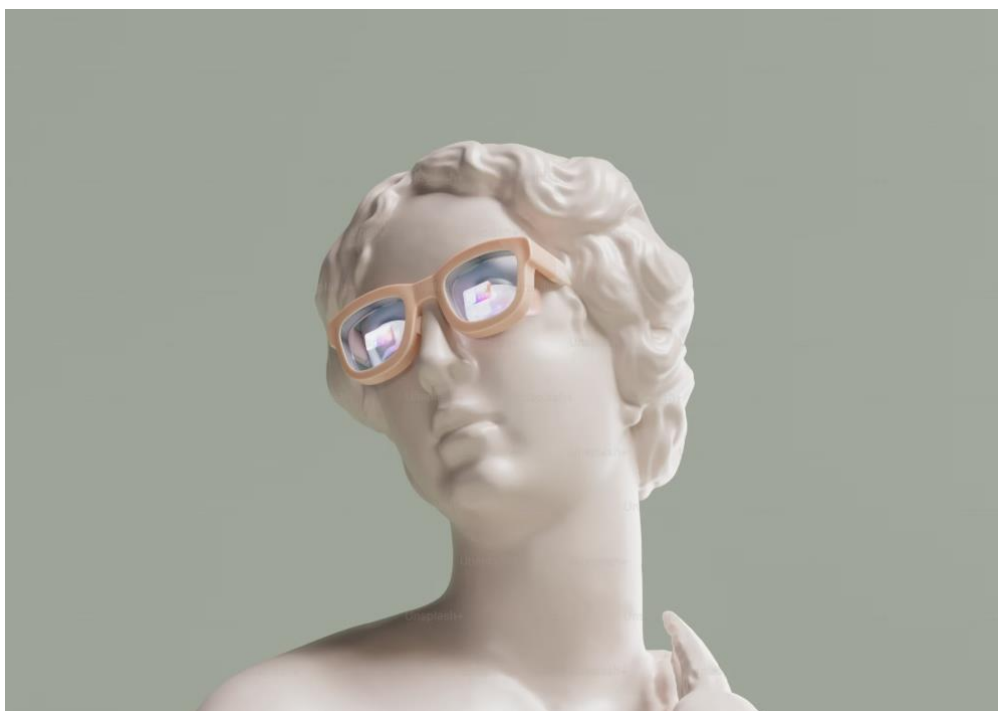




SECULAR STUDIES
ASSOCIATION BRUSSELS
RESEARCH GROUP

CONFERENCE: BIOGRAPHIES AND THE SECULAR

PROGRAM AND ABSTRACTS BOOK



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PROGRAM

Friday, 21 November 2025 — Morning

Welcome

09:15 – 09:30

Welcome by the VUB Rector

Keynote 1

09:30 – 10:00

Chair: Jeffrey Tyssens

Johannes Quack (University of Zürich)

Existential and Quotidian Questions: Methodological Considerations

Discussion: 10:00 – 10:15

Session 1

10:15 – 10:55

Chair: Jeffrey Tyssens

- Lena Dreier (University of Münster)
How Can We Find the Non-Religious in Biographies? Worldviews and Normativity in Biographical Settings
- Nyala Nauwelaers (SSAB-VUB)
The Feminization Thesis under Scrutiny: A Biographical Approach to the Secular Women of Ghent (late 19th – early 20th century)

Discussion: 10:55 – 11:15

Break: 11:15 – 11:30

Session 2

11:30 – 12:10

Chair: Sabrina Testa

- Jeffrey Tyssens (SSAB-VUB)
No Happy Shadow: Louise-Julie Careau (1756–1805) and the Non-Religion of Women in the Age of Revolution
- Andrew Prescott (University of Glasgow)
Elizabeth Sharples Carlile and English Secularism

Discussion: 12:10 – 12:30

Lunch: 12:30 – 14:00

Afternoon

Keynote 2

14:00 – 14:30

Chair: Nyala Nauwelaers

Nella van den Brandt (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven)

Race and Leaving Religion in Western Europe: Racializing the Study of Religious Exit

Discussion: 14:30 – 14:45

Session 3

14:45 – 15:25

Chair: Nyala Nauwelaers

- Lieke Schrijvers (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)
Secular-Christian Mixed Intimacies in the Netherlands
- Maruta Herding & Anja Frank (German Youth Institute / Deutsches Jugendinstitut, Halle/Saale)
Secular Worldviews and Lived Non-Religion in the Biographies of People from a Muslim Background in Germany

