

Listening to My Own Feelings

Emotions in Representations of Leaving Religion in the Dutch Context



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RMA Thesis *Religious Studies*, Utrecht University

Word count: 43032

This thesis is dedicated to Eline Voorn

Frontal image: Personal drawing of a paper figure that is glued to a stick on a pedestal that my six year old niece Sarah made for a school project. In this project, the schoolchildren had to make a figure in the style of the famous Dutch Cobra artist Karel Appel. I have chosen this image because this figure perfectly embodies the notion of unspoiled childhood and expressive authenticity, which is not only one of the key notions of dadaism and cobra, but also one of present-day representations of emotions in leaving religion.

Abstract

This thesis contributes to the scholarly inquiry of religion by investigating the lived afterlife of religion through combining two young and promising fields: religious emotion and leaving religion. It argues that one cannot understand leaving religion without taking the emotional dimension into account. This thesis proposes such a study by investigating the “emotional scripts” that are presented in representations of leaving religion in the Dutch context. With “emotional scripts” the author highlights the mediation and structure of emotion as presented in narratives of leaving religion. It investigates three case studies that range from the 1960s to the present-day context: the literary works of Jan Wolkers and Maarten ‘t Hart (1960s and 1970s), the TV-series *Vrijdenkers* (2021), and the blogosphere *Dogmavrij.nl* (2015—present) and its audience. It argues that the emotional scripts that are presented by Wolkers and ‘t Hart have a lasting influence on Dutch understandings of leaving religion, but that the present-day representations indicate a fundamental change in the emotions of leaving religion. Whereas Wolkers and ‘t Hart presented an emotional script that confronts the negative religious past in order for a blessed secular state to arrive, the present-day representations present an emotional script that confronts the self. The author argues that this shift towards the self is related to the rise of the ideal of authenticity and the therapeutic narrative that both proclaim an ideal notion of selfhood as becoming one’s true self.

Note: The primary sources for this thesis—the literary works by Wolkers and ‘t Hart, the TV-series *Vrijdenkers*, and the website *Dogmavrij.nl*—are all in Dutch, the quotes in this thesis are thus translated from Dutch to English by the author, unless stated otherwise.

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Chapter 1 | Introduction

Over the years, I have made several close and good friends who have left their religion. I have left religion myself as well and I am often surprised by the amount of people that I know that have left their religion. And even though many of my friends are ‘religion leavers’, we do not necessarily speak about it, nor do we regard ourselves first and foremost as ‘fellow religion leavers.’ As with almost any other aspect, our lives cannot be reduced to the leaving religion one. So, when I meet them, we talk about many things, our jobs, our relationships, our convictions, the things we like and the things we hate, but we only occasionally talk about the religious past and the consequences of leaving it behind. Nevertheless, there is one occasion where we always talk about leaving religion and its consequences, and it is always steeped in emotion: the relationship we have with our parents.

Just like last week, when I had a moving conversation with Rian. I had met Rian about a year ago at a party and I was introduced to him as “someone who has also left his religion.” We smiled, said hi, and chatted about all kinds of things, but neither of us felt the need to talk about the topic that we shared, since we both felt that it would be too heavy. It was only after I had seen and spoken to him several times that we started to discuss our processes of leaving religion in depth. It started with Rian who shared something about his mother. He told me that he recently had been away for the weekend with his mother and that they had had a heavy conversation on belief and dis-belief. He asked his mother how she felt about who he had turned out to be, a man in his thirties with a good job and a nice girlfriend, but without the faith of his parents. She told him that his parents were proud of him and that they loved and accepted him fully, but that there is one exception that she will never be able to accept: his dis-belief. She told Rian that she felt a great responsibility for the wellbeing of her son’s soul. And that it would cause her a lot of grief and pain when she would die, knowing that her own son does not believe in God, and thus will not be in heaven with her. She said that she hopes with all of her being that her son would return to his faith, so that they would be together after her death. Rian was shocked and devastated by her confession, he never wanted to cause his mother any pain and definitely not during her last moments in life because of his leaving of religion. Rian told me that he wants to be loved and accepted fully by his mother, just as he does with her. Knowing that his own disbelief puts so much stress on his parents, and specifically on his mother, destroys him. Leaving religion is an emotionally heavy burden for both himself and for his parents that is characterised by longing, grief, despair and a struggle to accept the situation.

Rian’s story of emotional struggle because his parents cannot accept that he is leaving religion, is a very common one amongst my peers. When we talk about leaving religion, I am always struck by the emotional intensity of the conversation. We hardly discuss the cognitive

particularities of changing convictions nor our specific theological standpoints. We talk about our parents, about the emotional struggle of building our own lives whilst trying not to disappoint our parents. The lived afterlife of religion is a process that cannot be understood without taking emotion seriously. It is a process that goes beyond the particularities of (dis)belief and has a lasting effect on the social reality of the subjects and of their immediate surroundings. In this thesis, I investigate the lived afterlife of religion, by studying the emotional dimension. I do so by studying the emotions that are presented in representations of leaving religion in the Dutch public sphere. We will see that emotions of leaving religion in the Dutch context have a specific socio-historical context and a specific history of emotional representations of leaving religion that started with an iconic narrative in the 1960s (Chapter 2), but that has been changed in recent years (Chapters 3, 4 and 5).

The premise of this thesis is that one cannot understand leaving religion without taking the lived reality of emotion into account. For a long time, religion has been approached without an investigation of the emotional dimension. Scholars approached religion as something that was primarily immaterial, interior, textual, cognitive, and spiritual. This approach yielded “a focus on beliefs and questions of meaning as privileged domains of inquiry” (Meyer and Houtman 2012, 1). Concomitantly, as religion was viewed through the lens of “belief” and “questions of meaning,” leaving religion, or de-conversion, or deconstruction,¹ was conceptualised in terms of dis-belief and loss of meaning. This one-sided and cognitive focus on leaving religion as (dis)belief has been problematised by only a few studies (Enstedt 2020). In the recently published *Handbook of Leaving Religion* (2020), Daniel Enstedt signals a lack of corporeality and materiality in the study of leaving religion and calls for the implementation of the bodily turn in this field. Doing so could “provide valuable insights into the processes, consequences, and even the ambiguity of exiting a religion” (Enstedt 2020, 303). I heartily

¹ There are various terms that are used by scholars and subjects to describe the process of the diminishment of a religious lifestyle and conviction. In this thesis I most often use “leaving religion” to denote a process that is enduring and that entails many aspects. Whereas the finishing point of this process is obscure, undefined, and varied, it does have a clear starting/departing point. I use the term “de-conversion” to denote the more cognitive process of changing convictions and beliefs. Another term that is commonly used amongst present-day American youtubers that describe their leaving religion process is “deconstruction.” This term is in line with leaving religion in the sense that it denotes an enduring and complex process. This process consists of a continuous and active deconstruction of the learned religious convictions and outlooks on life.

agree with Enstedt that leaving religion conveys more than just dis-belief and loss of meaning and that exiting a religion has an undeniable emotional side. Therefore, this thesis takes the recent appreciation of lived religion and reappraisal of religious emotion as its starting point in investigating leaving religion.

1.1 The turn to emotion – *interplay between agent and larger structure*

In 2010, Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead note how strange it is that up to that point “little attention has been paid to the emotional dimension of religion in academic work.” This is surprising, they say, “given how much interest was paid to religious emotion at the time when the academic study of religion was initiated” (2010, 1). In the early days of the discipline of religious studies, the study of emotion was everywhere. In 1923, in the introduction to *The Idea of the Holy* by Rudolph Otto, J.W. Harvey “wondered aloud whether the sheer quantity of studies of religious emotion and intuition threatened to swamp the field” (Ibid.). Several years prior to *The Idea of the Holy*, however, Durkheim and Mauss warned that emotions “cannot be properly studied because they are fluid, mixed, not easily defined, and consequently impossible to analyze (see Durkheim and Mauss 1963)” (Lindholm 2007, 31). Durkheim and Mauss sought a sociological study that would move beyond both the psychological focus on individual emotions and beyond the religionist interpretation of feelings as divine interventions. They wanted to investigate the larger social context in a serious and empirical fashion. In their view, there was no place for the wild and vague individual and religionist emotions in the sociology of religion that they were trying to build. Riis and Woodhead point out that soon after its initial peak interest in emotion, the study of religion abandoned its interest in emotions and became dominated by a ‘belief-based’ approach, that focused on the intellectual and textual side of religion. That the study of religion shied away from studying emotions, does not mean that emotions are not central to religious experience. As a matter of fact, emotion and religion are very strongly interrelated and therefore in need of serious study. Riis and Woodhead plea for a sociological study of religious emotion, which they try to initiate in their monograph. In the introduction, they stress the important link between religion and emotion, “religion is one of the most important crucibles for emotional change and transformation” (2010, 11) and argue for a focus on the emotional dimension. Their plea for studying the emotional dimension of religion concurs with the material turn that started to gain importance in the study of religion at the turn of the 20th-century. In the material turn of religious studies, the focus shifted “to the body and corporeality,

to [the] lived experience” of religion (Bräunlein 2016, 366).² The belief-based approach of “assuming that the essence of a religion is to be found first and foremost in its central texts and doctrines” (Scheer 2020, 14) made way for a lived and practice-oriented understanding of religion. Through this corporeal, material, and practical understanding of religion, emotions re-entered the field of religious studies as a serious subject that could be sociologically studied.

Next to Riis and Woodhead’s plea for the study of religious emotion, multiple studies and approaches of (religious) emotion have been conducted and proposed in the last decades of which I succinctly treat a relevant selection in this section.³ These works inform us on how (religious) emotion has been studied, so that we can take the valuable insights of these approaches with us and apply them to our study of emotions of *leaving religion*.

What these studies on emotion all have in common is that they do not understand emotions, or feelings⁴, as isolated and private phenomena that are experienced within and disconnected from the outside world. They critique a common interpretation that regards emotions as “inner states which are displayed or expressed, whereby the experience comes first (and is subjective), and the expression comes second (and is an objectification of that experience)” (Scheer 2020, 20). In their understanding, emotions override clear boundaries and do not reside solely in the body (or in the mind for that matter), but exist *in-between* the social, the personal, the cognitive, and the body. Monique Scheer stresses that emotion is “not purely biological but tightly linked to socialization, culture, [and] power” (Scheer 2020, 19) and describes emotion as “bodily intelligence” (Ibid., 28). Steven Mullaney proposes an understanding of emotions as boundary phenomena. “They are prismatic aspects of somatic and sentient life, hard to contain in rigid or exclusive categories because they are, by their very nature, things that happen betwixt-and-between rather than here or there” (Mullaney 2015, 19). Sara Ahmed stresses that emotions can never be one-sided, they “are not ‘in’ either the

² See also: Meredith McGuire (2008).

³ Hochschild 1983, Lindholm 2007, Ahmed 2014, Knoblauch and Herbrich 2014, Mullaney 2015, Scheer 2020, Frevert 2023, Riis and Woodhead 2010.

⁴ ‘Emotion’ is a difficult term that can be delineated in multiple ways. It is related to terms such as passions, sentiments, and feelings and difficult to translate into other language and time periods (Lindholm 2002). Whereas some would argue that there are only four basic emotions: angry, happy, sad, and afraid, others would argue that there are many more emotions to discern. Ute Frevert for instance describes 20 emotions: anger, belonging, curiosity, disgust, empathy, envy, fear, fondness, grief, hate, honour, hope, humility, joy, love, nostalgia, pride, shame, solidarity, trust. In this thesis, I take ‘emotion’ in a broad sense, so that it also covers sentiments, passions and feelings.

individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects” (Ahmed 2014, 10). Even though emotions are felt inside one’s own body, its experience and expression is influenced by a larger socio-historical context. Emotions exist in the interplay between the person, his/her body, and his/her cultural context. There are two sides to this *in-betweenness* of emotions which are mainly treated in studies on emotion. Firstly, emotions are vague and open for interpretation, and secondly, emotions are strongly influenced by a larger social and historical context. These two sides are connected to each other, since they both stress that emotion is not purely biological and private, but something that is influenced by the outer world.

Emotion is powerful and pervasive in both societal and religious structures and it has a strong (motivational) force in the lived reality of both religion and irreligion. Yet, it has not been subject to scholar inquiry in the field of religious studies for a long time. The main reason is that emotion is “a notoriously obscure concept” (Lindholm 2007, 31) which is hard to delineate and difficult to study. Emotions have a certain vagueness, they have an indeterminate character and are thus influenced by its interpretation. Riis and Woodhead stress the indeterminacy of emotion when they state that “it is very rare to have a pure feeling. We are much more likely to feel, say, a mix of grief and relief, or of affection and irritation, or righteous indignation and jealousy” (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 47). Emotions are hardly ever pure, the way one talks and thinks about their emotions already influences the experience of these emotions. Scheer stresses that “emotions are not self-evident objects; our experience of them, how we talk about them, is deeply shaped by our understanding of what they are and how they work. In other words, theory informs the practice of emotion” (Scheer 2020, 19). The experience of emotions is open for interpretation and it is influenced by its interpretation. One of the main sources for the interpretation of emotions is the specific socio-historical context. Ute Frevert stresses how emotions are not only shaped by personal experience, but also by the larger collective experience and the cultural context. Emotions “feed on sociocultural repertoires that invest them with nuance and meaning. How and what people feel always depends on what they have learnt about emotions” (Frevert 2023, 3). The societal norms strongly influence the experience and expression of emotions. Since emotions are difficult to grasp themselves, all the studies propose a close analysis of the context wherein the emotions are experienced and expressed.

All studies on emotion focus on the interplay between the societal context and the personal experience and expression of emotion. Since emotion takes place in the interplay between the agent (person) and the larger structure (societal norms), the historical/cultural/

sociological study on (religious) emotion has to deal with the difficult issue of studying a phenomenon with unclear power structures and origins. To what extent is this specific emotion, its experience and expression, influenced by larger societal norms and to what extent is it personal and original? The concepts that are being used inside the studies of emotion reflect how the researchers deal with this interplay and where they place their focus (on the societal norms, or on the personal agent).

One great example of research that focusses on the societal norms of religious emotion is the monograph *A Sociology of Religious Emotion* (2010) by Riis and Woodhead. They argue that religion offers “emotional regimes” for its subjects and that these regimes can be investigated fruitfully. They use the notion of emotional regime to capture

the way that emotions are integral to the structured social and material relations that constitute a particular social unit or setting—whether a business, a family, an Internet-based fan club, or a religious community. Like the wider social ordering with which it is bound up, an emotional regime has an internal coherence and boundedness, though it can enter a state of flux, imbalance, or disintegration (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 10).

Riis and Woodhead use the concept emotional regimes to look at the structural relations of emotional expression and experience and the power structures that shape these relations. They are interested in the social and cultural connections that constitute an emotional regime, rather than the individual religious feelings. Interestingly, Riis and Woodhead argue that it is the religious environment, in particular, that provides strong and all-pervading emotional regimes. “Most religions promise to transfigure emotional lives according to a pattern of order that is embodied and expressed by a religious group, its members, and its sacred symbols, both personal and collective” (Ibid., 11). To be a member of a religion, means to be a member of strong religious emotional regime. Throughout their monograph, Riis and Woodhead spell out three different characteristics of religious emotional regimes:

- 1) **Emotional ordering:** inside religious emotional regimes there are normative patterns of feeling and relating, wherein certain emotions are praised and others are disregarded.
- 2) **Transcendence-transition:** the religious emotional ordering is connected to a transcendent reality which enables it to transcend and transition the daily and mundane emotions of its subjects.

3) **Inspiration-orientation:** religious emotional regimes offer long-lasting emotional inspiration and orientation, rather than intense sensations that pass after a while; it is a regime that stays for a lifetime and beyond.

Riis's and Woodhead's focus on the emotional norms that are provided by religion. They argue that the experience and expression of emotions by the religious subjects are strongly influenced by an "emotional regime" and that being religious means to be part of a specific and strong emotional structuring.

Other research that focusses on the culturally structured side of emotion is the highly influential work on flight attendants and their display of desirable emotions by Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983). Hochschild uses the term "script" to analyse the display of emotions and equates "script" with "feeling rules" (Hochschild 2012 [1983], chapter 4) that are prescribed by society. She focuses on how these feeling rules prescribe the desired feelings and expression of emotions for specific subjects inside a particular social context. This understanding of emotion is in line with the emotional regime as proposed by Riis and Woodhead.

Hubert Knoblauch and Regine Herbrich, who study the mediation of emotion inside religious communities and events, use the term "emotional style" to denote "the situational aggregations of communicative codifications of the emotional, which we can observe and analyze" (2014, 358). They study the interactions between the authorities, the crowd, and the specific mediation of emotion inside religious events. By focussing on the visual performances and utterances of emotion they allow for an analysis of how emotion is codified and performed. Their approach focuses on how religious authorities prescribe a certain emotional style through a specific mediation (music, images, video's) and how this emotion style is taken up by the religious audience.

Ute Frevert, a historian of German emotion, argues in her monograph *The Power of Emotions* (2023), that emotion not only makes history (through their powerful motivational character), but that it is also part of a larger socio-historical context. "Emotions not only *make* history. They are also *made by* history. They are transformed by social institutions and events that differ across time and place. Emotions *have* a history" (Frevert 2023, 5). Frevert's argument is that, as emotion is related to its specific context, the perception and evaluation of emotion changes over time. In her monograph she traces and reconstructs the specific "emotional styles" of German history. She uses emotional style to describe the "social conventions and rules, both explicit and implicit" (2023, 13) that are common among certain groups at specific periods. Frevert focusses on the specific socio-historical feeling conventions and feeling rules which

allows her to investigate historical periods and their emotional styles (for instance the emotional ‘coolness’ amongst German men in the 1950s and 1990s).

A researcher who focusses more on the mediation and the personal practice of emotion is Monique Scheer, who studies the practice of enthusiasm in the German Christian context. She uses the term “emotional practice” to focus on the “complexes of bodily emotion-as-practice and the broader context in which they are done” (Scheer 2020, 21). Scheer focusses on the practice of emotional doings and how they are structured by factors such as language, social order, and local culture. Emotions have to be mediated in order to be available, and this is done through practice. As an example, Scheer mentions the “skill” of crying. Just as any other expression of emotion, crying is something that has to be practiced for it to be available. Scheer describes how in certain historical periods and cultures “the proscription of male weeping is so strong that some men have trouble producing tears at all, even in situations where it might be allowed, due to lack of practice” (Ibid., 22). Emotional expressions have to be mediated by the bodily practices that are influenced by the cultural proscriptions, prescriptions, and social order.

Emotion and religion are approached in several different ways and since emotions take place in the interplay between the personal and the societal context, all studies take the larger context into account. Riis and Woodhead use the term “emotional regime” to denote the emotional norms and rules inside a religion. They identify a strong connection between a religious community and the emotions of its participants. Hochschild also focusses on emotional norms and rules in her influential study on the “feeling rules” that flight attendants have to adhere to. Knoblauch and Herbrink use the term “emotional style” to denote the communicative aggregation of codifications of the emotional. They study the emotional styles that are present within religious events and communities by analysing which emotions are mediated and how they are mediated. Frevert uses the term “emotional style” as well, but she uses it to denote the explicit and implicit feeling rules in a given community at a given period. Scheer uses the term “emotional practice” to denote the practicality of emotions. Emotions are “skills” that are practiced. Scheer studies which emotions are practiced and how this practice is related to societal norms and ideas on these practices. What all these studies have in common, is that they regard emotion as something that takes place in the interplay between the personal and the societal. Emotions are shared and mediated, they take place on a bodily and social level. One can study emotion by investigating how it is practiced in relation to its larger context. By investigating its mediation and performance and the implicit and explicit feeling rules in play.