Discussion: 15:25 – 15:45

Break: 15:45 – 16:00

Session 4

16:00 – 17:00

Chair: Sofia Nikitaki

- Christoph De Spiegeleer (Liberas / SSAB-VUB)
Between Two Waves: Gabrielle Rosy-Warnant's Advocacy for Public Education at the Intersection of Feminism and Secularism, 1920–1960
 - Willeke Los (University of Humanistic Studies – Utrecht)
The Religious Humanism of Matthew Ies Spetter (1921–2012)
 - Niels De Nutte (SSAB-VUB)
A Right to Die or a Right to Self-Termination? Charles Minet as the Exponent for Catholic Advocates in the Belgian Right-to-Die Movement
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Saturday, 22 November 2025 — Morning

Keynote 3

09:30 – 10:00

Chair: Christoph De Spiegeleer

Sabrina Testa (University of Santiago de Compostela)

How Did You Become an Atheist? On the Significance of Deconversion Narratives for Non-Religious Mobilisation in Brazil

Discussion: 10:00 – 10:15

Session 5

10:15 – 10:55

Chair: Christoph De Spiegeleer

- Akira Nishimura (University of Tokyo)
Reconsidering Apostasy from the Emperor as a "Living God": Defeat and Postwar Transformation in the Case of Kiyoshi Watanabe
- Jungsue Rhee (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales)
Religious Transitions of Ryu Sangtae and Development of the Right of Non-Belief in South Korea

Discussion: 10:55 – 11:15

Break: 11:15 – 11:30

Session 6

11:30 – 12:10

Chair: Cécile Vanderpelen

- David Veltman (Biography Institute – Universiteit Groningen)
Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950): Lived Experiences in Understanding Religion. A Biographical Perspective on Gerardus van der Leeuw's Phenomenology of Religion
- Elisabeth Waldl
I, Pastafari, Parliamentarian, Entrepreneur and Laicist. Niko Alm, a Figurehead of Secularist Austria

Discussion: 12:10 – 12:30

Lunch: 12:30 – 14:00

Afternoon

Keynote 4

14:00 – 14:30

Chair: Caroline Sägesser

Ryan T. Cragun (University of Tampa)

Micro and Macro Secularization: Theory and Data

Discussion: 14:30 – 14:45

Session 7

14:45 – 15:25

Chair: Caroline Sägesser

- David Vergauwen (CEDOM-MADOC / SSAB-VUB)
Joseph Defrenne (1767–1848): From Activist Journalist to Anticlerical Chansonnier
- David Nash (Oxford University)
(Auto)Biography as Weapon of Choice: The "Lives" of the Leaders of 19th-Century British Secularism

Discussion: 15:25 – 15:45

Break: 15:45 – 16:00

Conclusion

16:00 – 16:35

Carolin Kosuch (University of Göttingen)

Concluding Remarks

Discussion: 16:15 – 16:30

Final Word by SSAB Chair: 16:30 – 16:35

ABSTRACTS (BY SURNAME)

Ryan T. Cragun – University of Tampa

Niels De Nutte – SSAB-VUB

Christoph De Spiegeleer – Liberas / SSAB-VUB

Lena Dreier – University of Münster

Anja Frank – German Youth Institute

Maruta Herding – German Youth Institute

Willeke Los – University of Humanistic Studies

David Nash – Oxford University

Nyala Nauwelaers – SSAB-VUB

Akira Nishimura – University of Tokyo

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Lieke Schrijvers – Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Sabrina Testa – University of Santiago de Compostela

Jeffrey Tyssens – SSAB-VUB

Nella van den Brandt – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

David Veltman – Biography Institute – Universiteit Groningen

David Vergauwen – CEDOM-MADOC / SSAB-VUB

Elisabeth Waldl

Micro and Macro Secularization: Theory and Data

Ryan T. Cragun (University of Tampa)

Abstract

Dobbelaere (2002) proposed that secularization both happens and must be understood at three levels: micro, meso, and macro. I review recent formal theorizing on macro and micro secularization from two books: *Beyond Doubt* (Kasselstrand, Zuckerman, and Cragun 2023) and *Goodbye Religion* (Cragun and Smith 2024). I explore the theory, definitions, and propositions proposed in these two books, drawing connections between them. I then examine corresponding data evaluating the formal theorizing at both the macro and micro level, drawing on large, international datasets, smaller, national-level data, and qualitative data. There are some data that compellingly support micro and macro secularization, but there are also lacunae where additional data are needed. I point out where direct tests of theoretical propositions are lacking and what, specifically, should be done to address this lacuna. I conclude by discussing the lack of formal theorizing about secularization at the meso level and suggest that future research should explore this area.

A right to die or a right to self-termination? Charles Minet as the exponent for Catholic advocates in the Belgian right-to-die movement

Niels De Nutte (Vrije Universiteit Brussel - CAVA)

Abstract

The global phenomenon that was the right-to-die movement emerged from the mid-1970s onwards. In that wave, the Belgian organisations Association pour le Droit de Mourir dans la Dignité and Recht op Waardig Sterven came to light in the main pack, not early on nor at the tail end.

Right-to-die societies of this age have, in the literature, generally been treated as euthanasia groups. We have shown in earlier work that this view does not do justice to the complexities of different national groups nor the general goals of the movement. In Belgium, this is exemplified by the statutes of the ADMD and its first fields of action. Namely, the establishment of a truth contract (*contrat de vérité*) between physician and patient to counter the use of medical jargon to obscure harsh realities, as well as battling therapeutic tenacity (*acharnement thérapeutique*, a French neologism at the time). This practice, intervening medically with a patient at a time when seen as excessive and detrimental to quality of life, was already identified in 1973 at the European level as something to avoid.

In this mix, dr. Charles Minet, as a Catholic physician and the first president of the earliest Belgian right-to-die society, exemplifies the complexities of the actions employed by these groups. Already in the early 1980s, Minet shows affective to later palliative care – establishing what is likely the first palliative care unit in Belgium – and serves as an early example of the later Belgian medical reality where advocates of the 1990s see euthanasia, palliative care and patient right as necessarily interconnected, leading to the emergence of the trio of laws on these matters in 2002. Additionally, Minet shows that philosophical pluralism was part of the equation, disproving the usually secular versus catholic understanding of Belgian end-of-life discussions. As such, his trajectory can be instrumental in bridging the unnecessary divide between catholic and secular action.

Between Two Waves: Gabrielle Rosy-Warnant's Advocacy for Public Education at the Intersection of Feminism and Secularism, 1920–1960

Christoph De Spiegeleer (Liberas – Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

Abstract

First-wave feminist Isabelle Gatti de Gamond (1839–1905) is the only Belgian female freethinker to have received substantial, in-depth biographical attention, largely thanks to her successful efforts to promote secular education for girls—efforts that earned her the honour of a street named after her in the Brussels municipality of Uccle. But what about the women who attended the non-confessional secondary school she founded and turned into secularist feminists themselves? To address this gap, this paper focuses on one such student: the liberal feminist Gabrielle Rosy-Warnant (1881–1960), who was active during the often-overlooked period between first- and second-wave feminism (1920–1960).

When Rosy-Warnant is mentioned in historical accounts, it is primarily for her commitment to women's economic, political, and legal emancipation in the interwar years. Her secularist activism, however, has received only marginal attention. Yet from 1937 until her death in 1960, she served as the permanent female vice-president of the Brussels-based Ligue de l'Enseignement—Belgium's most influential secularist pressure group in the field of education, known for its firm opposition to public funding for Catholic schools.

This paper examines Rosy-Warnant's advocacy for public education in her home municipality of Uccle as a local councillor for the Liberal Party, as well as her ultimately unsuccessful resistance to a growing tendency within the interwar Liberal Party—both among local Liberal politicians who formed municipal coalitions with Catholics, and within the party leadership at the level of the Brussels arrondissement—to accept state subsidies for Catholic schools as a way of resolving the so-called “school question.” This conciliatory approach would later be formalized in the 1958 School Pact.

Through a 'biographical approach' (which is distinct from a conventional biography with a classic cradle-to-grave narrative), Rosy-Warnant emerges as a militant secularist operating in three male-dominated arenas: in the Uccle municipal council; in the executive committee of the Fédération Libérale de l'Arrondissement de Bruxelles (where she held a seat at various moments through her leadership position within the Brussels liberal women's movement); and in the governing bodies of the Ligue de l'Enseignement.

The biographical reconstruction of Rosy-Warnant's actions and ideas in relation to education aligns with one of the central methodological uses of biography in secular studies: connecting the history of secularism with other historical fields. In this case, the analysis reveals the intersections between secularism, local politics, education, and feminism in Belgium between 1920 and 1960, the period between the so-called first and second feminist wave. As with Gatti de Gamond, Rosy-Warnant's commitment to secular public education was an essential part of her feminist agenda. She believed that girls should be prepared to assume economic roles in society, rather than being educated solely to fulfil the role of housewife, as prescribed by the Catholic educational project.