In this thesis, I approach the emotions of leaving religion, by investigating which emotions are displayed, the specific mediation that is used, and how this display of emotions connects to larger societal ideas. I do so by looking at representations of leaving religion and how emotion is presented inside these representations. I argue that the authors/creators of these representations provide an exemplary narrative of leaving religion that comes with an exemplary “emotional script” for the audience to identify with or relate to. I have devised the term “script” because “regime” and “style” do not fit with the data for this thesis. “Emotional regime” appears to denote a somewhat coherent, mentalised, enforced, and static system of shared norms. The term “style” appears to be somewhat more vague than regime, it denotes a shared sense of emotional display that would fit my research, but does not do justice to the “scripted” character of my case studies. The representations of leaving religion contain a clear emotional narrative that presents not only a specific emotional display, but also a specific emotional development from suppression to expression. This progression from suppression to expression does not fit the notion of style (one either has a suppressive emotional style or an expressive one), but does fit the concept of “script” in the sense of a “plot” that contains progression. The only author that uses “scripts” in her study of emotion is Arlie Hochschild, her conception of the term “scripts”, however, differs fundamentally from my conception. Hochschild equates “scripts” with “feeling rules” that are ‘*prescribed*’ inside a given context. The notion of emotional script that I have devised focusses on the display of emotions provided by a personal voice inside a personal narrative. I do argue that these scripts are related to a larger societal structure, but they are not “feeling rules” that prescribe the emotions one has to feel or express when leaving religion in the Dutch context. The emotional scripts take place in the interplay between personal agent with their personal narrative and the larger societal structure where, on the one hand, the emotional scripts are already informed by the societal structures that the author is part of, and on the other hand, they inform the larger structure with its exemplary function.

1.2 Concepts used in this thesis – *emotional script, authenticity, and therapeutic narrative*

1.2.1 Emotional script

In this research, I study the emotions of leaving religion through the notion of “emotional script” which I use to focus on the specific display of emotions inside the personal, but shared, representations of leaving religion. The choice for “script” is closely related to the data of this thesis. The case studies in this research consists of three different representations of leaving religion in the Dutch public sphere that display certain emotions within a specific progressive

plot which provides an evaluation emotions and leaving religion. My study of emotion differs from the studies presented above, in that it does not investigate the presence of emotions inside specific (religious) situations and events. It investigates the narratives of leaving religion that are constructed in the public sphere. It is in these public representations that the emotions of leaving religion take the centre stage in the Dutch context. Inside these representations of leaving religion, a (n un)conscious choice has been made as to which emotions are displayed and how they are presented. Representations are, on the one hand, mediations of past and present events and sentiments and, on the other, reflections and interpretations of these past and present events and sentiments. Inside the moment of mediation, there is a moment of reflection and choice. These representations emphasise certain emotional aspects and provide a specific story that can be taken up, or contested, by the audience. The notion of scripts allows me to investigate which emotions are displayed and how they are displayed, the story that they form together and the interpretations that they are part of. In addition, the notion script points towards the exemplary function of the public representations. The stories that are told and the emotions that are displayed function as normalising, and sometimes even iconic, scripts for the Dutch audience to identify with. The notion of emotional script not only highlights the mediated character of emotions of leaving religion and how these emotions are structured, but it also points towards the exemplary character of a script that can be followed by the audience.

1.2.2 Authenticity

In line with the emotion research described above, I make a connection between the emotional scripts that are presented inside the representations of leaving religion and the larger socio-cultural context. The iconicity of the emotional scripts that are presented in Chapter 2 have to be understood in the context of the 1960s and 1970s as years of cultural transition. And as I will make clear in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, the emotional scripts of the present-day representation of leaving religion have to be understood in light of the modern ideal of authenticity. The ideal of authenticity is so pervasive and important inside the emotional scripts of present-day representations of leaving religion, that a brief treatment of the ideal of authenticity is needed here. The ideal of authenticity is “taken for granted as an absolute value in contemporary life” (Lindholm 2008, 1). Authenticity is a powerful “motivating force” (Lindholm 2013, 390) that has come to “permeate the core institutions of modern, Western countries” (Houtman, Aupers

and de Koster 2011, 22). It has become an undisputable force and is therefore subject to many different studies.⁵

Anthropologist Charles Lindholm traces the history of the modern ideal of expressive authenticity. He states that it grew out of the simpler, more modest virtue of sincerity that arose in 16th-century European society. One of the main reasons for the rise of sincerity is the loss of a stable and sacred social order. With the breakup of the feudal system and the massive movements out of the countryside into urban environments “people were no longer quite sure where they belonged, what their futures held for them, or who their neighbours were” (Lindholm 2013, 356). Because of the erosion of the sacred hierarchy and the condition of living among strangers, personal sincerity, reliability, and integrity became a desired trait. This shift towards personal self-reliance and sincerity was supported by the rise of the protestant bourgeoisie that proclaimed personal responsibility for salvation and radical egalitarianism. It was also supported by the rise of scientific reason and scepticism, with French philosopher René Descartes (1596—1650) as its main exemplar “who believed that underlying reality could only be discovered by eliminating all social and personal preconceptions” (Lindholm 2008, 4). These tendencies towards sincerity and self-reliance grew into an emphasis on authenticity during the Romantic period in the 18th-century. Lindholm calls the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712—1778) “the inventor of modern authenticity” (Ibid., 8). Rousseau was one of the main figures of the romantic turn in European thought as he romanticised and idealised the original nature of men. In his eyes, modern human are alienated from the authentic self through civilization that could only “be found among primitives (sic), peasants, and innocent children and, for some sensitive persons such as himself” (Lindholm 2013, 382). Rousseau propagated the “communion with the unique inner self resistant to all social pressure” (Ibid., 10) seeking a life of authenticity outside of alienating society. A solitary, self-centred, and idealised tendency that Lindholm traces further in the influential works of philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre. During the 1960s and 1970s, authenticity was wielded by the countercultural movements to break away from the alienating mainstream mass society and while these movements have diminished, the ideal of the authenticity as an absolute good has lasted and became mainstream in contemporary Western societies.

⁵ Studies of authenticity focus, amongst others, on consumer culture (Banet-Weiser 2012; O’Neill, Houtman and Aupers, 2014; Thurnell-Read 2019), religion (Houtman, Aupers and de Koster 2011; Bielo 2012; Kim 2017), heritage (van de Port and Meyer 2018), cultural history (Lindholm 2008), anthropology (Lindholm 2002; van de Port 2004), and therapeutic culture (Illouz 2008; Foster 2016).

In their chapter “Religions of Modernity. Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital” Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers (2010) describe a focus on the self that is found in new forms of religion and spirituality, New Age in particular, that is similar to the rise of authenticity that Lindholm describes. Houtman and Aupers argue that in New Age, the sacred can no longer be found ‘out there’, but rather ‘in here’. They call this “the imperative of self-spirituality” (2010, 6). In New Age, there are two selves, the mundane and socialised self (i.e. the alienated self) and the deeper, true, natural, authentic self. “The spiritual self is conceived as laying hidden behind, beyond, or underneath the mundane self. Residing in the deeper emotional layers of consciousness, it is sacralized as representing the person one ‘really’ or ‘at deepest’ is” (Ibid.). The imperative of self-spirituality states that one has to seek the true and authentic self, beyond the alienation and to become “who one really is” (Ibid., 8). The ideal of listening to your own inner voice and to life according to the true and innocent self, has become a pervasive ideal in the modern-day context and is a defining feature of new forms of religiosity and spirituality.

Modern western society is obsessed with the ideal of authenticity, but paradoxically, as the notion of “ideal” already suggest, scholarship on authenticity agrees that authenticity has a mythical character and therefore needs to be actively constructed. Authenticity is not something that is innate and already present inside a specific object, act, or situation, but always has to be achieved through means of authentication (Thurnell-Read 2019). As Mattijs van de Port and Birgit Meyer state it in their research on authenticity and heritage: authenticity is not an “essence to be discovered” inside sites of heritage but a quality that is always “produced” in a specific mediation, a cultural construction of the real, that creates the really real of heritage (Van de Port and Meyer 2018, 6). And so, any claim of authenticity has to maintain a difficult balance between “the mythical and the actual” (O’Neill, Houtman and Aupers 2014, 594). Authenticity is a vulnerable quality that has to deal with the constant threat of being exposed as constructed and inauthentic. The ideal of authenticity of being true to yourself and listening to your inner voice, despite the alienating socialisation, has an idealistic and mythical character, it is an ideal that is difficult to achieve, it is not something innate and innocent as suggested by Rousseau, but something that has to be constructed and mediated.

1.2.3 Therapeutic narrative

In Chapters 4 and 5, I will make clear that in these representations of leaving religion, emotion is embedded not only the ideal of authenticity, but also in the “therapeutic narrative” that gained in importance during the previous century. In her monograph *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*, Eva Illouz (2008) argues that a “therapeutic narrative”

has come to pervade modern society. Illouz describes the rise of psychology and the subsequent psychologization of social reality and self-understanding. She argues that the rise of psychology is connected to the concept of self-actualisation that became equated with being healthy around the 1950s. This equation

represented an extraordinarily enlarged realm of action for psychologists. Not only did psychologists move from psychological disturbance to the much wider realm of neurotic misery, but they now moved from neurotic misery to the idea that health and self-realization were *synonymous*. The effect of putting self-realization at the very center of models of selfhood was to make most lives become “un-self-realized.” This basic idea formed the core of psychology’s uncanny popular success (Illouz 2008, 161).

According to Illouz, the idea of self-realisation contributed bilaterally to the rise of psychology. One, by putting self-realisation at the centre, it made most people un-self-realised, and two, made sure that these people had to go into therapy to learn how to become self-realised. Illouz uses the term “therapeutic narrative” for this psychological ideal of self-realisation, since it is a narrative of selfhood that has come to pervade how people understand their own lives. It has become a narrative of self-identification wherein one narrates their life as a progression from un-realisation towards realisation. Illouz is critical of this narrative, since the therapeutic narrative contains “an extraordinary paradox: therapeutic culture—the primary vocation of which is to heal—must generate a narrative structure in which suffering and victimhood actually define the self. Indeed, the therapeutic narrative functions only by conceiving of life events as the markers of failed or thwarted opportunities for self-development” (Ibid., 173). The ideal of self-development and self-realisation seemingly points towards a desired state, but contrarily only points towards states of failure. The desired state of being self-realised is impossible to establish, since it is never made clear or fleshed out in the narrative and thus only functions as a negative mirror that creates sick people that need to go to therapy.

A dynamic similar to the therapeutic narrative can be found in the sacralisation of the self in New Age and the ideal of authenticity as the communion with the true self beyond the alienation of socialisation. The true self is an ideal that is lost through alienation and has to be found again. This ideal is not clearly defined and difficult to fully reach. As with the ideal of self-realisation that creates a narrative wherein people are un-self-realised, the ideal of authenticity creates a world of inauthenticity and alienation. An similar to authenticity, the ideal of self-realisation is sought through a careful authentication, mediation, and construction. It

does so through a psychological language and therapy. Through following therapy, one becomes more self-realised. In Chapters 3, 4 and 5 it becomes clear that the emotional scripts are to be understood in line with both the ideal of authenticity and the ideal of self-realisation.

1.3 Central question

This thesis starts with two premises: one, scholars of religion need to study the afterlife of religion, and two, the afterlife of religion cannot be understood without taking emotion serious. The study of leaving religion and de-conversion has only gained attention in recent years and is in need of a focus on the lived side of leaving religion, on the materiality and corporeality of the religious afterlife. This thesis aims to take a step into the direction of lived religious afterlife by studying the emotional scripts inside representations of leaving religion in the Dutch context. Through this approach I am able to compare leaving religion in the 1960s and 1970s with the present-day context and provide insights into a phenomenon that has been neglected and ill understood for a long time. I agree with Daniel Enstedt who signalled in 2020 a lack of material and corporeal investigations in the field of leaving religion and called for the implementation of the bodily turn. Both the field of studying leaving religion and the field of studying religious emotion are young and full of promise. This thesis combines precisely these two fields in a time where lived religion seems the way forward in religious studies, but where there are less and less religious people in the West-European context and where the body of leavers of religion is growing. In a recent symposium that I attended on leaving religion as a gendered experience,⁶ several papers stressed the importance of emotional and corporeal research in religious exit as well. Together with these scholars, this thesis calls not only for the study of leaving religion, but also for the study of leaving religion as an embodied and emotional experience. This thesis investigates the emotional scripts that are presented in three representations of leaving religion in the Dutch context and how these emotional scripts can be compared and understood in the Dutch context of leaving religion. It is a preliminary study that calls attention to a neglected and poorly studied field. It aims to open the conversation on studying the lived afterlife of religion in the Dutch context and beyond.

⁶ The symposium was titled: *Gender and Religious Exit: Moving Away from Faith* and held at November 28, 2023 by the Coventry University. The organisers were: Nella van den Brandt, Sarah-Jane Page, and Teija Rantala.

1.4 Method and structure

Through the notion of *emotional script*, this thesis investigates the emotions that are presented inside the representations of leaving religion in the Dutch public context. The data of this research consists of three case studies that are divided over four chapters that together form the main body of this thesis. Chapter 2, the first case study: the iconic representation of leaving religion as presented in the literary work of Jan Wolkers and Maarten 't Hart (1960s and 1970s). Chapter 3, the second case study: a TV-series on leaving religion that presents a new emotional narrative centred around authenticity, *Vrijdenkers* [Freethinkers] (2021). Chapters 4 and 5, the third case study: a blogosphere on leaving religion and religious trauma that is in line with the TV-series, but that connects authenticity with a therapeutic narrative: *Dogmavrij.nl* [Free of dogma] (2015—today). In the fourth chapter I focus on the author of the blogosphere, Inge Bosscha, and in the fifth chapter on how the comment section and the guests' blogs of the blogosphere. I selected the first case study because it is my argument that one cannot study present-day representations of leaving religion without taking the iconic narrative of Wolkers and 't Hart into account. For the analysis of the novels and their reception I make extensive use of Jesseka Batteau's monograph *Literary Performances of Post-Religious Memory in the Netherlands* (2022). I use her research to get a good sense of the iconic narrative that Wolkers and 't Hart came to represent, and I analyse the emotional scripts that are presented inside the novels that created this iconic narrative. I selected the second and third case study, *Vrijdenkers* and *Dogmavrij.nl*, because they are both good and rich examples of the present-day leaving religion narrative in the public Dutch context.⁷ The three case studies, however, differ in time and in media form. The first case study is the iconic representation of leaving religion as presented in the literary work of Jan Wolkers and Maarten 't Hart. In the case of Jan Wolkers (1925—2007), I treat three important novels: *De hond met de blauwe tong* [The dog with the blue tongue] (1964), *Terug naar Oegstgeest* [Back to Oegstgeest] (1965), and *Turks Fruit* [Turkish Delight] (1969) and the film adaptation of *Turks Fruit* in 1973. In the case of Maarten 't Hart (1944—), I treat his most influential novel *Een vlucht regenwulpen* [A flight curlews] (1978) and its film adaptation in 1981. We will see that Wolkers' and 't Hart's representation of leaving religion provides an emotional script of frustration, violent score settling, and liberation that gained such

⁷ There are other representations of leaving religion that could function as a case study for this thesis, such as the podcast *Van God Los* [Free of God] by Lale Gül and Ronit Palache, which aired in 2022. These other representations, however, presented an emotional script that was so similar to *Vrijdenkers* that it was not distinctive enough and is thus excluded from this thesis.

an iconic status in the Dutch context that it influences the present-day representations of leaving religion. Albeit that the iconic narratives originates four to five centuries prior to the present-day representations, the present-day context cannot be understood without an understanding of the iconic narrative from the 1960s and 1970s. The second case study is the TV-series *Vrijdenkers* that aired in 2021, we move from literary novels and film adaptations to a documentary/interview series on leaving religion divided in four episodes. In the series, six participants are interviewed about the de-conversion from their respective religions: Vrijgemaakt Gereformeerde Kerk;⁸ Hinduism; Islam; Jehovah's Witnesses; Orthodox Judaism; and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. *Vrijdenkers*, is part of a larger celebration of 75th anniversary of the Dutch Humanist Alliance of that year, and frames the participants as embodiments of a humanist ideal: freethinking. The series uses editing, music, and emotional images to create an emotional script that explicitly differs from the iconic representation of the 1960s and 1970s. The emotions that were part of the settling score/liberation theme: anger, frustration, and freedom, have made way for emotions that are part of the authenticity theme: acceptance, longing, and vulnerability. The third case study is the website/blogosphere www.dogmavrij.nl by Inge Bosscha that started in 2015 and is still active to this day. *Dogmavrij.nl* connects leaving religion with religious trauma and focusses on the absence and presence of the true, authentic, self. It describes the process of leaving religion as a journey towards authenticity and it poses the ability to take personal emotions serious as a mediation of authenticity. *Dogmavrij.nl* aims to be a platform where one can express one's true emotions in all vulnerability. The audience of the blogosphere mostly endorses Bosscha's narrative and any challenging voices are managed immediately, showcasing that Bosscha's 'safe space' for free expression of true emotions only allows for voices similar to her own. Just like *Vrijdenkers*, *Dogmavrij.nl* the emotional scripts differs from the ones presented in the iconic narrative and centres around the ideal of authenticity and becoming true to oneself. Religion is presented as a strong repressor of authentic emotion and after one has left religion, a struggle begins where one has to follow therapy to reach the innocent self that has been traumatised by religion.

My investigation of the emotional script consists of a detailed analysis of the emotions that are presented in the representations of leaving religion. How are these emotions presented and how are they evaluated? Per case study, I investigate not only the presentation of emotion through verbal display, but also give attention to the specificities of the particular mediation. In the case of the work of Wolkers and 't Hart the semi-autobiographical style of their novels, with

⁸ Dutch Liberated Reformed Church, see p. 46, n 18.

a protagonist that carry the same name and live in the same place as the author, created the sense of real and authentic stories of leaving religion, staging the emotional scripts as exemplary representations of the dealing with a religious past. In the case of *Vrijdenkers*, the stories of the participants are edited in a specific way, they are structured by the editor of the series and emotionally coloured by a pairing with music. In the case of *Dogmavrij.nl*, I pay attention to the dynamics of the blogosphere, to the interplay between the blogger and the comment section and to the emotional images that guide the emotional tone of the blogs on *Dogmavrij.nl*. In this thesis, emotional scripts are analysed by studying how the emotional dimension is presented inside the different forms of mediation. I investigate the textual presentations of emotions (words that indicate an emotional disposition), the musical presentation of emotion (music score that conveys an emotional mood and setting), and the pictorial presentation of emotion (images that portray an emotional mood and setting).

Inside the case studies, several emotional scripts can be analysed and constructed. It is my argument that there has been a fundamental change in the emotional scripts of leaving religion in recent years. The emotional script has moved away from settling score and revenging the past in order to achieve (sexual) liberation towards authentic vulnerability of becoming one's true self. The emotional scripts present inside the different narratives are related to a larger socio-historical structure, I therefore pay attention to the specific context of the representations and relate the emotional scripts to broader research. Especially the ideal of authenticity and the therapeutic narrative play an informative and important role in analysing the emotional scripts of present-day representations of leaving religion.

Chapter 2 | Space 1

The iconic representation of leaving religion in the 1960s and 1970s

In present-day representations of leaving religion in the Dutch context one always finds that the authors/creators start with a statement about how negative they will portray religion. In the case of both *Vrijdenkers* (Chapter 3) and *Dogmavrij.nl* (Chapters 4 and 5), the creators begin with explicitly stating that they do not intend to rail at religion. Two recent podcasts on leaving religion that did not make into this thesis, *Van God Los* (2023) and *Niet te Geloven* (2024), use the first episode to state the same thing. They stress that they do not intend to portray religion in a negative way. Apparently, the creators of these present-day representations of leaving religion feel that the Dutch audience expects them to rail at religion. This Dutch expectation of representations of leaving religion that paint a very negative image of religion, as something that has to be settled score with, finds its source in an iconic narrative that I investigate before I move to the present-day representations of leaving religion and its emotional scripts. This iconic representation derives from the 1960s and 1970s and functions as a background for the present-day representations of leaving religion. It is my argument that one cannot appreciate the present-day context without looking at the iconic representation from the 1960 and 1970s.

The iconic narrative from the 1960s and 1970s portrays religion as very negative and something that has to be revenged. This iconic representation has largely been created by Jan Wolkers and Maarten 't Hart and is intimately tied to the cultural transitions in the 1960s and 1970s. During these years, the Netherlands not only saw a massive de-churching, but also the rise of a new cultural and economic system and it is during these transitional years that an iconic representation of leaving religion was created. In this chapter, I thus investigate the representations of Wolkers and 't Hart and their emotional scripts. In the case of Wolkers, I treat three important novels: *De hond met de blauwe tong* [The dog with the blue tongue] (1964), *Terug naar Oegstgeest* [Back to Oegstgeest] (1965), and *Turks Fruit* [Turkish Delight] (1969). Wolkers' iconic secular narrative for the Dutch public to identify themselves with develops from settling score with a negative religious past to a 'blessed state' of freedom and sexual liberation. In the case of 't Hart, I treat one novel: *Een vlucht regenwulpen* [A flight curlews] (1978). The representation of leaving religion that is provided by 't Hart, revolves around themes similar to Wolkers. 't Hart's work presents a frustrated and violent settling score with a negative religious past and also focusses on a sexual liberation, which is, however, never reached. In this chapter, I treat their representations extensively and investigate the emotional scripts that they provide.