How Can We Find the Non-Religious in Biographies? Worldviews and Normativity in Biographical Settings

Lena Dreier (University of Münster)

Abstract

The process term biography suggests certain research methods, but in any case, also implies an understanding of social change. Biography as an object of research is based on the premise that social change is reflected in biographies. Even if social changes take place over considerably longer periods of time than changes that are reflected in biographies, empirical research based on biographical theory has shown that, despite this temporal divergence, change can also be empirically traced in biographical or generational changes. But how is an increase in the significance of the non-religious reflected in biographies and vice versa: how is the non-religious produced and reproduced in biographies? To what extent do biographies refer to the meaning of religion in the generational course or to non-religious values in the social environment? As in other areas of non-religious research, the question arises as to what should actually be investigated in the search for the biographical non-religious: secular moments, secular affects and ideologies, implicit demarcations of religion or non-religious practices and traditions in general? This paper will empirically prove the concept of non-religious biographical analysis using biographies collected in non-religious milieus in Germany. Firstly, following Burchardt (2022), this paper will address the question of how secularity can be reconstructed in biographical trajectories when it is not a matter of explicit demarcation from religion alone. Secondly, it will be analysed which concepts are suitable for representing non-religiosity in biographies. In this context, the concept of worldviews will be examined,

and we will attempt to transfer the relational, non-binary concepts of non-religion to biographies. Are it worldviews, values, ideologies or normativities that are biographically framed? Or, as Quack (2014) suggests, which specific discourses and practices constitute biographies or biographical moments as non-religious?

Secular Worldviews and Lived Non-Religion in the Biographies of People from a Muslim Background in Germany

Murata Herding and Anja Frank (German Youth Institute)

Abstract

Young European Muslims, much at the centre of discussion in society, academia and the media, are widely perceived as uniformly and collectively religious. Survey studies, however, suggest that there is also a number of young Muslims in Europe who refer to themselves as non-believing. Our paper aims at tracing the development of secular worldviews of young adults of Muslim background in Germany in the course of their lives and within generational dynamics in families. Drawing on our previous research – on the one hand into biographies and Islamist radicalisation and on the other hand into the secular in East German families –, we examine ways of “lived nonreligion” (referring to MacGuire 2008) and compare different biographical trajectories to and from religion/ideology. Using biography analysis we seek to explore the wide spectrum between ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’, such as different degrees, overlapping phases and processes of going back and forth. This method also draws attention to the biographical function, which the development of a secular worldview has for the individual, and in what ways religious interpretations of the self and the world lose in importance in the course of life – within the context of generational and societal change. This paper will present a first exemplary case of a Muslim-born woman who, in the course of her migration to Germany, not only backed away from religion but also developed a determined atheist worldview. It gives first insights into worldviews that develop from (and in demarcation of) a Muslim background and shows how the secular becomes plausible within the individual biography.

The religious humanism of Matthew Ies Spetter (1921-2012)

Willeke Los (University of Humanistic Studies)

Abstract

The Jewish-Dutch humanist Matthew Ies Spetter is mainly remembered as a witness of WWII and his short-lived friendship with the famous diarist Etty Hillesum. However, his philosophy of life is relevant again today, as he developed his ideas not only in response to the horrors of WWII but also to the threats to freedom and democracy in 1960's America, where he emigrated to in 1951. There he became a member of the Ethical Union and soon became an ethical leader. He wrote many contributions to various humanist journals in the U.S. as well as in the Netherlands. He also published several books of which *Man, The Reluctant Brother* (1967) represents his most elaborate view on humanism as a philosophy of life.

Spetter defines his humanism as a form of religious humanism. In my paper I will explore what he means by this and how his ideas evolved from his liberal Jewish background to a religious humanism that adheres to the notion of an indifferent cosmos. To show how his views developed in relation to his life experiences, I will take a variety of primary sources into account, ranging from his pre-war publications as a journalist and his memoir of his experiences in the camps to his key publications on humanism in the 1950's and 1960's.

(Auto)biography as weapon of choice: The 'lives' of the leaders of 19th Century British Secularism

David Nash (Oxford University)

Abstract

Dobbelaere (2002) proposed that secularization both happens and must be understood at three levels: micro, meso, and macro. I review recent formal The leaders of the British Secularist movement found themselves in a situation where both biography and autobiography became weapons in a war that sought to establish the truth of individual's motives and actions. This was important in establishing the credentials of individual leaders as well as their origins and past performance. As a record of a 'life' this also provided explanations for the performance of individual's in the movement's dilemmas and controversies (e.g. the Knowlton Pamphlet trial, the oath question). For related groups, such as the Positivists, biography represented the extension of reverence for humanity and leaving this record for posterity as evidence of humanity's improvement. For Secularism's primary leader (Charles Bradlaugh and his daughter Hypatia) there was a constant struggle to maintain an orthodox version of his 'life'. This was in the face of

scurrilous stories about his exploits at different moments of his career and strenuous efforts were made to fend off the impact of a string of false and invented biographies. Such actions engaged Bradlaugh's daughter until well into the 1920s. In later years biography could catalogue the transformation of life from a religious to a secular perspective (e.g. Joseph McCabe) and sometimes became a primer for those contemplating a similar journey. As the twentieth century wore on biography faded as Secularism (and its offshoots) found more 'normalising' tones in its communications to replace (auto)biographical narratives of struggle and the heroic.

The feminization thesis under scrutiny: A Biographical Approach to the Secular Women of Ghent (late 19th – early 20th century)

Nyala Nauwelaers (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

Abstract

This paper offers a systematic biographical approach to the understanding of the secular by reconstructing the lives and deaths of twelve working-class and lower-middle-class women affiliated with the Socialistische Vrijdenkersbond van Gent (Socialist Freethinkers' Association of Ghent) during the late 19th and early 20th century. Engaging directly with the feminization thesis, which posits a binary wherein secularism is coded as masculine and religiosity as feminine, this study challenges such assumptions by revealing the active philosophical agency of women who have long been absent from the historiography of the Belgian Freethought movement.

Using vrijdenkerstestamenten (freethinker wills) - rare ego-documents in which these women requested a civil, non-religious burial - this paper mobilizes the method of group biography to analyze secular life choices. Specifically, we question whether the secular women in question personally appropriated freethought or were perhaps influenced by a freethinking spouse.

Through a bottom-up reconstruction of each woman's ideological path, the study uncovers diverse routes to freethought. Some women joined the freethinkers' association before marriage or independent of a male partner; others never married or partnered with presumed Catholics. In yet other cases, entire families joined on the same day, suggesting a collective dynamic of secular engagement.

Rather than seeing women as persuaded into unbelief, this paper positions them as initiators and co-participants of secular worldviews. In doing so, it offers biography as a generative key for analyzing non-religion, gender, and agency in a Catholic-majority context.

Reconsidering Apostasy from the Emperor as a “Living God”: Defeat and Postwar Transformation in the Case of Kiyoshi Watanabe

Akira Nishimura (The University of Tokyo)

Abstract

Kiyoshi Watanabe (1925–1981), a demobilized naval soldier and later secretary-general of Wadatsumi-kai, a major postwar pacifist organization, provides a rare autobiographical account of the lived experience of State Shinto and its postwar aftermath. As a teenager from rural Japan, Watanabe internalized the Emperor-centered religio-political order, enlisting in the navy with fervent devotion to the Emperor as a living deity—reflecting the embodied reach of wartime State Shinto.

After Japan’s defeat in 1945, Watanabe experienced a profound religious and ideological rupture. He abandoned his previous beliefs and became a vocal critic of the Emperor system and a dedicated anti-imperialist activist. His autobiographical text, *The Shattered God: Memoirs of a Demobilized Soldier* (1977), frames this deconversion not simply as political dissent but as a spiritual transformation.

Despite its relevance, Watanabe’s case has been largely neglected in scholarship on State Shinto and modern Japanese religious history, which tends to focus on institutional or sectarian developments. This paper argues that his writings compel us to reconsider State Shinto as not merely a political ideology but as a deeply affective religious system. Through analysis of his personal narratives, the paper examines how the sacred authority of the Emperor was internalized, broken, and reconfigured in postwar consciousness, contributing to broader discussions on religious disenchantment, sacrality, and rupture in modern religious or secular subjectivity.

Elizabeth Sharples Carlile and English Secularism

Andrew Prescott (Glasgow University)

Abstract

Elizabeth Sharples Carlile (1803-1852), the daughter of a Lancashire bedspread manufacturer, was one of the most prominent women advocates of freethought and feminism in early Victorian England. Discussion of her life illustrates the problems of assessing the role and outlook of female secularists during this period. Her conversion to freethought has frequently been ascribed to the influence of the prominent English freethinker and populariser of Thomas Paine, Richard Carlile. However, Elizabeth’s own family life and her exploration of radical circles in north-west England also fundamentally

shaped her engagement with secularism. While Carlile was imprisoned, Elizabeth took over as lecturer at the Routunda in London, which Carlile had established as a major centre of freethought and radical activity. Elizabeth's own publication, *The Isis*, is an important source for early secularist and feminist thought in England. Elizabeth's own reputation was complicated by her 'moral marriage' with Carlile and this has often overshadowed the importance of her own contribution. After Carlile's death, Elizabeth, despite her great poverty, was an important link in radical and freethought movements in England, taking under her wing such figures as the young Charles Bradlaugh. The continuity of English radical freethought from Paine to Carlile, Holyoake and Bradlaugh is well known, but the fundamental contribution of radical women in knitting together and articulating this tradition is less well-known and indeed it may be that this continuity was largely due to the connections formed by women like Eliza Sharples.