2.1 Representing leaving religion in Dutch literature – *the rise of an iconic narrative*

A century prior to the tumultuous 1960s, and the creation of the iconic Dutch narrative of leaving religion, two Dutch authors already wrote about leaving religion: Eduard Douwes Dekker (pseudonym: Multatuli) and François HaverSchmidt (pseudonym: Piet Paaltjens). Both authors bade farewell to the religion of their youth, and staged it as an important literary theme. We start this chapter with these two authors because they were the first to incorporate the theme of leaving religion in Dutch literature. These authors created the Dutch literary field on leaving religion and influenced later literary representations that treat leaving religion. Another reason why I wanted to start with these two authors is because they represent two different scripts of leaving religion that we will encounter further throughout this thesis. Leaving religion as a victory, on the one hand, and as a continuous struggle, on the other. Whereas Douwes Dekker celebrated his farewell as a modern victory over ridiculous and obsolete religion (liberation, score settling), HaverSchmidt mourned his farewell as an unavoidable loss (struggle, mourning).

In 1860, Douwes Dekker finished one of the most famous works of Dutch literature, *Max Havelaar*. In the original manuscript, which was censored by Jacob van Lennep,⁹ Douwes Dekker wrote down a list of twenty-five questions that ridicule the Christian faith in a modernist and rationalist critical tone.

What was the purpose of those pigs in a country where boar meat is forbidden? – Why did Ezekiel have to eat filth? – Why was humanity first saved four thousand years after Creation? – Why does God allow many to reject that salvation? – Why do we close our homes in a country that is Christian, and therefore without thieves? How did Noah get a pair of polar bears for the ark? (Multatuli 1992b, translated by GN, 397).

⁹ Jacob van Lennep (1802—1868), a famous Amsterdam based author, published and edited the first print of *Max Havelaar*. He censored several parts of the novel, including the questions regarding the Bible. In a later publication, Douwes Dekker provided the following remark to the question of censoring the critical questions:

“The funniest thing is that V.L. himself, who is courting with narrow-minded superstition here, often mocked the biblical stories. He loved Voltaire more than I did [...] His orthodox friends in Amsterdam were not to be offended in their kitchenmaidbeliefs [*keukenmeidengeloof*].” (Multatuli 1992a, translated by GN, 274)

In this remark, the critical and mocking tone of Douwes Dekker towards religion as a backward superstition is clearly pronounced.

Upon reading these questions, it becomes clear that Douwes Dekker not only knows the Biblical stories very well and reads them in a critical light, but also that he has little regard for the orthodox Christian interpretation of these stories. This critical stance towards orthodox Christianity and literal interpretation of Bible was completely in line with the then current idea amongst the modernists. Around the 1860s, leaving religion became a major theme in literature, science and the public debate in Dutch upper society. Natural sciences offered new and different explanations for the world, industrialisation had commenced, and critical Bible studies gained importance. Several modern, empowered citizens thought that it was time to finally grow up and bid farewell to the church and its superstitions. “Religion was something for children and primitives. This view, shared by many from the highest circles in these years, made it acceptable to stop believing” (Jensma 1997, translated by GN, 12—13). Douwes Dekker is an example of this modernist view, who thought of religion as a backward superstition and who was glad that he had outgrown this childish tradition. In his view, moral authority had to be handed over from religion to the more adult world of literature. A role he gladly wanted to take (Ibid., 28).

Douwes Dekker’s contemporary and equally famous Dutch author HaverSchmidt bade farewell to the faith of his youth as well. But for HaverSchmidt, leaving religion felt fundamentally different. He struggled with his loss of faith. He knew for certain that he could no longer believe, but he kept longing for the faith that he had lost. On the one hand, he was a modernist thinker that was critical of religion, and on the other, a pastor who kept serving his own congregation and preached the faith that he longed for. Ultimately, he committed suicide in 1894. During his life, HaverSchmidt dealt with his inner conflict by staging a literary pseudonym, a doppelganger, who embodied his unbelieving, modernist side: Piet Paaltjens. In the foreword of *Snikken en Grimlachjes* [Sobs and Smirks], a collection of poems that HaverSchmidt published in 1867 under the name of Piet Paaltjens, HaverSchmidt distances himself from the modernist and pantheistic poetry written inside the collection. “I find PIET’s verses more nasty than beautiful. I can’t find any moral bearing in it. If I were to go into poetry, I would have done it differently” (Ibid., 25). Through irony, HaverSchmidt distances himself from his own work, rejecting the modernist tendencies that are part of himself. HaverSchmidt is simultaneously the creator and the repudiator of his work. The sheer duality of this stance is also reflected in how he deals with losing his faith in the rest of his work. For HaverSchmidt, leaving religion is not “a heroic victory by the modernists, but a loss of childlike faith. He definitely does not want to view faith as primitive or childish, yet through reason he *must*” (Ibid., 27). In another text by HaverSchmidt from 1873, *Een kind van onzen tijd* [A child of our

time], the main character is led away from the faith through reason. Throughout the story, the protagonist tries to stick to his faith with great fervent, but to no avail. At the end of the story, he has to acknowledge that it has become simply impossible for him to keep believing in miracles and ancient texts. For HaverSchmidt, modernity and leaving religion are a sad inevitability that comes with growing up as an adult.

Eduard Douwes Dekker and François HaverSchmidt were both famous Dutch authors who wrote and published during the second half of the 19th century and already made leaving religion an important theme in their literary oeuvre. According to Goffe Jensma it is namely the work and life of Douwes Dekker, as someone who critically left religion, that became exemplary for leaving religion in Dutch literature later on.

Many authors imitated Multatuli on this topic. When dealing with religion, the biography of Multatuli became a model story in Dutch literary history. [...] Up until our time, a long line of authors has solemnly, or less solemnly, dismissed the Christian faith in the name of modernity [...] whereof Jan Wolkers or Maarten 't Hart seem to be good examples. They both wrote several books on this topic (Ibid., 19).

The notion of leaving religion, and being critical of religion, has been used by several Dutch authors, but Jensma specifically names Wolkers and 't Hart as good examples of the leaving religion theme in Dutch literature. These two authors not only successfully adopted the leaving religion theme in their literary work, but also came to be the main representatives of leaving religion in the Dutch public context from the 1960s onwards. Jesseka Batteau has extensively argued that both Wolkers and 't Hart became iconic representatives of the Dutch religious past from the 1960s onwards (Batteau 2022). Wolkers became an “iconic figure of identification for the Dutch public, having liberated himself from the confinements of an orthodox religious milieu,” (Ibid., 160) because of his well-known literary works—*Terug naar Oegstgeest*, *Turks Fruit*—and public appearances that embodied leaving religion and sexual liberation in the Dutch context. In *Terug naar Oegstgeest*, Wolkers writes about his religious past and the process of leaving it, and in *Turks Fruit* Wolkers writes about a life of uninhibited sex. These two novels came to represent a narrative of leaving religion and (sexual) liberation for the Dutch public to identify with. 't Hart also gained the status of iconic representative of the Dutch religious past through his literary work and public appearances. Unlike Wolkers' oeuvre that describes a process of leaving religion and subsequent (sexual) liberation, 't Hart's works revolves almost solely around settling a score with religion, displaying a constant repetition of

the act of breaking away from religion. Specifically, 't Hart's novel *Een vlucht regenwulpen* contains a scene of violent settling score with religion that provided "an iconic scenario of secular liberation in the Netherlands" (Ibid., 264).

Batteau argues that Wolkers and 't Hart are *iconic figures* that are linked to a specific narrative and a specific historical period. In Batteau's interpretation, iconic figures are historical persons that "start to stand for more than just him- or herself: his reputation moves *beyond* his artistic achievements and he comes to represent an era, ideology, or even a cultural transition" (Batteau 2009, 233). An iconic figure is someone who *represents* something that is larger his- or herself. In the case of Wolkers and 't Hart, Batteau argues that their iconicity is intimately tied to how they represent the 1960s and 1970s and the sense of transition at the time.

The iconicity of the authors in my case studies, I argue, was intimately related to this sense of transition and the anticipated arrival of 'modern times'. The dramatic transformation of the Netherlands during the 1960s did not merely figure as the context of production and reception of the literary works in question but was implicated within the novels themselves. In other words, the authors and novels were not merely the product of cultural transformation, but their stories also contributed to the construction of a shared interpretation of the 1960s and 1970s as a period of secular liberation (Batteau 2022, 38).

The iconicity of Wolkers' and 't Hart's representation of leaving religion, is strongly linked to the 1960s and 1970s. These years are understood as important and defining years for leaving religion and the present position of religion in the Dutch 'secular' and 'tolerant' society.¹⁰ In the following section I describe how leaving religion inside the 1960s and 1970s is understood, wherein the subject of leaving religion is a contested one. Although there is one common interpretation of leaving religion as a story of liberation, it has recently been subject to critique. The common interpretation is a highly constructed one, with Wolkers and 't Hart as its main propagators. Next, I treat Wolkers' and 't Hart's representation of leaving religion and the emotional scripts that they provide. The stories of Wolkers and 't Hart describe the religious past as a negative one and the break with religion as a (violent) liberation.

¹⁰ See: Van der Veer (2006) and Van den Hemel (2015).

2.2 Leaving religion during the 1960s and 1970s – *constructed narrative*

The 1960s and 1970s are a defining period for Dutch understandings of leaving religion and its place in present Dutch society. It was a transitional period wherein “many social and cultural structures which had offered a sense of stability to a majority of the Dutch population disintegrated, and the emergence of countless new cultural and social phenomena gave rise to a shared sense of accelerated modernisation” (Batteau 2022, 38). During this transitional period, the Netherlands not only saw the rise of the welfare state, with higher education levels, increasing prosperity and growing mobility (Van der Veer 2006; Van Rooden 2010), but it also saw a sexual revolution (Van der Veer 2006) and went through a period of rapid and massive de-churching (Knippenberg, 2006). Up to the 1960s, church attendance and membership had been very high in the Netherlands, this however, began to decline rapidly. “In a relatively short period Holland was transformed from a highly religious to a highly secular society” (Van der Veer 2006, 118). Even though different interpretations for the rapid de-churching have been proposed by several experts, the common interpretation of the collective leaving of religion in the 1960s and 70s is one of liberation and de-pillarisation.

In this common interpretation, Dutch society has liberated itself from the suffocating pillar-system that ruled the daily lives of the Dutch citizens from the end of the 19th-century up to the 1960s. The pillar-system that ruled Dutch society for over half a century was a system that divided the society along the lines of religion and ideology into four strong and integrated communities: orthodox Protestants, Catholics, Socialists, and Liberals. Life inside these pillars is depicted as constrained and as determined by the tight communities and its authorities. Everything, from the cradle to the grave, was taken care of by the religious/ideological authorities.

A Catholic married a Catholic boy or girl, sent her/his children to a Catholic school, listened to the programs of a Catholic broadcasting corporation, read a Catholic newspaper, rented a house from a Catholic housing association, was a member of a Catholic trade union, received Catholic medical care, voted for a Catholic political party and was eventually buried in a Catholic cemetery by a Catholic undertaker (Knippenberg 2006, 322).

And then, the 1960s arrived. A transitional period of cultural change and revolution wherein the Dutch society ‘broke free’ from the suffocating pillar system. Suddenly, the pillars diminished and with it the power of the religious authorities diminished as well. The collective pillar-system made way for the individual that started to live for him/herself. With the ending of the pillarised

situation during the 1960s and 1970s, the constraints of religion were lifted and the Dutch citizen was finally liberated and could now live in a tolerant, individualist, and secular society.

This common interpretation of leaving religion during the 1960s and 1970s places a lot of importance on the cultural changes of the period and depicts leaving religion as a sudden and dramatic break from a suffocating (religious) system. Peter van Rooden, however, criticises this common interpretation. He interprets the changes in religious life during the 1960s and 1970s as a gradual process that went without drama and without a sense of liberation. Van Rooden interprets both religious life and its diminishment as non-reflexive. He states that religion inside the pillars “went without saying.” The presence of religion was not so much present in conversations about convictions and beliefs, but “above all, religion was present in acts and rituals framing everyday life” (Van Rooden 2010, 184). It was taken for granted and non-reflexive. “People did not speak about what religion could mean for themselves. The discourse that accompanied the rituals was markedly non-reflexive” (Ibid.). And since religion was so self-evident and non-reflexive, the change away from religion was not sensed in a reflexive way either.

What took place was the opposite of conversion. The change cannot be interpreted as the conscious abandonment of a particular way of life in favour of another one, the result of a choice for a new direction of life. Instead, a religious pattern of behaviour, which went without saying, slowly disappeared, without this being noticed or discussed (Ibid., 187).

According to Van Rooden, religious change went without conflict. There was no dramatic liberative break from religion, nor from the ‘pillarised’ situation. Van Rooden’s interpretation not only critiques the common one that depicts the 1960s and 1970s as years of dramatic transition, but also directly contradicts the iconic representation of leaving religion as provided by Wolkers and ‘t Hart as we will see below.

Even though Van Rooden criticises the common interpretation of leaving religion during the 1960s and 1970s as a sudden and dramatic break, he does not criticise the notion of the pillarised situation. His interpretation of leaving religion during the 1960s and 1970s builds upon the notion of a pillarised society and on subsequent de-pillarisation/leaving religion as well, it only differs in the evaluation of the dramatic intensity. Peter van Dam takes the critique on the common interpretation a step further, and criticises the notion of pillars and de-pillarisation altogether. In his view “the influential pillar metaphor has seriously distorted our view on the dynamics of Dutch post-war history” (Van Dam 2014, translated by GN, 31). Van

Dam describes the pillar metaphor as a strong myth that “gave a face to an elusive nation” (Ibid., 42) in a time of cultural and economic change, but that only offered a “caricatural representation of the Netherlands” (Ibid., 40). Van Dam criticises the pillar metaphor on three levels: it falsely represents the Dutch situation as exceptional, it provides an exaggerated image of the actual situation, and it falsely suggest radical breaking points in Dutch history (Ibid., 45—46). Van Dam calls for a new understanding of recent Dutch history and its secularisation processes without the notion of a pillar-system and de-pillarisation. He calls for an interpretation of leaving religion during the 1960s and 1970s “beyond the pillars.”¹¹ By doing so, Van Dam not only criticises the common interpretation of leaving religion as a one-sided caricature, but also nuances Van Rooden’s interpretation that commences with the non-reflexiveness of collective pillarised religion.

In the last two decades, the common interpretation of leaving religion during the 1960s and 1970s in the Dutch context as a transitional liberation from the suffocating pillar-system has been subject to strong critique. The main take away from this very brief and succinct overview is that this common interpretation is a highly constructed one. As we saw above, Batteau points towards the iconicity of Dutch authors Wolkers and ‘t Hart for the origin of this narrative construction.¹² Both Wolkers and ‘t Hart have actively shaped the narrative of leaving religion as a liberative break. Wolkers’ work represents leaving religion as the first step towards living an inhibited life of unbridled sexuality, and ‘t Hart’s work represents leaving religion as a break from a suffocating and strict milieu. In the remainder of this chapter, I investigate how Wolkers’ and ‘t Hart’s literary works, and its adaptations into film, represent leaving religion for the Dutch public. Which specific narrative did they construct and which emotional scripts are present in these narratives?

2.3 Jan Wolkers’ representation of leaving religion – *sexual liberation*

In the case of Jan Wolkers (1925—2007) I treat three literary works that together form the exemplary and iconic narrative of leaving religion that Wolkers came to embody during his

¹¹ Van Dam’s critique on the pillar-metaphor is written in a chapter that is part of a book on secularisation dynamic in the Dutch post-war context. This book is titled *Achter de Zuilen* which can be translated as either “Behind the pillars”, or “Beyond the pillars.”

¹² In her monograph on Dutch iconic literary figures and the representation of religion and secularisation in the 1960s and 1970s, Batteau also includes Gerard Reve (1923—2006). Reve, however, never left religion, nor did he represent a narrative of leaving religion, thus, he is not subject to this thesis.

lifetime. *De hond met de blauwe tong* [The dog with the blue tongue] (1964), *Terug naar Oegstgeest* [Returning to Oegstgeest] (1965), and *Turks Fruit* [Turkish Delight] (1969). The last of these literary works, *Turks Fruit* has been adapted into a highly successful film by Paul Verhoeven in 1973, which I treat as well. The iconic representation that Wolkers provides, moves from settling score with a negative religious past in *De hond met de blauwe tong* to a more neutral stance towards religion in *Terug naar Oegstgeest*. As the influence of religion starts to fade away in *Terug naar Oegstgeest*, the need to settle score with the past, with its negative emotions, starts to fade away. In *Turks Fruit*, the religious past has become fully absent and is replaced by a celebration of uninhibited sexuality. Wolkers' representation portrays leaving religion as a process where one first has to settle score with a negative religious past in order for its influence to dissolve later on, so that one can get completely rid of the religious heritage and embrace the positive present of unbridled sexuality. The leaving religion narrative of Wolkers is one of liberation that can be divided into three phases: settling score with a negative religious past – gaining a casual stance towards the religious past – embracing the present of inhibited sex.

Wolkers' work prior to the publication of *De hond met de blauwe tong* made him an author who was interpreted as an example of *afrekeningsliteratuur* [settling score prose].¹³ In his first publications, Wolkers settles score with his religious youth. He depicts his religious past as a suffocating, loveless, and negative Protestant milieu which he gives a face through the figure of a tyrannical father. He does so in a gripping literary style that is graphical and replete with strong emotions. Wolkers' negative and graphical depictions of his religious past was read as settling score with the older generation. Wolkers' work was framed "as representative of a broadly shared struggle between generations in the Netherlands – a struggle of the younger generation to 'rid' themselves of the religious and bourgeois taboos and confines of their parents" (Batteau 2022, 168). The collection of stories, *De hond met de blauwe tong*, was interpreted in the same way. Whereas the protagonist in the earlier works of Wolkers was still part of the Protestant milieu, in this collection, we find the first story wherein the protagonist looks back at his religious upbringing and thus represents leaving religion for the

¹³ *Afrekeningsliteratuur*, literally "settling score prose", which denotes a type of Dutch literature that settled score with the negative religious past and the older generation. They wrote 'transgressive' prose that 'rebelled' against the status quo and 'revenged' the inhibitions of their upbringing. In this thesis, I alternate between the term "settling score" and "revenge" with regard to the religious past. In both cases I use it to denote a negative and victorious stance towards the religious past.

first time. In *De hond met de blauwe tong*, a score is settled with the religious past in a violent and embittered tone. In the title story, the protagonist is on his way to his dying father, while memories of his religious youth and his tyrant father fill him with distaste, repulsion, and anger. The protagonist looks back at his religious past and he scolds not only at his tyrannical father, but also at his father's faith which did not prevent him from getting fatally ill. He thinks of his father's death as a liberation and he hopes that his father will be dead before his arrival. The story depicts the religious past, embodied by the dying father, as something that is tyrannical, repulsive, and negative. The critics interpreted this story as a ruthless settling score with God and his stand-in, the father. The extreme negativity of the protagonist was read as a wish to free himself from his father and his past (Ibid., 194). Batteau argues that the "violent and embittered breaking with the past" in *De hond met de blauwe tong* is important for the emergence of a shared narrative of secular liberation.

For it presented itself as a caesura in time, a point of no return in the narrated life of the protagonist – and by extension that of Wolkers. In this story, the author articulated for the first time an explicit refutation and dismissal of 'his' religious past. This is not only suggested in the extremely negative portrayal of events in the religious childhood of the protagonist, but also in the form of the remembrance itself: past events are no longer presented through the focalising eyes of the younger experiencing 'I' (Ibid., 195).

For the first time, Wolkers describes a story that represents leaving religion by presenting religion as something of the past. In this representation, religion is violently and explicitly refuted by the protagonist, who is filled with emotions of angers, repulsing and embitterment. The emotional script of *De hond met de blauwe tong* is violent and negative. The religious past incites strong and negative emotions for the protagonist, which are fully released. By staging these negative emotions to their fullest extent, Wolkers rails at religion as something that is very negative and as something has to be revenged. This emotional script of anger and destruction, stands in line with the strong critique by Douwes Dekker on religion (see 2.1) and will be endorsed by the work of 't Hart (see 2.4). It is a strong emotional script that uses anger and resentment to deal with a negative religious past. It is so strong, that the present-day public narratives of leaving religion (Chapters 3 and 4) explicitly posit themselves against this angry emotional script of settling score with a negative past.