Existential and Quotidian Questions: Methodological Considerations

Johannes Quack (University of Zürich)

Abstract

This talk outlines why the combination of biographic and ethnographic approaches is particularly fruitful for the study of secular lives and nonreligion. Based on illustrative examples from contemporary India, it is argued that this combination enables researchers to address different temporalities and modalities of knowledge, to do justice to the co-constitutive relationship between individual and society, to take the micro-sociological messiness of life and larger socio-historical forces into consideration simultaneously, and – above all – to interrelate the existential and quotidian questions that together shape people's lives.

Religious Transitions of Ryu Sangtae and Development of the Right of Non-Belief in South Korea

Jungsue Rhee (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales)

Abstract

Building on my previous research on the reconfiguration of secular norms in South Korean education system, this research explores, applying the biographic method (Tyssens & Jansson 2025), the social engagement of Rye Sangtae, key figure of the affaire Kang Ui-seok,

in which a high school student publicly denounced religious education of his high school Daegwang, and which initiated major changes in religious education and developed the idea of 'freedom to non-belief' in the society (Ko 2008).

This study focuses on Ryu, the former school pastor and religious teacher of Daegwang, compelled to resign due to his support for the student Kang, yet often forgotten in the studies of the secular (Jansson 2025). It analyses his subsequent social activities criticizing his former conservative church and defending religious freedom, especially the 'right not to believe', within some social organizations such as the Korea Institute for Religious Freedom (KIRF).

By highlighting the process of shaping secular norms for non-religious citizens, nearly half of the South Korean population and tracing Ryu's fluctuations in his religious stance, especially between the conservative protestant church and the legacy of South Korean historical reformist theological movement, this research reveals the interconnectedness between conservative and progressive dimensions of religion, politics, and society in South Korea, particularly, with the historiography of the Korean War and the related political landscape, beyond the theoretical dichotomy between the secular and the religious, (Tyssens & Jansson 2025).

Secular-Christian Mixed Intimacies in the Netherlands

Lieke Schrijvers (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

Abstract

This paper presents the outcomes of a qualitative research with couples where one partner is nonreligious and the other is Christian, shedding light on the intimate and everyday manifestations of nonreligion in the Netherlands. It focuses on the couples' individual and joint biographies, with regards to their experienced religious/secular difference. As scholarship increasingly recognises the interconnectedness of Christianity and secularity, the research aims to understand the manner in which these two co-emerge or differ in everyday realities, working against binary thinking about religion and secularity. Drawing on the conceptual approach into 'mixedness' – where what is mixed is understood to be fluid, context-bound and intersectional – this article asks how, where and to what extent these couples experience mixedness. Particular attention is given to the connections between Christian and secular hegemony in the Netherlands. In many ways, the partners have similar positionalities as white, middle- or upper class, majority heterosexual and able-bodied Dutch citizens. Both also come from Christian families. However, they do experience a degree of mixedness in terms of religious practice and self-identification, as one partner is practicing Christian and the other identifies as nonreligious, atheist, agnostic or secular. The paper asks how they navigate this difference and how nonreligion gains meaning in the context of intimate relationships.

Starting from an understanding of the secular as relational and contextual, this research highlights relationality by focusing on intimate relationships. It explores how these couples give meaning to religious-secular difference, to further understand the entanglements of Christian and secular hegemony and privileges in everyday life.

How did you become an atheist? On the significance of deconversion narratives for non-religious mobilisation in Brazil

Sabrina Testa (University of Santiago de Compostela)

Abstract

This presentation explores the significance of deconversion narratives in shaping non-religious mobilisation in Brazil. Among Brazilian non-religious activists, personal accounts of how they came to identify as atheists (a term encompassing all forms of explicit religious unbelief) are a subject of considerable interest. At the grassroots levels, the majority of activists were raised in Christian families and had undergone systematic religious education, many were also former committed believers and engaged participants in close-knit religious communities. Furthermore, given the pervasiveness of faith in Brazilian popular culture and sociability, for most of them religiosity was an inherent aspect of day-to-day life and detaching from it a long, complex and significant process that shaped how they understand and live their non-religiosity. It was, above all, a process whose story is worthy of being told. The relevance of sharing the account of their path towards unbelief exceeds individual identities and biographies: it constitutes a pivotal aspect of their sociability and activist praxis as unbelievers. This communication will argue that those narratives, and the act of telling them, hold important clues for understanding the form non-religious mobilisation assumes in a context where overt non-belief is invariably an exception and frequently an aberration. The analysis employs a relational approach to non-religion (Quack, 2014; Lee, 2015) and is grounded in multi-site ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2016 and 2018 within the Brazilian atheist movement.