In *Terug naar Oegstgeest*, however, the emotional scripts shift from anger and destruction towards a more casual and distant tone that fits the post-Protestant identity that

Wolkers would come to embody. In *Terug naar Oegstgeest*, the narrator 'Jan' revisits his hometown, Oegstgeest, and relates his life story. The narrator resembles Wolkers very closely, he not only carries Wolkers' first name, but also shares the same hometown, the same profession, the same scar on his head, the loss of a brother, and other biographical similarities. The strong resemblance suggests an intimate connection between Wolkers and the narrator of his novel. The novel was "unanimously received as the authenticating version of all previous literary reworkings of Wolkers' past" (Ibid., 198).¹⁴ Many of the dramatic episodes and themes that operate in Wolkers' previous work recur in this novel, but the tone of *Terug naar Oegstgeest* differs significantly. It is much more sober and distant, which suggests a stripped down and more realistic version of Wolkers' religious past through his alter ego. A good example of the alternation of the emotional tone can be found in how Wolkers portrays the father figure. The father figure that used to be the tyrant that embodied the negative religious past, has become a frail and awkward man. When Jan drives with his car through Oegstgeest, he sees his father.

He had a woven wicker bag in his hand and he didn't see me. I turned and drove up next to him. He was on his way to the supermarket to get rid of some empty jars and bottles. I drove him there, it only took a small moment. He sat a little cramped next to me, with his legs stiff and straight in front of him. He had new open sandals and because he was wearing black socks, his feet looked small like a young boy's. I thought about how I used to sit at the front of his bicycle bar, also a bit cramped and with my legs anxiously stretched forward along the wheel (Wolkers 1965, 75).

The tyrannical figure has been replaced by an almost childish figure that Jan has to care of. The feet of the father figure look like the small feet of a young boy and Jan compares his father's cramped composure to the one he used to have as a small boy on the bicycle of his father. The tone of this scene is reflexive and more distant. Jan is reminded of his childhood and reminisces about the relationship between the present and the past. *Terug naar Oegstgeest* is a novel that investigates the relationship between the religious past and the secular present. The protagonist wonders about who he came to be and how this is related to his religious past. In the novel, the chapters that depict memories of Jan's childhood are contrasted with the chapters that reflect on present-day Oegstgeest. The town and the landscape of Jan's childhood have changed to

¹⁴ The novel is linked to the personal biography, which gives it a semi-autobiographical character. This literary style of writing close to the personal life is a means of authentication that is also visible in all the other representations of leaving religion. In 't Hart, *Vrijdenkers* and on *Dogmavrij.nl*.

such an extent that Jan does not recognize it anymore. The material environment of his youth is fully eradicated, which is symbolised in the demolition of his family home at the end of the novel. Batteau argues that with the disappearance of the religious past, the protagonist gets room to grow. “Significantly, this narrative of decline, deterioration and disappearance is closely connected to the ‘emotional growth’ of the protagonist” (Batteau 2022, 202). The relationship between the present and a disappearing past point towards a process of identity formation that is directly connected to the increased distance of the religious past. By doing so, Wolkers constructs an identity that is both beyond religion and structurally connected to it (Ibid., 207). In *Terug naar Oegstgeest*, Wolkers represents leaving religion as a process of increasing distance between the secular present and the religious past. The emotional script has moved beyond the angry settling score with the past and has become casual and distant. The protagonist views his father as a pitiful figure that is awkward and frail and the material environment of the religious past has almost completely disappeared. In this novel, Wolkers embodies a dissociated post-Protestant memory that still reminisces on the religious past but is no longer negatively affected by it. The religious past was a negative one, but the protagonist has successfully outgrown its hold over him.

With the publication of *Turks Fruit*, Wolkers’ identity as a post-Protestant figure changed into an identity of vital materiality and sexuality. The religious past disappeared completely “offering readers a new mode of being through which they too could rid themselves of unwanted memories and focus on the present” (Ibid., 212). The story in *Turks Fruit* is narrated by a sculptor¹⁵ who describes his love affair with a young girl, Olga, and contains explicit and shocking sex scenes for its time. It quickly becomes clear that even though the relationship between the sculptor and Olga started off as a feast of uninhibited sexuality, it was doomed to fail. Batteau describes how the critics of the time all remarked on two aspects of the novel. One, they praised Wolkers for leaving the religious trope behind. The tyrannical father figure is finally absent and Wolkers opens up a new field of potential. And two, they remarked upon the prominent presence of sexuality in the novel. Throughout the novel, the sculptor narrates his insatiable thirst for sexual intercourse through graphic scenes and graphic language. The inhibited sexuality presented in *Turks Fruit* has an ambiguous character that is embodied in the figure of Olga. Even though the narrator seems to have experienced a period of sexual

¹⁵ Wolkers was a sculptor as well. Just as with *Terugkeer naar Oegstgeest*, the novel *Turks Fruit* was equated with his Wolkers personal life. Wolkers created a narrative that was strongly tied to his own life, a method of authentication that is ever present in representations of leaving religion in the Dutch context.

bliss with Olga, the joyful memories are counterbalanced by signs of Olga's discomfort. The sculptor forces Olga repeatedly into sexual intercourse, even when she tries to fight him off. Eventually, Olga breaks up the love affair and at the end of the novel she has been remarried and divorced several times and lies in the hospital, dying of cancer. The sculptor visits her and nurses her. He gives Olga Turkish delight to eat, since she is too weak to eat anything else. What began as a celebratory sexual story ends in the tragic death of Olga. The novel provides an ambivalent take on the uninhibited sexuality of the sculptor. On the one hand, the novel is a celebration of sexuality, providing new language and new ways of engaging with sexuality. On the other hand, Olga suffers from the sexual obsessions of the sculptor and she eventually leaves him. Batteau argues that despite the ambiguous take of uninhibited sexuality in the novel, *Turks Fruit* "has come to be remembered as a novel of sexual liberation, rather than as a narrative that carries within it a possible critique of aggressive masculine sexuality" (Ibid, 218). The main reason for the one-sided interpretation of the novel as a celebration of sexuality is due to the highly successful film adaptation,¹⁶ only four years later.¹⁷ The film adaptation stressed "sexuality as a liberating mode" which "enabled the novel to become iconic for the secular trajectory from religious repression" (Ibid.). The film has the celebration of the sexuality between the main figures as its main focus, amplifying the humoristic side of the novel and overshadowing the tragic end of Olga. At the time, only some reviewers were critical of the film. They were critical of the vulgar and comical sexual scenes that, in their eyes, was made purely to entertain the audience. They described disapprovingly how the audience constantly laughed when anything sexual was put on the screen (Ibid., 219). Most reviewers however were very positive, praising the adaptation for capturing the authenticity of the novel. After the screening of the film adaptation, Wolkers' image was transformed definitely, "he no longer represented the struggle with the Protestant past, but came to represent a new artistic, sexual

¹⁶ *Turks Fruit* is with 3.338.000 visitors the best visited Dutch film of all time (Filmonderzoek 2024). In 1995, 'the year of the movie', a Dutch 80-cent postage stamp was made that depicted a scene from *Turks Fruit* see: <https://geheugen.delpher.nl/nl/geheugen/view?coll=ngvn&identificer=MVC01:NVPH-1635> (accessed May 10, 2024).

¹⁷ *Turks Fruit* was adapted by Paul Verhoeven with Rutger Hauer in the lead role as the sculptor. Paul Verhoeven is a renowned director who has directed *Robocop*, *Total Recall* and *Basic Instinct* amongst others. His latest film, *Benedetta*, wherein a 17th-century nun performs sexual acts with a wooden Maria figure, was surrounded with controversy.

and bohemian lifestyle” (Ibid.). The religious past, and its suffocating grip on Wolkers, had made way for a vitalist life of joyous uninhibited sexuality.

The iconic representation of leaving religion that Wolkers provided the Dutch public to identify with moves from an angry score settling to a positive secular life of uninhibited and joyous sexuality. His representation of leaving religion is connected to the disappearance of the religious past and can be divided into three stages. In the first stage of leaving religion, religion is still actively present and one has to settle score with it. Wolkers uses strong and negative emotions to depict this stage. The protagonist of *De hond met de blauwe tong* refutes his religious father in a violent and angry tone. The violent and destructive emotions are given free range. In the second stage of leaving religion, religion has become something of a more distant past, but is still a subject of inquiry. The tyrannical father figure has evolved into a frail and awkward man that does not emit any threat anymore. The religious past is considered through a self-reflexive identity construction. The identity of the protagonist of *Terug naar Oegstgeest* matures because of the disappearance of religion. The religious past is still represented as negative and the move away as the condition for the protagonist to mature. In the third stage of leaving religion, the tyrannical father figure has completely disappeared. In *Turks Fruit*, the focus is shifted towards a free life of uninhibited sexuality and especially the film-adaptation by Paul Verhoeven created a positive and iconic narrative that celebrates sexuality and secular life.

The representation of leaving religion that Wolkers provides centres around the notion of liberation. It portrays leaving religion as a liberation from a negative religious past, which is reflected in the emotional script. The further the negative religious past fades away, the more liberated one gets, and the more positive the emotions become. Inside the three stages of the progressive disappearance of religion, the increasing degree of absence of the religious past is connected to an increasing degree of positivity in the emotional dimension. The first stage is replete with negative emotions, the second stage presents a more distant and self-reflexive tone, and the third stage is one of sexual liberation and humour. It is this emotional script of leaving religion, from an angry and destructive stance towards religion to a liberated and blessed state without religion, that has become iconic in the Dutch context.

2.4 Maarten ‘t Hart’s representation of leaving religion – *frustration*

The work of Maarten ‘t Hart (1944—) differs from Wolkers’ oeuvre on several points. Whereas Wolkers’ representation of leaving religion describes a trajectory from settling score with, to liberation from, and replacement of religion, ‘t Hart’s representation does not go beyond the

point of liberative score settling. Whereas Wolkers grew up during the second world war and presented a leaving religion narrative for the Dutch public to identify with, 't Hart is “a representative of the *post-war* generation and is considered to be a minor author in the Dutch literary field” (Batteau 2022, 234). With the publication of 't Hart's first novel in 1971, *Stenen voor een ransuil* [Stones for a long-eared owl], the overall critique was that the subject of leaving religion was exhausted. The critics felt that

religion belonged to the past (or a museum) and its return was unexpected. The majority of critics were surprised that some communities apparently still practised this particular form of Protestantism, despite the cultural and social transformations taking place at the time (Ibid., 238).

As a result, the work of 't Hart did not come to represent the collective sense of leaving religion in the 1960s and 1970s at first, nevertheless, he was placed in the same line as Wolkers. Just like Wolkers, 't Hart was considered to be an example of *afrekeningsliteratuur*, he settles score with the religious past in his literary work. Furthermore, Batteau argues that 't Hart played an essential role in the “remembrance of the religious past, perhaps even more so than those of his older colleagues” (Ibid., 234). The most salient difference between the work of 't Hart and Wolkers' oeuvre, is that 't Hart 'sticks' to the violent breaking away from a suffocating religion and does not reach the blessed secular state that Wolkers came to represent. Since 't Hart' does not move beyond the breaking away point, his extensive literary oeuvre is built on repetition. His work is repetitive performance of familiar protagonists, locations, episodes, and themes: a troubled religious childhood, (sexual) frustration, and a violent breaking away from religion. Batteau describes 't Hart's work as a “*mnemonic stasis*” (Ibid., 235) and argues that “repetition was the main vehicle through which 't Hart's oeuvre achieved a representative, iconic, quality” (Ibid., 259). It is precisely through this retelling of the same story over and over again, that 't Hart came to represent leaving religion and the religious past in the 1960s and 1970s in the Dutch context. In this part of the chapter, I focus on only one novel by 't Hart, *Een vlucht regenwulpen* [A flight of curlews] that was published in 1978. Not only was *Een vlucht regenwulpen* 't Hart's most famous novel, it is also the most emblematic one in its representation of the repetitive leaving religion narrative. Especially the episode at the heart of the novel, the visit of the elders, functions as the iconic narrative, and emotional script, of secular liberation that 't Hart provides.

Een vlucht regenwulpen is 't Hart's most successful novel. Over more than a million copies have been sold and it has been adapted into a film.¹⁸ In *Een vlucht regenwulpen*, the protagonist of the story, a 30-year-old biologist called Maarten, memorises his religious youth and his disillusion with his upbringing that has made him into a sexually frustrated figure. The novel is structured in twenty-three chapters, which are divided into two parts that alternate each other. The largest part of the novel is a description of the memories of the narrator that range from early childhood and teenager/student to the recent past, while the other part describes the present-day context. The storyline of the present is a depiction of a sexually frustrated Maarten who is about to date a woman for the first time in his life. He fears however, that he cannot date this woman since his life will probably soon end. In the novel, 't Hart presents an iconic timeline of a religious child, a doubting teenager, and an enlightened secular adult. This timeline is presented and framed through the narration of the secular adult: "the 'before' is represented from the perspective of the adult: the 'taking leave' has already occurred, regardless of the time layer the reader is confronted with" (Ibid., 265). Batteau argues that this is crucial for the novel, since it implies that "the 'taking leave' is not so much a phase in the protagonist's development as a frame through which all his experiences and memories are mediated" (Ibid.). All the representations of religion in the novel are thus interpreted through the narrative of leaving it. Already at the start of the novel it is made clear that the protagonist has left his religion and so every depiction of religion serves as a building block towards the violent break with religion. 't Hart uses the religious scenes to create a secular narrative of a negative and frustrating religious past that he settles score with.

The most iconic episode of the novel, which was deemed as a crucial scene by the critics at the time, is the episode at the heart of the novel: the visit of the elders. The critics collectively praised the episode for a depiction of leaving religion that was "forever etched in the reader's memory" (Ibid., 266). In this episode, 't Hart stages an emotionally loaded scene that is played out by three emotionally different characters: the insensitive elders, the helpless mother, and

¹⁸ The novel was adapted into film in 1981 and directed by Ate de Jong, who left orthodox Protestantism as well. The protagonist is played by Jeroen Krabbé. The film alters many features of the novel, only the scene of the visit of the elders has been adapted almost verbatim, the only alterations seem to be aimed at exaggerating the violent confrontation between the protagonist and the elders. That the visit of elders is copied so faithfully, attest to the iconic of the scene. Whereas the episode is placed in the middle of the novel, it is placed near the end of the film. Stressing its importance and the emotional release inside the scene.

the frustrated protagonist. The scene carefully builds up to a liberative moment of violent eruption where the protagonist finally deals with the awful elders. ‘t Hart represents religion as a frustrating, ridiculous and insensitive atrocity that has to be revenged in a violently liberative moment.

The mother of the protagonist suffers from cancer of the oesophagus and she slowly but surely loses her voice and her breath and eventually suffocates to death. A day before her death, two elders of the church come by for the “yearly visit for instruction and education, despite the fact that a pastor comes by almost every day now, despite the fact that I have said that it is bad timing” (‘t Hart 2014, 58). The mother of the protagonist is depicted as a vulnerable and helpless woman who tries really hard to live up to the demands of the elders, but is unable to. She attempts to swipe the house clean before the elders arrive and attempts to sing a psalm during the visit, but she is too ill to succeed. The protagonist, Maarten, is depicted as someone who is very frustrated by both life and by religion. He hates the elders for their insensitive behaviour and he hates their ridiculous beliefs that state that God send the cancer to his mother. During the episode, his temper rises and rises until he can no longer constrain himself and violently hits one elder in the face and kicks the elders out of the house. The elders are depicted as frustratingly insensitive, they have no regard for the stressful situation that the protagonist is in, nor for the serious condition of his mother. When they loudly sing a Psalm together, they ask why the mother does not sing along, ignoring the fact that her voice is broken from the cancer. Their insensitivity reached a climax when they conclude their visit with a prayer. The mother has just confessed to the elders that she thinks that she has “sinned against the Holy spirit” and that she fears that she is beyond saving. Instead of comforting her, one elder prays:

You shall say: depart from me, ye unfaithful handmaiden, go to the outer darkness where the fire never extinguishes and the worm never dies, where she shall suffer an unspeakable suffering for her sins, a suffering of which You are already giving her a foretaste... (Ibid., 64—65).

When he hears the last line, the protagonist can no longer contain himself and he delivers “a giant blow in the middle of the face” of the praying elder. He furiously kicks the elders out of the house and throws one of the elders into a canal. When the elders have left the premises, the protagonist calms down and realises that “Christianity is a deception” (Ibid., 66). The next day, his mother dies.

The emotional script that ‘t Hart provides in his representation of leaving religion, is one of frustration that is resolved in liberative and violent settling score with religion. Religion

is depicted through the figures of the elders as a frustrating reality that has no regard for sensitive and vulnerable people. The protagonist of *Een vlucht regenwulpen* has to cleanse himself from this frustration that is incited by religion by expressing it, and he does so very violently. He kicks the elders out of the house in an aggressive frenzy and gives them “a broken nasal bone, holes in the face, [and] bruises on the legs” (Ibid., 58). In this iconic scene, religion is depicted as something that is very negative and has to be settled score with in order to be liberated from it. This settling score with religion follows a strong emotional structure that functions as a model for ‘t Hart which he is able to constantly repeat throughout his oeuvre: frustration, anger, outpour, and tranquillity. The representation that ‘t Hart provides, contributes to the iconic representation on leaving religion that Wolkers had already created. It endorses Wolkers’ representation in two ways: firstly, settling a score with a negative religious past, and secondly, the portrayal of leaving religion as a liberation. In ‘t Hart’s case, however, the liberation is never fully realised. Even though the protagonist has liberated himself from the negative presence of the elders, and although his religious mother has died during the novel, he still suffers from frustration because of his religious past. The arc of the present-day protagonist revolves around him being sexually frustrated, a lasting condition that he is unable to resolve. In both ‘t Hart’s and Wolkers’ representation of leaving religion, the sexual liberation is central to the liberation from a negative religious past, but whereas Wolkers was able to reach this ‘blessed state’, ‘t Hart was not. In ‘t Hart’s case, leaving religion is presented as a dynamic between frustration and release.

2.5 Conclusion – *settling score and liberation*

In this chapter, I have investigated the iconic representation of leaving religion that came to influence Dutch understandings of leaving religion since the 1960s. This representation has been created by the life and work of literary authors Jan Wolkers and Maarten ‘t Hart who both left religion themselves and made it a major theme in their oeuvre. Both authors have an iconic status when it comes to representing the religious past in the Dutch context. Their iconicity is strongly related to how they represent the transitional years of the 1960s and 1970s. Their work was not only influenced by these years, but also actively contributed to a shared interpretation frame of these years, with a specific focus on leaving religion and sexual liberation. The 1960s and 1970s saw a massive de-churching and went from a highly religious country to a highly secularised country in a short period of time.

Wolkers’ representation of leaving religion can be divided into three stages that together form a narrative of liberation. In the first stage, one has to settle score with a negative religious

past and ample room is given to negative and destructive emotions: disgust, anger, and resentment. In the second stage, religion is moved into a more distant past and room is given for emotionally casual reflection and self-discovery. In the third stage, religion has disappeared completely and is replaced by the positive presence of sexual liberation. The emotional script of Wolkers progresses from a very negative one to a very positive one and is structurally related to the presence of religion. The further religion fades away, the more positive the emotions become.

The representation of leaving religion that 't Hart provides, is one of frustration. He also depicts the religious past as a very negative one and as something that has to be settled score with. 't Hart presents an emotional script that progresses with a specific structure: frustration, anger, aggressive outpour, and tranquillity. The frustrations that are incited by the religious past are to be expressed in all its destructive negativity in order for a sense of liberation to be achieved. The emotional script of 't Hart is centred around the dynamic of frustration and release. A dynamic that keeps reappearing in his work and never gets resolved fully. The negative and destructive emotions of frustration have to be constantly released in order to achieve a state of liberation and tranquillity. This state of liberation, however, is only temporary and will soon disappear.