No Happy Shadow. Louise-Julie Careau (1756-1805) and the Non-Religion of Women in the Age of Revolution

Jeffrey Tyssens (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

Abstract

In France, the most significant sign of a radical rupture with Catholicism was the rejection of Church-related ways of dealing with death. The precocious secular burial in 1826 of star actor Talma was an iconic event in this respect. This response to clerical exclusion of theatre people, also helped to establish a cliché, in the 19th century and beyond, of militant secularism being masculine and religion constituting women's realm. But were (late Enlightenment) unbelief and secular practices indeed a masculine preserve? A problem-based biography of Louise-Julie Careau, Talma's first wife, proves that women developed proper secular stances and did so early on. Born in poverty, starting as a ballet dancer and building wealth as a courtesane, Careau married the flamboyant tragedian in 1791, who left her in 1794 after spending most of her money. During the Revolution, Careau animated liberal salons where she closely befriended Benjamin Constant. In their discussions, Constant defended religiosity, whereas Careau vigorously rejected it. She systematically kept all clergy away from the deathbeds of her agonizing sons. While succumbing to tuberculosis herself, she firmly refused sacraments too. However, her friend Anna Lindsay (Constant's former mistress) arranged for church burial, Careau's convictions notwithstanding. If it was Monsieur and not Madame who had an early secular tomb, this resulted not only from patriarchal gender relations (keeping women within the faith to keep them docile) but also from symbolic violence, the dominated assimilating the doxa of the dominant, where other women, rather than men, impose compliance with religious norms.

Race and Leaving Religion in Western Europe: Racialising the Study of Religious Exit

Nella van den Brandt (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven)

Abstract

Women's trajectories of religious exit in Western Europe often negotiate issues of gender and race. Drawing on life story interviews with individuals of diverse Christian and Islamic backgrounds in the UK and the Netherlands, this article discusses the ways in which women's narratives address race. The article shows that an intersectional perspective, operationalised through theories of religion and racialisation, is crucial in approaching former Christian women's concerns about racism and coloniality,

and former Muslim women's negotiation of the continued perception of them as Muslim. Intersectionality is innovatively merged with the concept religio-racial formations to analyse women's narratives as talking about and embedded in structures of religio-racialisation. The article argues for a more sustained incorporation of intersectionality in scholarship on gender and religion through further conceptualising the religion-race nexus in Europe.

Bio: Nella van den Brandt is a postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at KU Leuven. Her book *Religion, Gender and Race in Western European Arts and Culture: Thinking Through Religious Transformation* was published by Routledge in 2024. Between 2022 and 2024, she worked on a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship-funded project researching women's life stories of leaving religion in the UK and the Netherlands, hosted at Coventry University (UK). Her current project explores the experiences of interreligious romantic couples in Belgium. She is senior editor of the international academic journal *Religion and Gender*.

Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950). Lived Experiences in Understanding Religion. A Biographical Perspective on Gerardus van der Leeuw's Phenomenology of Religion

David Veltman (Universiteit Groningen)

Abstract

In my lecture, the individual agency will be researched of Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950), professor of the phenomenology of religion at the University of Groningen. I will show how the theoretical viewpoints laid out by Van der Leeuw were translated into his individual practice as a scholar working at university. He allowed himself to consider the interconnectedness of various religious and non-religious traditions, seeking to understand the universal aspects of spirituality while respecting the uniqueness of each tradition.

In various publications, reviews, and interviews, Van der Leeuw discussed his interpretation of the phenomenology of religion, which proved to be very appealing to his colleagues at university. He emphasized the importance of lived experiences in understanding religion, asserting that individuals engage with the sacred in diverse and meaningful ways. In discussing the emergence of new forms of spirituality, Van der Leeuw stated that: "There is genuine Christianity only where the powers of this world are acknowledged and are served. Denial is an opponent that Christianity can live and struggle with. Demonic affirmation brings the church new struggle and new hope." This perspective highlights the dynamic interplay between established religious traditions and emerging secular expressions. In this lecture, Van der Leeuw's individual interpretation of phenomenology will be problematized: how did it deviate from or concord with the mentalities and values derived from contemporary phenomenological approaches?