The emotional script of leaving religion, that Wolkers and 't Hart provide, is a one that moves from angry and destructive emotions incited by a religious past to a liberated and blessed state without religion. The emotional script is a confrontational one, the negative religious past has to be confronted, i.e. settled score with, in order for a liberation to arrive. This is different from the present-day representations that I treat in the following chapters. In these representations the confrontation with a negative past changes to a confrontation with the self.

**Chapter 3 | Space 2:
Interview series on leaving religion**

During the last decade, there have been several interview-series on Dutch television that run specifically on the topic of leaving religion. The most elaborate and longest running television series that deals with religion and leaving it behind is *Adieu God?* which is broadcasted by the Christian Evangelical Broadcast. In it, the Christian host Tijs van den Brink interviews Dutch celebrities that grew up in a Christian environment. “They have been raised as a Christian and used to go to the church. What is left of it?” (van den Brink 2012). As the title of the series already suggests, it is unclear whether something of God, the church, and/or religion is still present in their lives. Van den Brink enters in a conversation with them “on religion, irreligion and everything in between” (van den Brink 2023). As it turns out, there are many Dutch celebrities that have (had) to do with religion. The highly successful series has been running from 2012 and is in its 13th season already, with over 190 guests. As with the popularity of the literary works by Wolkers and ‘t Hart, this series shows that leaving religion is a relevant topic in Dutch public society.

In this chapter, I focus on an interview-series that treats leaving religion from a different standpoint: *Vrijdenkers* [Freethinkers]. *Vrijdenkers* is a series that is made from a specific secular/humanist standpoint and focusses on the process of leaving religion behind. In it, six participants are interviewed about their de-conversion from their respective religions: Vrijgemaakt Gereformeerde Kerk;¹⁹ Hinduism; Islam; Jehovah’s Witnesses; Orthodox Judaism; and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. The participants talk retrospectively about leaving their religion, about how it went and how it felt for them. The frame through which these de-conversion narratives are presented, is the notion of freethinking. This notion of freethinking is intimately tied to the celebration of the Dutch Humanist Alliance’s 75-existence in 2021 (from now on: DHA), since the DHA employed the notion of freethinking to celebrate its anniversary. By depicting these de-conversion narratives as examples of freethinking, the participants, and leaving religion in a broader sense, are presented as an embodiment of a humanist ideal. In order to understand the emotional scripts of *Vrijdenkers*, we first have to investigate the specific context of the DHA’s celebration and how freethinking is conceptualised. In this chapter, I start by analysing the celebration of DHA and how they interpret freethinking (3.1.). Next, I treat the choice of the director and the host of the series

¹⁹ *Vrijgemaakt Gereformeerde Kerk*, the Dutch Liberated Reformed Church was founded in 1944 when it broke away from the Dutch Reformed Church. It famously has the conviction that only the members of this specific church are saved. This specific church denomination no longer exists, since it fused with the Dutch Reformed Church in 2023.

Vrijdenkers to present religion-leavers as the exemplary figures of freethinking and how they define freethinking themselves (3.2). The director, Eva de Breed, and the host, Öckan Akyol, have a great influence on the narratives of leaving religion. They structure the narrative and its emotional colouring through guiding questions, on the one hand, and editing of the structure, images, and music, on the other. Both the host and the director stated in interviews surrounding the series that the *Vrijdenkers* is “not anti-religious” and that they “don’t want to bash religion.” This proves to be a difficult paradox, since how can one praise leaving religion without being anti-religious? In order to find out, I investigate the series and at the emotional scripts of *Vrijdenkers* (3.3). I use the term “emotional script” to construct an emotional structure and evaluation that is (un)consciously presented inside the TV-series. *Vrijdenkers* has four episodes that treat the process of leaving religion in a four-phase structure: being religious – doubt – coming-out – freedom. Each episode comes with its own emotional script and emotional tones. Leaving religion according to *Vrijdenkers* revolves around the ideal of authenticity. The emotional scripts that come with gaining authenticity differ greatly from the emotional scripts provided by Wolkers and ‘t Hart. The liberation of overcoming religion and finding oneself is not presented as a jubilant victory over a negative religious past, but as a personal struggle of authenticity that comes with anxiety, insecurity, loneliness, and longing for love and acceptance.

3.1 Humanist freethinkers and freethinking: 75 years of Humanist Alliance

The Dutch humanist broadcaster HUMAN aired a four-episode series on leaving religion, *Vrijdenkers*, on every Sunday evening of May 2021. In it, six participants are interviewed and relate their personal stories of leaving religion. They describe how they replaced the normative and exclusive paths of their respective religions for their own, authentic paths. The series was specifically made by HUMAN to celebrate the 75-year existence of its humanist partner, the DHA (Janse and Mikkers 2021). The narratives of leaving religion that are presented in the series are thus connected to the DHA and to its humanist ideals. A clear indication of this connection is the title of the series, *Vrijdenkers*, i.e. Freethinkers. In the series, the participants are presented as examples of freethinking, a notion that was chosen by the DHA as the crucial term to celebrate its 75-year existence. The DHA regarded freedom of thought and freedom of speech as essential aspects of their humanist history and identity in the Netherlands. To celebrate their anniversary, the DHA organised many manifestations that were centred around these topics, amongst others: an interactive bicycle route in Amsterdam, a magazine on freethinking, and an exhibition in the Amsterdam Museum with a grand festive opening which

was broadcasted on television by HUMAN. All manifestations of the DHA's celebration were related to the topic of freethinking and almost all of them had a link to the Dutch Philosopher Benedict Spinoza (1632—1677). The DHA had chosen Spinoza as their hero, since in their view, Spinoza is one of the founding fathers of the Enlightenment, a humanist hero who challenged religious authority, someone who fought for tolerance and for freedom of speech, and most importantly, someone who was a freethinker himself. The narratives of leaving religion in *Vrijdenkers*, have to be understood in this larger context. Before I turn to the (emotional) narrative of *Vrijdenkers*, I analyse how the notion of freethinker is expressed in the celebrations of 2021. The humanist interpretation of what it means to be a freethinker provides context to the series and how it frames leaving religion and its emotions.

3.1.1 Freethinking as floating signifier

The largest manifestation of the DHA's celebration was the exhibition in the Amsterdam Museum with a grand opening that was broadcasted on national television. The exhibition was titled *Vrijdenkers: van Spinoza tot nu* [Freethinkers: from Spinoza until now] and could be visited from September 5, 2021 till February 27, 2022. The exhibition displayed a chronological overview of freethinkers in Dutch history, on the one hand, and invited the visitor to determine for themselves what would make someone a freethinker today, on the other. The historical overview of freethinkers presented the visitor with a wide and sometimes contradictory array of freethinkers; “freethinkers as innovators, idealists, dissenters, free minds and activists” (Rozenbroek 2021, 44). The historical overview began with a whole room that was dedicated to Spinoza, who was presented as the undisputed icon of Dutch freethinking. He was presented as not only a great advocate of free speech and tolerance, but also as someone who had to live with the consequences of his (radical) views. In the room, two documents were displayed: one containing Spinoza's banishment, and the other a list of Jewish members with Spinoza's name crossed out (Spreksel 2021). The display of these two historical documents that attest Spinoza's banishment, not only authenticates Spinoza's status as a freethinker, but also foregrounds the ideal of authenticity and staying true to oneself despite what the community dictates. Next to Spinoza, the exhibition presented many other Dutch freethinkers with a historical line-up of important embodiments of freethinking that neo-conservatist right wingers would dream of. Take for instance Gerard Reve (1923—2006), Pim Fortuyn (1948—2002), and Theo van Gogh (1957—2004), with Van Gogh's typewriter as “a symbol of free speech” (Humanistisch Verbond 2021). After the historical overview, the visitor was invited to determine who would be an embodiment of Dutch freethinking today. To help the visitor a little, the exhibition

suggested several names. These suggestions of modern-day freethinkers, however, completely lacked any right wing voices and only represented leftist thinkers and activists. A choice that was highlighted by the critics and deemed as curious and inconsistent (Van Brummelen 2021, Spreksel 2021). Although it was made clear that Spinoza is an undisputed icon of Dutch freethinking (as was already made clear in the title of the exhibition), the embodiments of freethinking later on became much more varied and contradictory.

The exhibition provided such a large and conflicting group of (potential) freethinkers that the notion becomes stretched to such an extent that it seems to lose any particular meaning. It becomes a “floating signifier” or “empty signifier” which is “everywhere, yet nowhere in particular” (Littlewood and Reynolds 2020, 110). Or in this case: everyone, yet no one in particular. Another manifestation of the DHA’s celebration, a magazine titled *Vrijdenkers & lenige geesten* [Freethinkers & agile minds], published in the fall of 2021, showcases a similar dynamic when it comes to determining freethinking. The magazine opens with an article that describes a five-step plan towards freethinking. In the article, the notion of freethinking is deconstructed completely. The first step is described as follows: “realise that freethinking does not exist”, and the fifth and final step states: “forget all the steps” (Meester 2021, 5—7). In the other articles, the magazine provides a diverse and very broad list of freethinkers. Almost anyone who behaves and thinks differently from the norm in some way at some point, is deemed a freethinker. Take for instance the list of freethinkers that philosopher Marli Huijer provides: Desiderius Erasmus, Baruch de Spinoza, Emma Goldman, Aletta Jacobs, Anton Constandse, Multatuli, Jort Kelder, Franca Treur, Lale Gül, Pieter Omtzigt, and Arnold Karskens (Huijer 2021, 43). As one review of the magazine in the daily paper the *Volkscrant* puts it: “You quickly are a freethinker, it seems” (Onkenhout 2021). The term freethinking becomes a floating signifier inside the exhibition and the magazine by the DHA, floating around so freely that it denotes *any* form of thinking differently. Nevertheless, there seems to be one figure that functions as a stabilising benchmark, the 17th-century Dutch philosopher Spinoza.

3.1.2 Spinoza as an icon of Dutch freethinking: influential, secular, and authentic

Not only in the exhibition and the magazine, but also in all the other celebratory manifestations of the DHA, Spinoza is depicted as the undisputed embodiment of Dutch freethinking. How then is Spinoza understood? In which way does he embody the ideal of freethinking as envisioned by the DHA? On the one hand, Spinoza is understood through his ideas (a pivotal and radical thinker), and on the other hand, through his biography (as someone who was banished into a life of loneliness because of his authenticity). When taken together, they make

a powerful combination that embodies simultaneously political engagement, secularity, and authenticity. Particularly the last two values ascribed to this 17th-century thinker are distinctly contemporary and anachronistic. By his ideas, Spinoza is understood as the founding father of the enlightenment, as someone who openly advocated freedom and tolerance in the state of Holland, and as someone who was a critic of the religious authorities. Spinoza is not only regarded as an influential and activist thinker, but also as someone who has left his religion, making him a secular figure. By his biography, Spinoza is described as someone who had to deal with the severe consequences of his anachronistic ideas. In a video that is part of the exhibition, one of Spinoza's quotes is read aloud by the famous Flemish historian David van Reybrouck: *the only path is one's own*. Van Reybrouck states that "if there is someone who is allowed to say this, it has to be him [Spinoza ...] It is perhaps the fate of the freethinker to be ahead of its time and he is thus per definition a lonely person" (Amsterdam Museum 2021). Van Reybrouck highlights the lonely path that Spinoza had to take because of his ideas. This take on Spinoza as a figure who was forced into solitude because of his ideas, is a romantic one and makes him appealing for the modern audience. It turns Spinoza into someone who already embodies authenticity, well before it gained the prominence it has in Western society today (Lindholm 2008). According to Lindholm, the modern ideal of authenticity was first articulated by the 18th-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who stated modern men was alienated from the pure and authentic self. Rousseau propagated that a communion with the authentic self could only be found outside of the social order (Ibid., 10). The specific understanding of Spinoza as a solitary thinker who lives outside of the societal and religious order because he stayed true to his original and authentic ideas fits the romantic narrative of Rousseau perfectly. Spinoza is understood as someone who is in touch with his unique inner self, "unconstrained by the alienating behavioural prescriptions of modern civilization" (O'Neill, Houtman and Aupers 2014, 586). By highlighting his banishment, Spinoza is presented as a secular and authentic figure who embodies a contemporary humanist ideal. It is precisely this powerful combination that makes Spinoza a compelling and iconic figure for the celebratory year of the DHA and this is the reason why they have chosen Spinoza as their hero out of all the other viable figures.²⁰

²⁰ Take for instance Hugo Grotius (1583—1645), who preceded Spinoza in his advocacy of tolerance, was influential in society, and was also banished because of his religious liberal ideas. The difference between Grotius and Spinoza is that Spinoza led a solitary, and thus more authentic, life.

3.1.3 Grand opening: celebration of the engaged freethinker

The exhibition in the Amsterdam Museum was opened with a grand opening ceremony and was recorded and broadcasted by HUMAN. During the opening ceremony, several speakers took the stage to give their thoughts on the notion of freethinking and conditions. We find a careful selection of present-day activists and freethinkers: Jürgen Tjon a Fong, the Surinamese-Dutch director of the Kleine Komodie and co-curator of the exhibition; Hedy d’Ancona, a retired politician and feminist activist; Mitchel Esajas, an anti-racist activist that founded the Black Archives; Lale Gül, a young author that wrote an autobiographical novel about leaving Islam and had to live in banishment but does not want her story to be ‘hijacked’ by right wing islamophobia; Nanoah Struik, a non-binary person and activist who was the second Dutch person to have an ‘X’ in their passport; and Stephen Fry, a famous humanist from across the Channel. Each of these speakers represents and gives a similar progressive and leftist take on freethinking, which show again the one-sidedness of potential present-day freethinkers by the DHA. They were asked to talk about freedom of thought, freedom of speech, taking room for yourself, and standing up against power structures. During the ceremony, there was one specific type of freethinker that was being lauded and presented as exemplary. Tjon a Fong gives the following description of a freethinker:

Yes, a freethinker is a provocateur. Yes, he is an activist. Yes, he has captured the zeitgeist and he needs freedom of speech to convey his ideals. However, freedom of speech is never a goal in itself [...] a freethinker never does it alone for himself, a freethinker also fights for the greater good (Humanistisch Verbond 2021).

At the end of the ceremony, the chair of the Humanist Alliance reiterates this definition. According to her, freethinking has to do with “creating a space for yourself, but also with taking responsibility for others” (Ibid.). In their definition, it would thus be wrong to regard freethinking as something that only benefits the freethinker. A true freethinker not only speaks his/her mind, because they want to express their authentic individuality, but also fights for the freedom of others. As a perfect example of true freethinking, Tjon a Fong mentions Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797—1883). Sojourner Truth was born in slavery, but escaped into freedom. And like a true freethinker, she did not stop at her own freedom. She became an abolitionist and feminist, and one of the first intersectional activists.

During the grand opening, the notion of freethinking is defined and delineated as the *engaged freethinker*. To only live a life wherein the individual freedom is lived to its full extent

is not enough. The freethinker that the DHA praises as exemplary has to think further than their own freedom, s/he is an activist. And given the absence of present-day right wing voices, preferably leftist.

3.2 Host and director of *Vrijdenkers*, their take on the series – *solipsist authenticity*

As described above, *Vrijdenkers* is a series about leaving religion in the contemporary Dutch context which was made specifically as a contribution to the celebratory year of the DHA. By choosing religion-leavers as examples of contemporary freethinking, the makers chose a type of freethinking that is more in line with Spinoza's solitary authenticity and secularity, than with the engaged freethinker that was celebrated during the grand opening of the exhibition. In an interview, Eva de Breed, director of the series, explains why they have decided to portray six religion-leavers instead of six contemporary politically engaged activists.

The Humanist Alliance has been making a case for this [non-religiosity] for a long time, so to speak, it wants to be a place where people that have doubts about the faith can go to. As you can see in the series, a lot of people that are in this process feel that they are the only one and they often blame themselves [...] It is also something that the Humanist Alliance is committed to nowadays, they have discussion groups, online private groups where people can meet each other (Janse and Mikkers 2021).

Even though the series does not depict politically engaged activists, the series itself is linked to the political engaged activism of the DHA. De Breed describes how the DHA has been “making a case” for leaving religion for a long time. In eyes of the DHA, freedom of thought and the freedom to be non-religious is something that cannot be taken for granted and needs an active world-wide commitment.²¹ The DHA wants to commit themselves for the freedom of non-religiosity in the Dutch context through nationwide online and offline safe groups for those who leave religion. The series is made in a similar commitment. By depicting those who leave religion as people who seek freedom of thought and freedom of non-religiosity despite the confinements of the religious upbringing, it serves the agenda of the DHA. The narratives inside the series serve as examples of leaving religion in the Dutch context, not only for those who know nothing about religion and the difficult process of leaving it, but also for those who do

²¹ The DHA yearly publishes a link on their website to an updated list of unsafe countries for non-believers: <https://www.humanistischverbond.nl/vrijheid/freedom-of-thought-rapport-2023/>.

know what it is to leave religion, who feel lonely and can recognise themselves and know that they are not alone. Each episode ends with a disclaimer that links the series with the agenda of the DHA: “Do you want to know more about *Vrijdenkers*? Or would you like to continue the conversation about leaving religion? Go to www.human.nl/Vrijdenkers.” The website provides further information on the series and a link to the *Vrijdenkplaats*, a private safe space for religion-leavers founded by the DHA.

Both the director of the series and the host, Özcan Akyol, have been interviewed multiple times surrounding the series. During these interviews they were both asked about their own religious backgrounds. Time and again, De Breed and Akyol had to explain their personal experiences with religion. And as we will see further below, Akyol states his personal religious history at the beginning of each episode of *Vrijdenkers*. When it comes to representing leaving religion, there is always an obsession with the personal experiences of religion of the creators of the representation.²² In the cases of this thesis, *Vrijdenkers*, Wolkers and ‘t Hart (Chapter 2), and *Dogmavrij.nl* (Chapters 4 and 5), the personal background of the authors functions as a means of authentication and justification. It is because of their personal experiences with religion that they are allowed to represent these stories of leaving religion and that their representations are given credit.

Next to their personal backgrounds, both De Breed and Akyol stressed multiple times that they did not want to make a series that openly critiques religion. De Breed states that she “absolutely did not want to make a series that is anti-religious” (Ruijs 2021). According to her, the series is simply about the process of people that “start to think for themselves” (Ibid.) which is perfectly in line with the ideal of authenticity as envisaged by Rousseau (Lindholm 2008; 2013).²³ Akyol also emphasises the neutral stance towards religion of the series. When an

²² Whenever I tell someone that I am doing a thesis on emotions of leaving religion, the standard follow-up question is if I have left religion myself as well. In dealing with leaving religion, the own background matters. This is also the reason for my personal note at the end of the thesis (see page 125).

²³ Akyol represents leaving religion as a movement of authenticity. This seems to imply that staying religious would mean one stays inauthentic, as if religion is a place where authenticity is not of importance. This is, however, certainly not the as several scholars have shown. Scholarly work on authenticity suggest that religion not only played an important role in the rise of authenticity, but also that authenticity has become an integral part of religion (Houtman, Aupers and de Koster 2011; Kim 2017; Bielo 2012; Lindholm 2008).

interviewer comments on how refreshing it was for her to listen to the warm and positive memories of some of the participants, Akyol replies as follows:

I constructed the interviews like that, together with researcher Eva de Breed, look, I do not want to rail at religion. I do not want that at all! That is something that the people really should know (Brouwer 2021).

Vrijdenkers is not about bashing religion, on the website of HUMAN Akyol states:

Unfortunately, we see a lot of intolerance towards people who think differently. That is why I believe it is important to present these religious worlds in a non-polarising, insightful, intellectual and above all calm manner to the people who do not know these worlds (Vermeer 2021).

The repeated emphasis on how *Vrijdenkers* is not anti-religious shows the expectations of the Dutch audience surrounding portrayals of leaving religion. That the Dutch audience expects a negative portrayal of religion is an attestation to the power of the iconic narratives of Wolkers and 't Hart. Their emotional representation of leaving religion was a negative one, they wanted to settle score with their religious past and depicted religion as a suffocating and absurd phenomenon that has to be done away. *Vrijdenkers* wants to break free from the expectations that are generated by this iconic narrative and solely focus on the process driven forward and understood through the depoliticized notion authenticity (see below). Yet, *Vrijdenkers* is also part of the tension field of leaving religion and critiquing religion itself. For how can one praise the process of leaving religion as examples of freethinking, on the one hand, whilst staying away from religion critique, on the other? A solution to this tension is put forward by Akyol in the emotional script of compassionate understanding.