I will argue that, depending on his education, personal beliefs, and engagement with various religious communities, Van der Leeuw was able to describe his agency as 'autonomous' to a certain degree.

Deconversion and Reconversion of a Pastor and Right of Non-Belief : Critical social engagement of Ryu Sangtae, former school pastor and religious teacher in South Korea

David Vergauwen (Madoc – Cedom)

Abstract

Joseph Defrenne was a multifaceted figure in Brussels: a lawyer, journalist, Freemason, and chansonnier. His life story not only sheds light on the political and cultural upheavals of his time but also illustrates the pathways through which individuals in nineteenth-century Belgium developed explicitly anticlerical positions.

Initially supportive of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, Defrenne radicalized in the 1820s, particularly in response to the regime's language policy. In pamphlets such as *Quelques idées sur l'usage obligé de la langue dite nationale...* (1829), he denounced the authoritarian tendencies of the state. At the same time, he made an institutional shift: leaving the pro-government lodge *L'Espérance*, he joined the more critical *Les Amis Philanthropes* and emerged as a key figure in Belgian Freemasonry, culminating in the founding of the Grand Orient of Belgium in 1833.

Although a protestant and not initially overtly anticlerical, a turning point came in 1837 with the episcopal condemnation of Freemasonry. At the age of seventy, Defrenne began writing and performing anticlerical songs within Masonic circles. In doing so, he became a cultural precursor to the more militant secular anticlericalism that soon took institutional form through figures such as Pierre-Théodore Verhaegen and Eugène Defacqz.

Defrenne's trajectory reveals how personal conviction, political context, and Masonic engagement intertwined in shaping anticlerical identities. Remarkably, he remained loyal to his Protestant faith. His funeral was held at the Chapelle Royale, and his grave in the Protestant cemetery proudly bears Masonic symbols. As Verhaegen remarked in tribute: "Beaucoup ont fait du bruit, très peu fait autant de bien."

I, Pastafari, Parliamentarian, Entrepreneur and Laicist. Niko Alm, a Figurehead of Secularist Austria

Elisabeth Waldl

Abstract

His role in the documentary *I, Pastafari: A Flying Spaghetti Monster Story* and his invention of the colander as a Pastafarian headpiece made Niko Alm internationally famous in secularist circles. But he is much more than the Master of Celery in the Austrian Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. As a jack of all trades, he is an entrepreneur, former CEO of well-known media companies, neoliberal politician, former parliamentarian and particularly one of the figureheads in the secular scene in Austria. Over the last twenty years, he has been substantially involved in numerous secular initiatives and campaigns advocating for a laicist state and a more critical relation to religion on the societal, political and legal level.

In this paper, I will present a biographical approach to my research on the secular scene in Austria by focusing on the life of Nikolaus Alm (born 1975). Starting with the initial self-realisation of his own unbelief to his first encounters with freethinkers and right up to his role as president of the Central Council of the Unaffiliated, we will trace his development to an outspoken activist for a strict separation of state and church. Furthermore, through the lens of Alm, we will look at projects like the Atheist Bus Campaign, the People's Referendum against Church Privileges and his theoretical work on a definition of laicity. By this, we can empathise with the overall progression of the freethinkers' movement towards the secular scene in 21st-century Austria.

VENUE (SILVER BUILDING)

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- **Nearby tram stops:** Diamant (≈4–5 min walk)
- **Nearby bus lines:** 21, 29, 79, R81, R90
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 - Transfer to Tram 7 (or 25 / 62) toward Diamant / Reyers.
 - Walk ≈ 5 minutes to Auguste Reyerslaan 70.
 - Approx. travel time: 15–20 minutes.
- Option 2: Direct Bus
 - From Brussels Central, take Bus 29 to Diamant stop.
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B. From Brussels Airport (Zaventem) → Silver Building

There are two main options from Brussels Airport:

- Option 1: Train + Metro + Tram
 - Take a train from Brussels Airport to Brussels-Schuman or Brussels Central station.
 - From Schuman or Central, take Metro line 1 or 5 toward Merode.
 - At Merode, transfer to Tram 7 / 25 / 62 to Diamant.
 - Walk ≈ 5 minutes to Auguste Reyerslaan 70.
 - Approx. travel time: 30–40 minutes.
- Option 2: Airport Bus + Metro + Tram
 - Take Bus 12 (Airport Line) from Zaventem Airport to Schuman station.
 - From Schuman, take Metro line 1 or 5 toward Merode.
 - At Merode, transfer to Tram 7 / 25 / 62 to Diamant.
 - Walk ≈ 4 minutes to the building.
 - Approx. travel time: 40–50 minutes.