[The participants] still speak very fondly of where they originated from and the people they grew up with. In my opinion, that makes you a real freethinker. If you can still allow it, if you are not vindictive and still feel so much love and understanding for those people, that is admirable and truly part of freethinking (Vermeer 2021).

Through the emotional script of compassionate understanding, the process of leaving religion has become fully depoliticized and understood through the notion of solipsist authenticity. The

responsibility for the positive evaluation of religion is placed solely on the side of the participants by Akyol. To what extent are they capable of truly being free and choosing love and compassion? According to Lindholm, authenticity revolves around the communion of the self with the self. It is about “being true to oneself,” “self-discovery,” and “self-realization” (Lindholm 2013, 363, 380). Through this solipsists framing, the series can stay away from any societal or political critique. The series focusses on finding peace in living being true to one’s self, and it just happens to be that in this case religion has to be left.

Looking at the larger context of the series provides a different picture. *Vrijdenkers* is one of the manifestations of the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the DHA. The other manifestations of the DHA mainly highlighted two aspects of freethinking: the authenticity (Benedict Spinoza) and engaged activism (Sojourner Truth). Both aspects of freethinking are embodied in this series. The narratives of leaving religion inside the series are framed as narratives of authenticity and the series itself is part of a larger agenda that calls for an awareness surrounding freedom of thought and non-religion in the Netherlands. By embodying both aspects of freethinking, *Vrijdenkers* maintains a difficult balance between praising leaving religion, on the one hand, and staying away from religion critique, on the other. How this balance is maintained, will be made visible upon investigating the emotional scripts that are part of the series. Which emotions are allowed? And which emotions are not? In the following section, we will see that the emotional scripts of *Vrijdenkers* is similar to the ones by Wolkers and ‘t Hart in that it is propelled forwards by a process of individual liberation from a suffocating group, but it differs fundamentally in the emotions that are presented and how they are evaluated.

3.3 *Vrijdenkers*

The series *Vrijdenkers* consist of four episodes that are chronologically ordered and constructs a narrative of leaving religion that is divided in four phases: being religious – doubt – coming-out – freedom. In the series, host Akyol interviews six participants that all talk retrospectively about the de-conversion process. Akyol interviews them in a minimalist room with concrete walls which contains only a white table, two simple chairs and a projector. During the interviews, Akyol sits opposite of the participant, with the table in between. Sometimes the projector displays images that accompany the narratives that are told by the participants. In the series we meet six participants who have left their religion and who represent six different religions/church denominations.

- Oliver. **Seventh Day Adventist Church.** Oliver wanted to become a preacher inside his church, but he started to doubt the faith through his theological studies. Eventually he left the church since he could not adhere to the prescribed faith anymore.
- Rajiv. **Hinduism.** Rajiv is the son of a pandit and was destined to follow his father into priesthood. He became however very critical of classical Hinduism and followed his passion of professional dancing.
- Inge. **Vrijemaakt Gereformeerde Kerk.** As a child Inge was a faithful Christian, but when she wanted to divorce her abusive husband she got into a conflict with her church. Today she no longer listens to the authority of the church, but only to herself.
- Veerle. **Jehovah Witnesses.** After a life of being a Jehovah's witness, Veerle decided to leave the community. For the first time she had to listen to her own feelings, something that she really had to learn.
- Sofyan. **Sunni Islam.** As a teenager, Sofyan became interested in astronomy through watching *Star Wars*. He quickly started to question his faith and decided that he no longer wanted to be a Muslim.
- Dina-Perla. **Orthodox Judaism.** Dina-Perla did not feel at home in the restrictive environment of Orthodox Judaism, since she was a teenager she struggled to have the freedom of self-expression.

In this section, I analyse the emotional scripts of the series *Vrijdenkers*. The emotional script is constructed by both the participants and the creators of the series. The participants share their stories and the emotional side of their stories, but the creators influence greatly how these stories are told. Akyol, on the one hand, steers the narrative through guiding questions and remarks, and De Breed, on the other, steers the narrative through editing and cutting up the original stories. The participants of the series have been carefully selected by De Breed and her team. They held auditions and selected the participants that not only suited best qua story, but also qua emotions. In an interview, De Breed describes how they decided to exclude someone from the series because the break with religion was still too fresh for this person, “he was too emotional” (Janse and Mikkers 2021). In the series, the participants keep a calm posture throughout, sometimes they smile, sometimes they look serious, but they are never angry nor in tears. Akyol and De Breed chose specifically for emotionally balanced participants.

Each episode is analysed on three points: the narrative, the music, and the images. On the intersection of these three different dimensions, the emotional scripts take form. When a participant *talks* about how sad s/he is, this is given emotional depth by showing suggestive *images* and by playing a specific *music* score on the background. All four episodes of *Vrijdenker* provide a certain emotional script in and of themselves. They are, however, better understood when they are taken together, since they form a larger emotional script together.

3.3.1 Intro

Each episode opens with the same intro which already frames the narrative of leaving religion that the series wants to tell and already invokes the emotional scripts that are part of the series. The intro opens with nostalgic images of four babies that are part of a religious denomination: a Christian baby is baptised, an Islamic baby is held by his father who is whispering “Allahu Akbar,” a Jewish baby is sleeping with a yarmulke on his head, and a Hinduist baby is sleeping with a bindi (a red dot) painted on her forehead (Figures 1 and 2). These images of religious infants are alternated by images of a pensive Akyol and images of the six adult participants. The images of the religious childhood have a nostalgic feel, rendering the religious in a distant past from the present-day images of the secular adults that are presented a moment later. The intro is underscored by *True Sorry* by Ibrahim Maalouf, a song that starts peacefully with an easy pace and develops into an upbeat song with warm and powerful tones. It is perfectly timed with the images of religious infancy (peacefully) towards present-day adult religion leavers (powerful tones). In the meantime, Akyol’s voice describes the premise of the series.

You are born into a religion which means that your life has been largely determined. But what if you no longer feel at home with it one day? I grew up as an Alevite myself but once I was older, I longed for complete freedom of thought and I let it go. In this series, I talk with six people who have gone through a similar process. All grew up inside a religion, but eventually they chose a different path. Their own path.



Figure 1:
Intro of the series, a baby is sleeping and wears a yarmulke.
Score: *True Sorry* by Ibrahim Maalouf (De Breed 2021a).

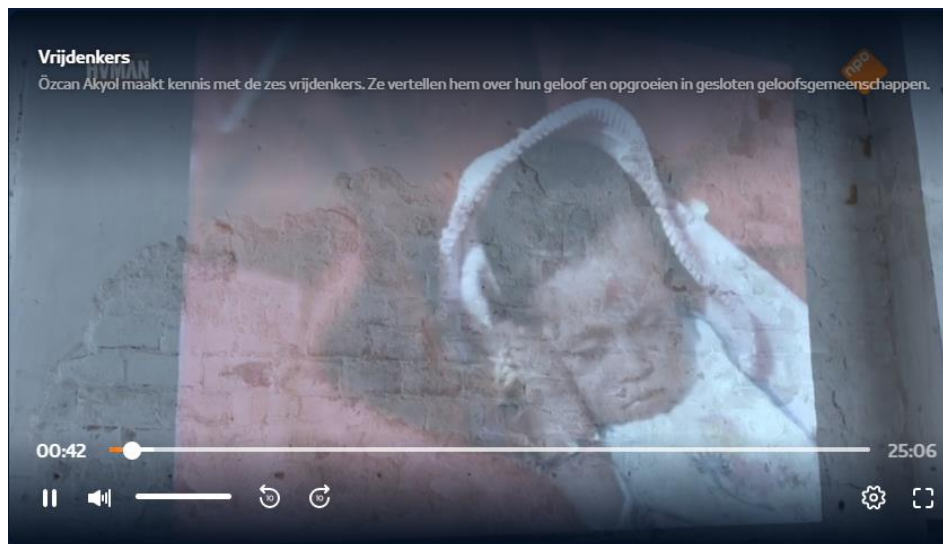


Figure 2:
Intro of the series, a baby is sleeping with a bindi painted on her forehead. Score: *True Sorry* by Ibrahim Maalouf (De Breed 2021a).

Akyol places his own departure from religion next to the narratives of the participants. By doing so, Akyol not only mirrors the narratives of the participants with his own, but also frames them through his own narrative. To describe the narratives of leaving religion, Akyol makes use of metaphor. In his research on de-conversion narratives, Philip Harrold points towards the common presence of “emotionally charged metaphors” (Harrold 2006, 84). Harrold argues for a close reading of these metaphors since they convey the feelings of de-conversion and the mental mode through which they are interpreted. For his personal experience of leaving religion, Akyol uses the metaphor of letting go, a metaphor of release which indicates an emotional state of inner peace and acceptance. Religion became redundant in Akyol’s life, so he started doing without. For the experiences of the participants, Akyol uses the metaphor of choosing one’s own path. This metaphor conveys leaving religion as an act of authenticity in the sense of “being true to oneself” (Lindholm 2008, 7). The process of leaving religion is

interpreted in a positive way, as becoming authentic. By interpreting leaving religion as a positive process of becoming authentic, the emotions that are part of this process (be it negative or positive) are viewed in a positive light.

The intro of the series moves from nostalgic images of religious infants towards present-day images of adult religion leavers. The tone of the music score and Akyol's narration indicate a positive view of the process of leaving religion. Despite growing up in a religious milieu, the participants chose for a path of authenticity. The emotional scripts that we encounter in the series are framed through this authenticity narrative.

3.3.2 Episode one *De Weg* [The Path]

As with all accounts that recall the breaking away from religion, a move towards the religion that is to be left has to be made first. Whereas the iconic narratives of Wolkers and 't Hart rendered the religion present through a negative lens, as something that had “to be settled score with” (Chapter 2), *Vrijdenkers* evokes the previous religion through a positive lens. Several Dutch media have written about the series *Vrijdenkers* and the refreshing break from the usual negative narrative. They all praise the first episode for its warm approach of the religious past (Bos 2021, Van der Kooi 2021, Brouwer 2021). As described above, the series aims to steer clear from overt religion critique and an anti-religion style. The religious past is not presented as solely suffocating and dangerous, but as something that is positive and that functions as a place of joy. To render religion as positive, the series makes use of nostalgia in the form of nostalgic music and images. Through nostalgia, religion is shown as something that is indeed positive, but also as something that belongs in the past. Only through the safe distance of the past can religion be seen as something positive. Nostalgia is deployed as a new emotional script.

The episode opens with Oliver, Veerle, and Inge talking about their religious past. They all smile and laugh while they talk about their happy childhood memories (Figures 3—5). Short videos are shown that depict old and general images of churchgoers and congregation members (Figures 6 and 7); the images do not actually show Oliver, Veerle, and Inge, or their specific churches. These images, that are part of a collective memory, are selected by HUMAN to provide a specific colouring with the warm memories that the participants recall. The chosen images have a nostalgic eighties and nineties feel. The colours have a low saturation and the videos have a low definition quality which makes the images vague, soft, and distant. Underneath the images, the score *Prickly Pear* by Portico Quartet is played. It starts as a calm melodic tune, with soft and happy but melancholic tones that are played on a hang. After about

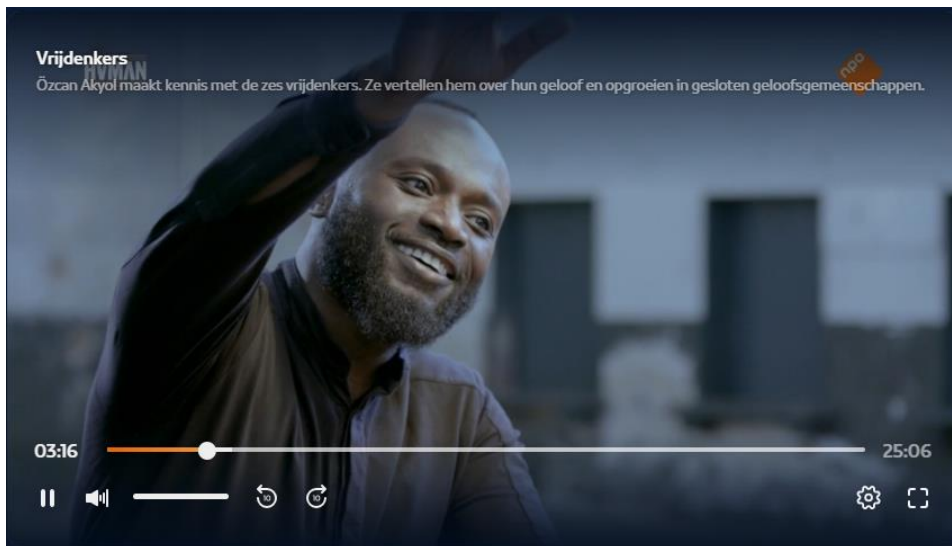


Figure 3:
Oliver shares his religious childhood memories. Notice how he is smiling (De Breed 2021a).

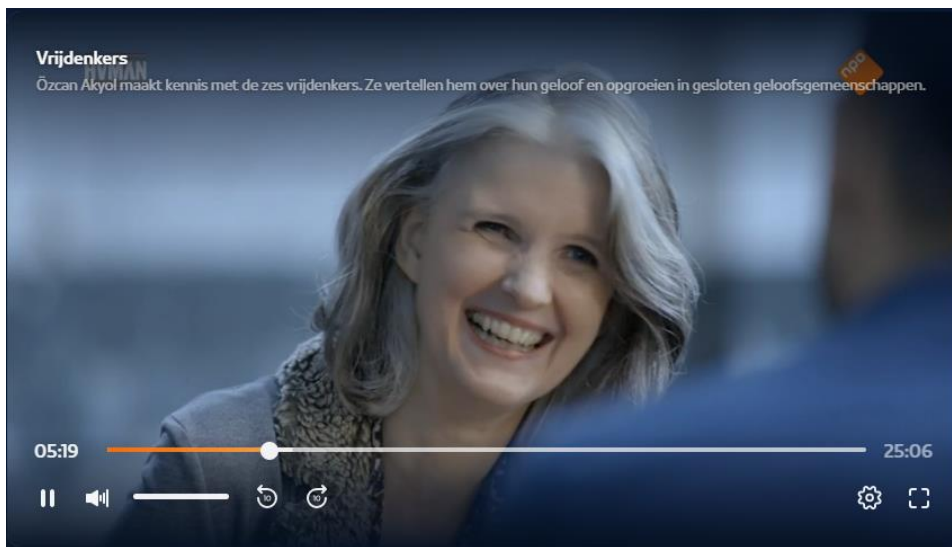


Figure 4:
Veerle shares her religious childhood memories. Notice how she is smiling (De Breed 2021a).

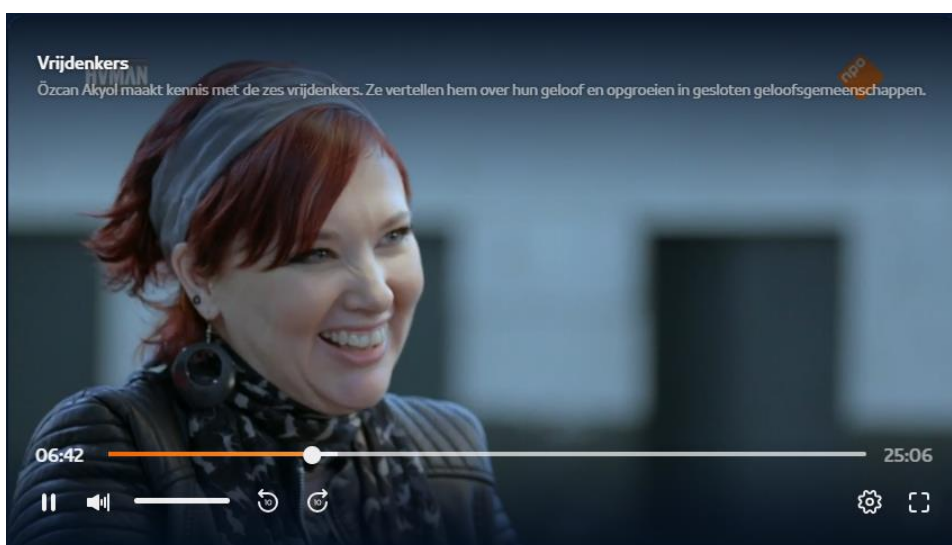


Figure 5:
Inge shares her religious childhood memories. Notice how she is smiling (De Breed 2021a).

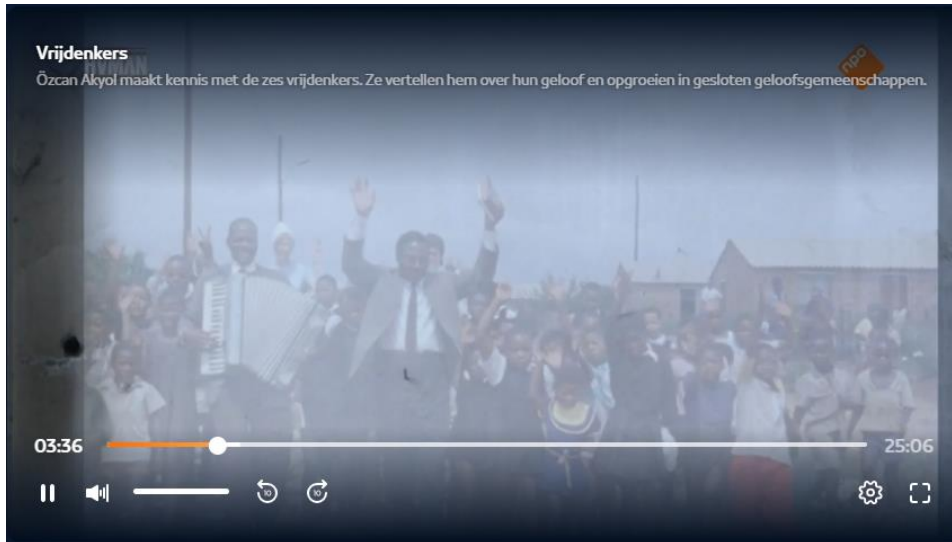


Figure 6:
Images displayed with Oliver's memories. A group of children walks on an unpaved road with a pastor in front. Score: *Prickly Pear* by Portico's Quartet (De Breed 2021a).

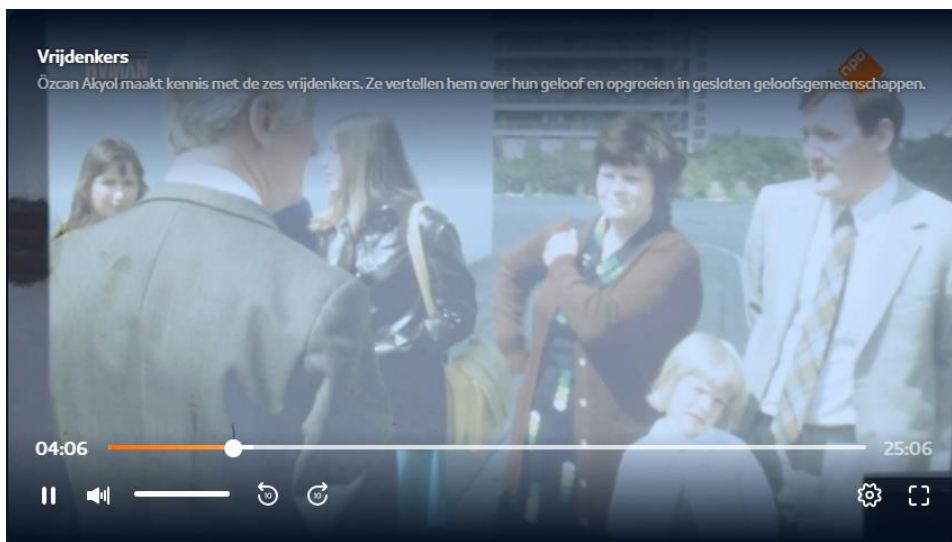


Figure 7:
Images displayed with Veerle's memories. A group of Jehovah's Witnesses deliberate on who takes which doors to evangelise. Score: *Prickly Pear* by Portico's Quartet (De Breed 2021a).

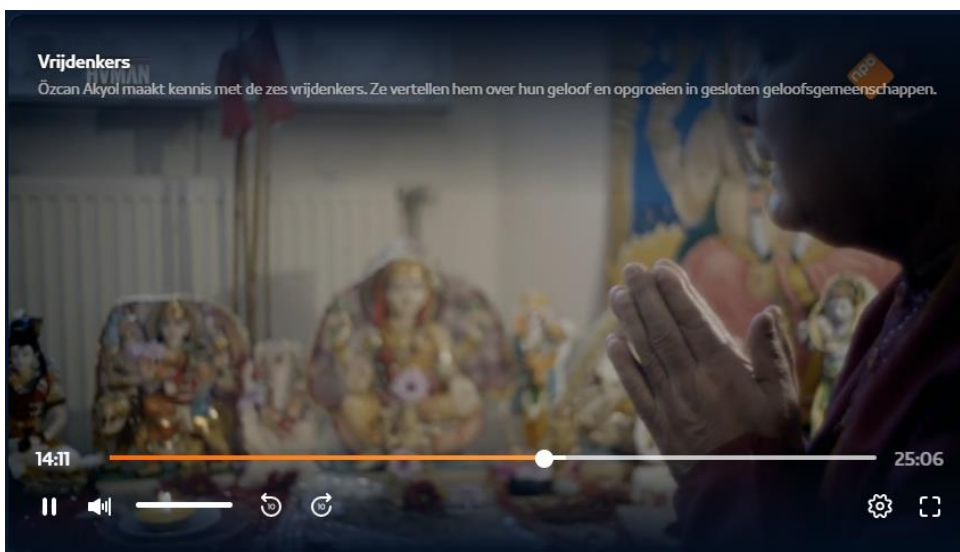


Figure 8:
A pandit is reciting a mantra in Sanskrit in front of a group of Hindu divine statues (De Breed 2021a).

fifty seconds, a saxophone plays sober tones over the soft and happy soundscape, creating a bittersweet sound that suggests a sense of fleetingness.

The combination of the smiling participants, the happy melodic score, and the historical religious images imposes nostalgic feelings upon the viewer. Together with the images of the intro, the images portray religion not as something that is still active and present (and thus capable of inciting all kinds of negative feelings), but as something of a (distant) past. Putting religion at a safe nostalgic distance allows for a positive emotional script. The script breaks from the iconic Dutch narratives of de-conversion that view religion through a negative lens. The only religious imagery that depicts present-day active religion, are depictions of Hindu rituals. Hinduism is a foreign religion to the mainline Dutch audience, since it does not receive much attention in the public sphere and it does not evangelise or try to convert people. The scenes of present-day Dutch Hinduism depict unfamiliar rituals for the Dutch audience without virtually any explanation of what is happening. A pandit is shown who recites a mantra in the foreign language Sanskrit in a room full of brightly coloured items and images of the ape-god Hanuman (Figure 8). The religious imagery differs greatly from the more familiar images of strict Christendom, Islam and Judaism. And thus, through its foreign and exotic status, it stays at a distance and does not become something that has to be criticized or revenged.

At two-third of the episode, the happy memories of a safe and warm religious youth start to make place for negative emotions. Akyol steers the conversation towards the narrowness of the religious upbringing. The participants talk about how they feared judgement from God and give attention to the exclusiveness of religion. The music turns towards a moody and sad atmosphere. The turning point of the episode is Veerle's baptism. Veerle recounts that she got baptised when she was thirteen and that it was a pivotal moment for her, since it meant that from now on, "I no longer followed my own will, but the will of the Lord." Akyol remarks that "to some that would be suffocating, because than there is no way back." He asks her how it felt for her. Veerle replies: "Well, I was thirteen, I wanted nothing else than to serve Jehovah." Indicating that she was young and did not know better. Meanwhile *Ars Moriendi* by Hilmar örm Hilmarson starts to play on the background, a gripping triste score with violins. For 17 long seconds, personal photos of a very young Veerle going in and out of the baptismal font are shown (Figure 9). Veerle's baptism is interpreted as a moment where she stopped listening to her own inner voice and lost track of her authentic self. Seung Soo Kim describes the narrative of authenticity as follows:

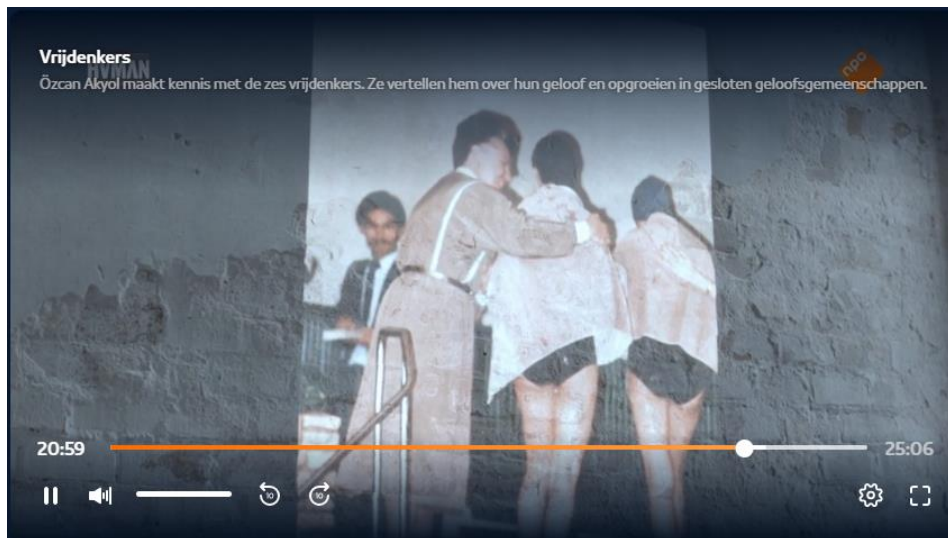


Figure 9:
A young Veerle exits the baptism font. From now on, she does not follow her own will, but only the will of Jehovah. A man embraces her with a towel. Score: *Ars Moriendi* by Hilmar örm Hilmarson (De Breed 2021a).

The modern narrative of authenticity says one needs to listen to one's own inner voice, find one's authentic self, and free oneself from any conforming pressures imposed by the outer social structure. To not listen to one's inner voice or find one's true self is imagined as morally wrong (Kim 2017, 128).

Inauthenticity is regarded as a modern sin, one has to listen to one's inner voice (i.e. own will) without being meddled by other voices (i.e. the will of the lord). The inventor of this modern narrative, Rousseau, coupled inauthenticity with alienation. In his eyes, modern men is alienated from the authentic self through civilization that could only "be found among primitives (sic), peasants, and innocent children and, for some sensitive persons such as himself" (Lindholm 2013, 382). The mythical character of the Rousseau's romantic "primitive" and "innocent authentic self" is contradicted and embraced by Veerle's account at the same time. Her account follows the hierarchical dichotomy of listening to the true self versus being alienated from the self, but contradicts the notion of "innocent children" as repositories of authenticity. Precisely because she was a child, Veerle thought of no other option than to serve Jehovah. It is through her gullibility that Veerle committed the sin of inauthenticity. Veerle left her own will in the baptismal font and when she exited the font a man towered over her, encapsulating her with a towel. After this turning point, the participants solely talk about the negatives experiences that they had inside religion. They talk about the fear for Gods ever present judgement, and the fear for eternal suffering in hell. At the end of the first episode, the participants hint on their departure from religion. What started as a warm nostalgic childhood-memory, evolved into an environment that had negative sides and that would eventually no longer fit the participants.

The emotional script of the first episode has two sides, a positive and a negative one. In the first part of the episode, religion is seen as positive through the safe distance of nostalgia. *Vrijdenkers* reiterates religious life as a positive and warm place, but places it in a distant past. Throughout the series, active religion is either distanced through the past (Christianity, Judaism, Islam), or through cultural difference (Hinduism), rendering it present without being a potential site of conflict. The second part of the episode shifts towards negative emotions, with Veerle's baptism story as a turning point. Her baptism, and through it her entire religious life, is regarded as a site of alienation from the self. As we see in later episodes, Veerle's religious identity is understood as an inauthentic one. Other participants talk about the fear they experienced with regards to the Gods and their judgement. As it turns out, religion was not only warm and happy, but also generated fear and alienation.

3.3.3 Episode two *Twijfel* [Doubt]

The second episode focusses on why the participants started to doubt their faith. Akyol inquires the participants on the specific conditions that started the critical questioning of the faith. Interestingly, a clear gender gap can be discerned in the reasons that are given. Whereas the men give rational reasons for losing religion, the women focus on the restrictiveness of religion and on feelings of being trapped. The stories of the women thus seem to provide a more emotional account of losing religion than the stories by the men. This is reflected in, or enhanced through, the images that accompany the stories. Even though Sofyan's and Oliver's story of discovering other truths does have an emotionally troubled side, this is not depicted.

Sofyan narrates how he got an interest in astronomy and science through watching *Star Wars* as a teenager. He found answers in science that exceeded the explanations he had learned in Islam and consequentially, he no longer believed in the creation story. He started to question the Islamic faith in its entirety, but there was no one he could talk to. Sofyan lived a "double life" wherein he would be religious in front of his parents, but "skip faith" when he was somewhere else. His personal discovery of scientific truth paired with the religion at his home caused a crisis inside his head. Oliver felt that it was his calling to become a pastor in the Adventist Church, so he studied theology at a university. During his studies, he found out that the authorship of the Bible is much more problematic than he could have ever believed. The Bible lost its fundamental authority and Oliver's faith in God started to completely change. Nevertheless, Oliver continued his studies and became a pastor at his church, despite his questions and disbelief. Oliver started to preach the faith he no longer believed in.

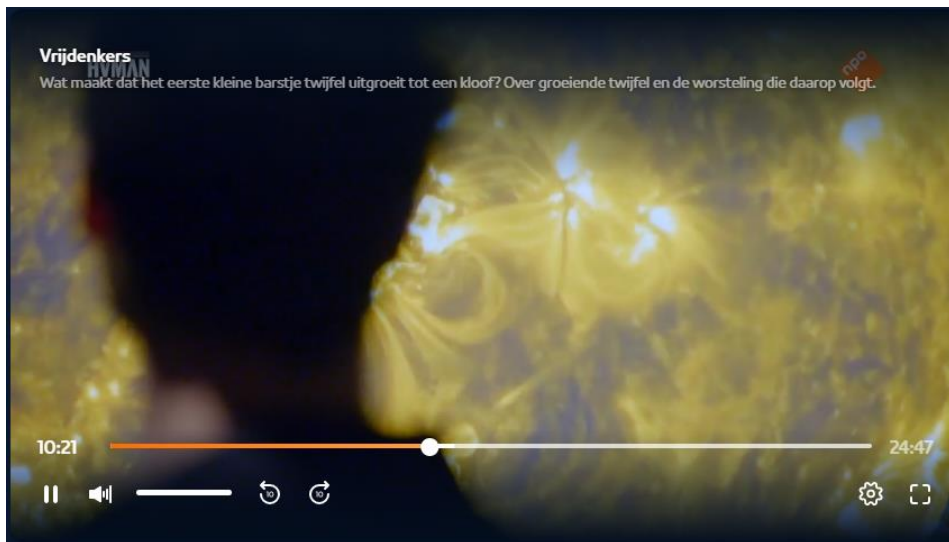


Figure 10:
Sofyan, alone in front of a reproduction of the sun. Score: *S3NS* by Ibrahim Maalouf (De Breed 2021b).

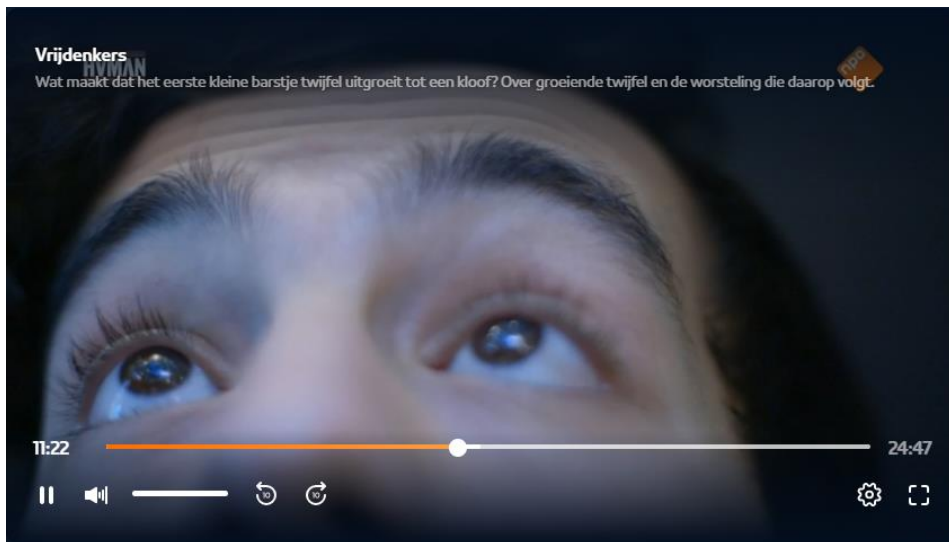


Figure 11:
Sofyan, looking upwards at a reproduction of the galaxy. Note how the stars are reflected in his eyes. Score: *Highway* by Ólafur Arnalds (De Breed 2021b).

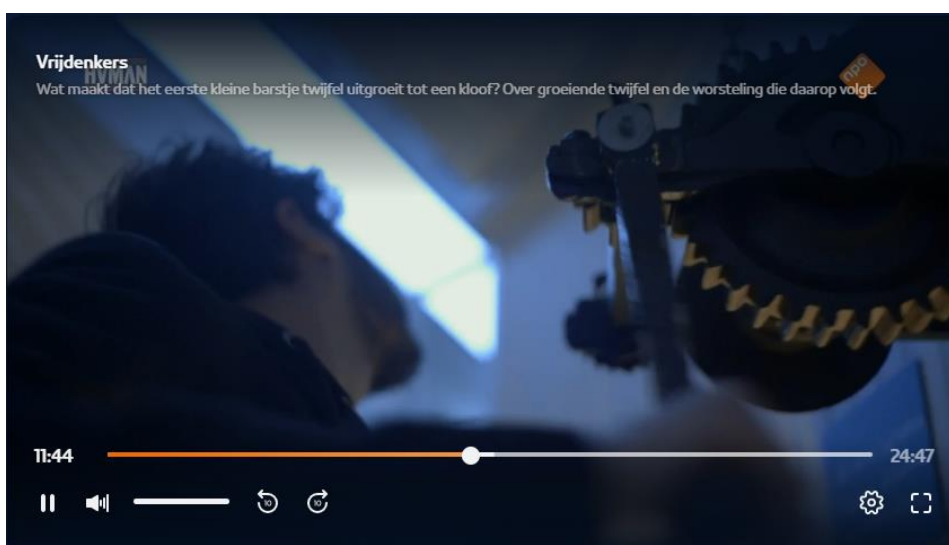


Figure 12:
Sofyan, opening the hatch of the observatory. Note how the light is pouring in. Score: *Highway* by Ólafur Arnalds (De Breed 2021b).

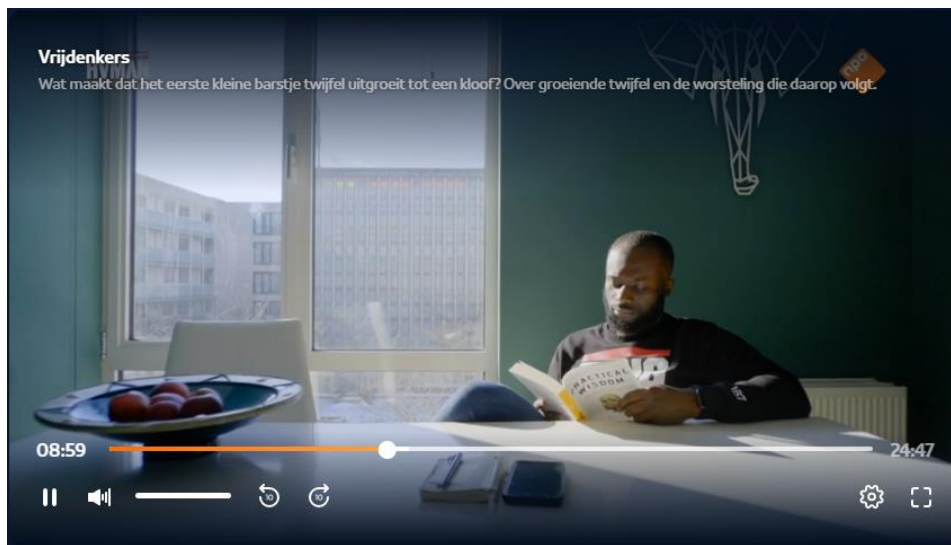


Figure 13:
 Oliver is reading at his home. Note how the sunlight falls on his face and on the pages he is reading. Score: *S3NS* by Ibrahim Maalouf (De Breed 2021b).

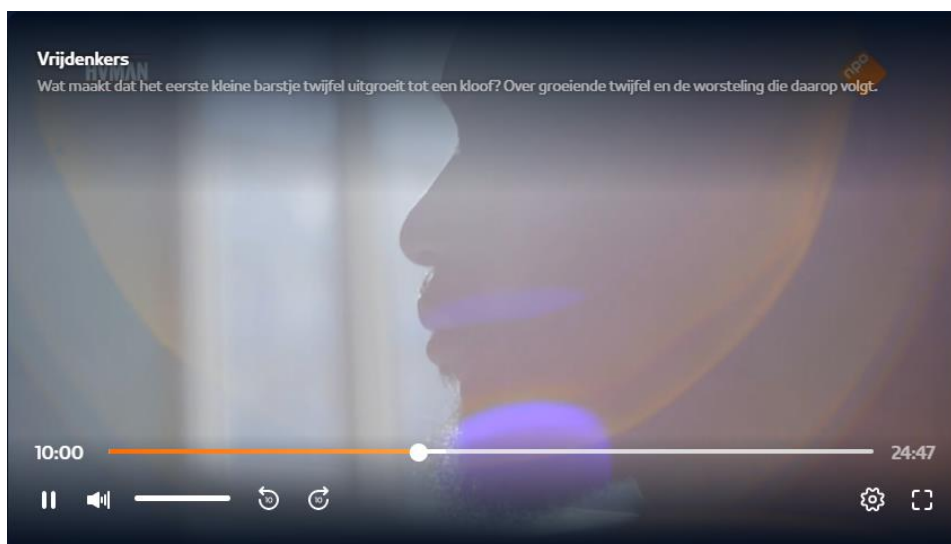


Figure 14:
 Oliver is reading at his home. A flare of sunlight brightly lits his face. Score: *S3NS* by Ibrahim Maalouf (De Breed 2021b).

Both stories contain a rational and an emotional side. Sofyan and Oliver both describe how they came into a personal crisis, because they led a double life. The series, however, focusses mainly on the rational side of losing faith. The guiding music and imagery only depict how Sofyan and Oliver lost their faith through discovering scientific truths. Sofyan's story of turning towards a scientific explanation is guided by images of Sofyan who is looking at depictions of stars and constellation (Figures 10 and 11) and by Sofyan who opens a hatch and looks at the sky through a telescope (Figure 12). On the background, atmospheric music is played, it is full of tension, creating a sense of expectation; *Highway* by Ólafur Arnalds. Oliver's story of thinking about the authorship of the Bible is depicted by a scene where Oliver is reading a book at his home (Figure 13). A rhythmic and melodic score is played on the background; *S3NS* by Ibrahim Maalouf, which creates a sense of hopeful expectation.

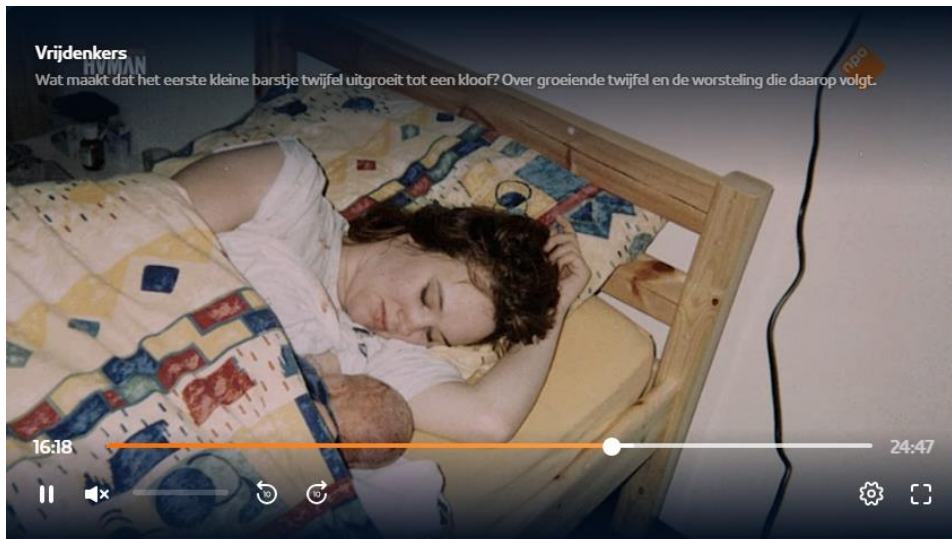


Figure 15:
Inge breast feeds her baby in the woman's shelter. Score: *Re:member* by Ólafur Arnalds (De Breed 2021b).

These images depict young and earnest thinkers that are searching for the truth. They are depicted in a calm solitude with a central role for the light. Sofyan searches for the light of the stars and stands eye to eye with the constellations of the universe. When he opens the hatch of the observatory, light pours in. While Oliver is reading on his own, sunlight falls on his book and on his face. The camera moves in such a way that a light flare falls on his face (Figure 14). As Katja Rakow has argued in the case of megachurches, light plays a significant role in the “affective atmosphere” (Rakow 2020, 104). Light, and its specific usage, mediates the message and the emotional note that is played inside these churches. In the images accompanying Sofyan's and Oliver's stories, the gradual increase of light mediates not only the increase of rational insights, i.e. “enlightenment”, but also affectively colours the images. By depicting the finding of new truths through the increase of calm and bright light, the new knowledge is shown as natural/neutral and its discovery as benevolent. No conflict is shown in these images nor any negative emotion. The stories of doubting the faith by Inge and Dina-Perla are quite different, they also focus on the discovering of own truths, but there is much more room for (negative) emotions.

Inge married into an abusive marriage, but fled to a women's shelter when she found out that she was pregnant and delivered her baby there (Figure 15). She wanted to divorce from her husband, but this was not allowed by the church. They told her that she was on a “path away from God.” This generated severe anxiety for Inge, and she had a very difficult time. Her family wrote her a letter “begging” her to return to her husband, which made her feel cold and abandoned. It is during this conflict that her faith started to crumble. The elders of the church kept visiting her and tried to convert her back to the church. “And then, I felt for the first time that something was not right. I had to obey them, simply because they were appointed by God

to dictate what God wanted for me, for my life.” Inge knew for certain that she had to leave her abusive husband but when the elders kept saying that it was sinful and forbidden, she eventually lost her trust in the church and in the faith. Dina-Perla describes her Orthodox Jewish background. She was virtually allowed to do nothing. She remembers for instance how “non-Jewish music was absolutely forbidden,” but that she saw a videoclip of the Spice Girls with the song *Say You’ll Be There* at her neighbour’s television (Figure 16). She was immediately taken in by the “powerful women” who were “semi-nude and leather-clad.” These women had a voice of their own, “they mattered.” She instantly knew she wanted this for herself as well. She had to fight and struggle for her own path, and overcome several setbacks, but she eventually succeeded in leaving the orthodox milieu and its faith. Dina-Perla started to wear makeup and more revealing clothes to her own liking (Figure 17).

The stories of Dina-Perla and Inge are about self-expression and choosing your own way. Despite their strict and suffocating religious environments that denies them healthy and normal things (divorce from an abusive husband, own lifestyle), they decided to follow their own path. This went with of struggle and moments of severe anxiety. Inge’s story is depicted through several personal photos of a young Inge and her baby in the women’s shelter (Figure 18). They are underscored with two sombre and languid songs by Ólafur Arnalds, *Þú ert jörðin* and *re:member*. They depict a vulnerable and young woman who suffers from anxiety, who is struggling to stand on her own and to be there for her baby. Dina-Perla’s story, is depicted by a videoclip of Spice Girls, this clip stands for strong women who matter just as they are. The original music, however, is not used. *Say You’ll Be There* is a calm song with an easy vibe, in the episode, the videoclip is underscored with *Essentieles* by Ibrahim Maalouf. A powerful score with fast and loud tones played on multiple trumpets, guitars, and drums. Later on in the episode, personal photos of Dina-Perla in makeup and more revealing clothing is showed. These images are underscored with the same music score, signalling on an emotional level that Dina-Perla indeed did become a strong women.

The emotional script that accompanies doubting the faith has a clear gender gap. Although both the men and women do describe the negative feelings that came with doubting the faith (crisis, struggle, anxiety), the series puts more focus on the (negative) feelings with the women. With the men, leaving religion is regarded as a cognitive process, as a natural loss of convictions that comes with learning scientific truths. Its emotional script is a positive one, the music and the lightful images portray excitement and wonder in learning new truths. The stories of the women, however, deconstruct this cognitive interpretation of leaving religion.

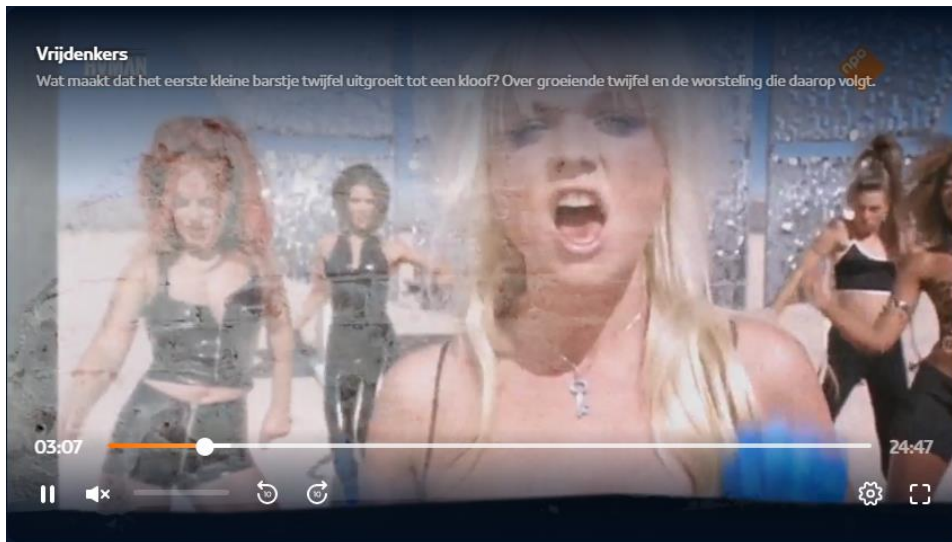


Figure 16:
Scene from the
videoclip *Say You'll
Be There* by the
Spice Girls. They are
powerful, semi-nude,
and dressed in
leather. Score:
Essentieles by
Ibrahim Maalouf
(De Breed 2021b).

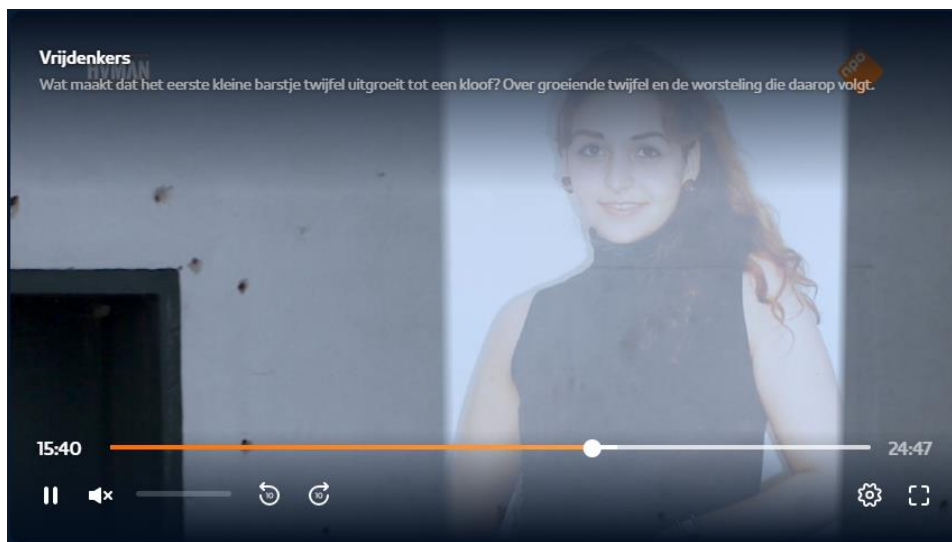


Figure 17:
Dina-Perla in
makeup, jewelry, and
clothes of her own
choice. Score:
Essentieles by
Ibrahim Maalouf
(De Breed 2021b).

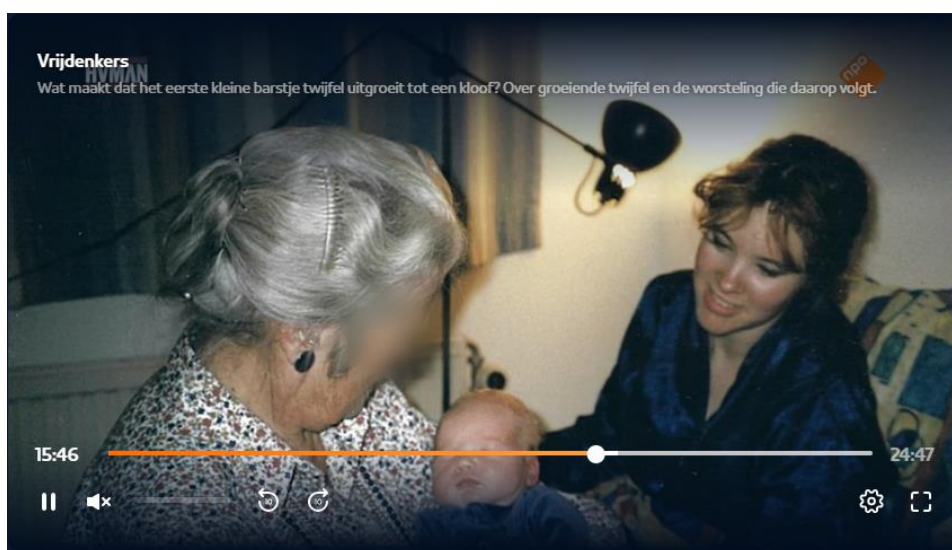


Figure 18:
A young Inge with
her baby in the
women's shelter.
Score: *Dú ert jörðin*
by Ólafur Arnalds
(De Breed 2021b).

They hardly speak of losing convictions and focus on the emotions instead. The stories told by the women allows for a negative (re)view of religion. Religion is seen as suffocating and the process of thinking differently is presented as a struggle, mirroring and differing the iconic narrative of Wolkers and 't Hart at the same time. Particularly Dina-Perla's story mirrors the iconic narrative, going from suffocating repression to victorious self-expression. The big difference between these stories and the iconic narrative, however, is that these are told by women, and thus told from a different position. This is reflected in the emotions that are depicted in the music and the images accompanying Inge's story. She is depicted as a vulnerable young woman that suffers from severe anxiety and personal crisis. The struggle against religion is not a confident and victorious one, but vulnerable and insecure.

3.3.4 Episode Three *Coming-out*

The third episode is called *coming-out*, a metaphor that is strongly associated with queer people that 'come out of the closet', i.e. share their identity as being queer. The coming out of the closet metaphor has a specific structure that presumes a closeted period of secrecy, a liberative confessional moment, and an open life afterwards. Travers Scott understands "coming out" in queer history as a political critique against stigmatisation. Instead of hiding the secret identity away "one walked the skeleton, even if one was the skeleton, proudly, out of the closet." (Scott 2020, 146) The act of coming-out functioned as a protest against a suppressive system. Next to this political dimension, the coming-out metaphor also has an emotional dimension. The 'closet' captures the sense of confinement and secrecy, of shame and fear of self-disclosure, and the 'coming-out' captures the sense of relief and liberation. The true identity is finally out in the open, and a more authentic life, less alienated from the true self, can be expressed. *Vrijdenkers* uses the coming-out metaphor only in the second sense. The stories of the participants do not function as a critique on a system that suppresses their true identities, but focus on the experiences of secrecy and the confessional moment (fear, crisis, longing for acknowledgement).

The coming-out metaphor provides a strong and clear structure, which explains its widespread usage, but it has received extensive critique. One of the main critiques, is that the metaphor presents revealing one's identity as queer as "a singular, measurable moment, rather than complicated ongoing process" (Scott 2020, 148). It condenses a long and often contradictory process of concealment and disclosure into one high-intensity decisive moment (McKenna-Buchanan, Munz and Rudnick 2015). In this sense, the coming-out metaphor

directly mirrors the Christian conversion testimonial culture, which influences the structure and nature of de-conversion stories as well (Avance 2013).²⁴

Vrijdenkers uses the coming-out metaphor to structure and condensate the lengthy process of various and multifaceted degrees of disclosures of irreligion into one decisive moment. Although the story of only one participant matches the coming-out structure, the episode is edited in such a way that every story fits the structure. The emotional script of the episode revolves around the three phases of the coming-out metaphor: the closet, the coming out, and the reactions by the immediate surroundings. Akyol pushes towards this structure and asks Inge about the moment of her disclosure. “You wake up one morning and decide that you have to tell your parents. What did that day look like?” Inge answers that she cannot remember such a specific day, there had always been discussions about what she believed and did not believe. Akyol reacts: “But the first time, you surely do remember that? The first time you said: ‘I don’t believe anymore.’” Eventually Inge does give an answer that satisfies Akyol, focussing on her mother’s reaction in one of the discussions (reactions to the coming-out). The only story that does fit the structure, is the story by Sofyan. His story shapes the episode, and to the other stories, to a large extent. Sofyan’s coming-out is put at the centre of the episode, and the episode ends with Sofyan’s remarks on life after the disclosure.

Sofyan’s “coming-out story” begins with Akyol telling something about his own history. “I have been in a similar situation like you, and I actually felt quite lonely. I did not feel accepted by the one group if I wanted to express myself as I was, and I couldn’t fully fit with the other group.” Akyol describes a situation of utter loneliness, since he couldn’t fit in with the group that he came from and neither with the group outside of what he knew. In this sense, the religion-leaver is akin to the Algerian worker migrant situation in France as described by Abdelmalek Sayad. Sayad coined the term “double absence” to describe the situation of the worker migrant who was no longer at home in the country of origin nor at the country that s/he lived in (Saada 2000, 37). In a similar fashion, Akyol was doubly absent, and felt lonely. Sofyan narrates how he was doubly absent as well: he could talk to nobody about his doubts. For his family, “it was too much of a taboo” and he knew no one outside of his family that would want to talk about Islamic faith and doubts. Sofyan grew to be more and more “absent” from his family. Sofyan felt lonely and guilty for his absence, “why can’t I just fit in?” Everything started

²⁴ Through its condensation of a larger process into one decisive moment and its specific structure of a bad pre-testimonial period and a good post-testimonial period, the coming-out metaphor closely resembles the structure of Christian conversion testimonials.

to “gobble up” until Sofyan could no longer deal with it. At the age of fifteen, Sofyan had to tell his parents the truth.

Sofyan: My mother had to translate, because I said it in Dutch. I did not dare to say it in Berber, because the fear of disappointing my father was just so great.

Akyol: What did you read on your mother’s face when you said it?

Sofyan: A kind of revulsion I think, not for me per se, but for what I had just told her, which was that one of her sons wouldn’t be a Muslim. I think that was unimaginable for her [...] She said: “Well, in that case you do not belong here. As someone who grows up in a Muslim family, but is no longer Muslim.”

Sofyan had a difficult relationship with his parents for several years after his coming-out moment. Sofyan doubted if his parents still loved him and it “tore him apart” to feel so “unwanted.” He missed the social warmth of the religious nest that he had just left. It was horrible for Sofyan and he feared that “the connection between me and my parents was broken beyond repair.” The loneliness and absence Sofyan felt inside the closet was repeated and affirmed in the conflicted relationship with his parents outside the closet. The emotional script of the “coming-out” episode circles around loneliness, fear, and absence of, or broken love. The script moves from a period of loneliness and secrecy that grew untenable, via a moment of scary self-disclosure, towards a period of broken love. The music and the images that accompany Sofyan’s story portray loneliness and sadness. The images show a lonely present-day Sofyan (Figures 19 and 20), underscored by and sad and sensitive music *Lina* by Frazer and *Cinema Paradiso* by Eric Vloeimans. Other images that depict the other participants also show lonely people, the only images of crowds of people are in the first episode, in the nostalgic images of

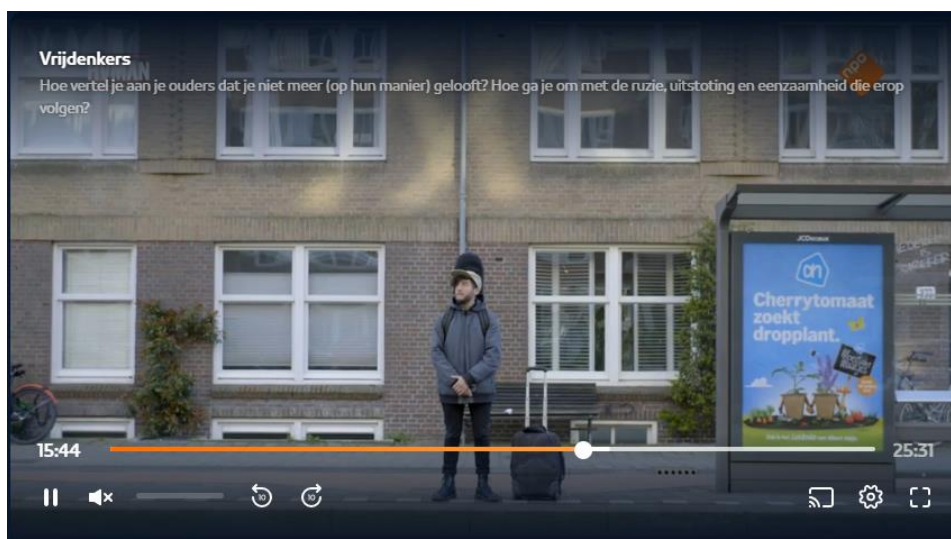


Figure 19:
Sofyan, standing alone at a tram station, looking into the distance. It is unclear why he carries a suitcase. Score: *Lina* by Fazer (De Breed 2021c).

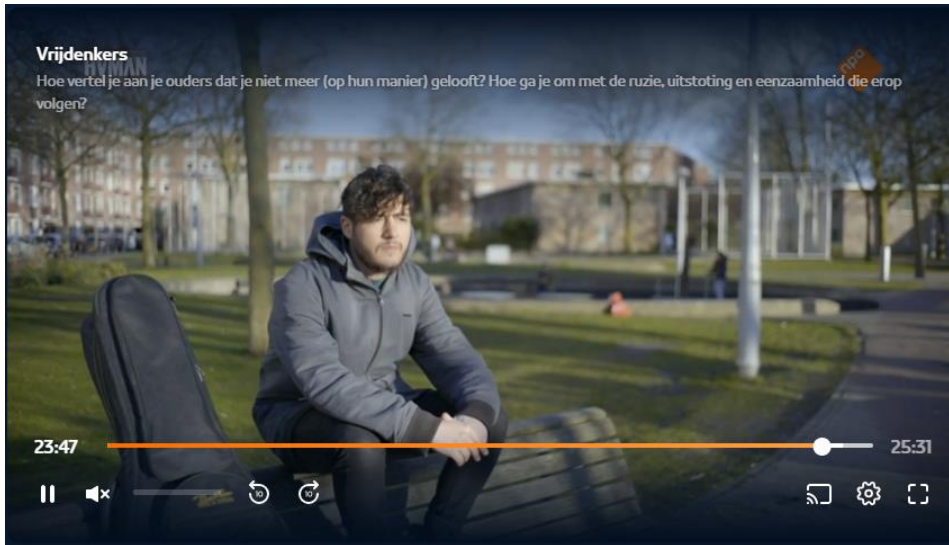


Figure 20:
Sofyan, sitting alone in a park, looking into the distance. He draws a serious face and takes a demure posture. Score: *Lina* by Frazer (De Breed 2021c).

a warm past. A clear cut is shown between crowded religion and lonely irreligion. Sofyan yearns for the warmth and the acceptance of his parents, but there is no room for non-Muslims in their environment. Oliver states that “leaving the people behind” was what’s the hardest for him. Veerle and Inge share how they yearn for acknowledgement from their parents, which they don’t get, because they are seen as the “bad ones.”

The emotional script is one of vulnerability. The participants yearn for love and acknowledgment by their parents and their peers. The participants are uncertain and afraid. The participants feel lonely, wronged, and disacknowledged. An interesting difference can be discerned when we compare these narratives to the iconic narrative of the Wolkers and ‘t Hart. In the iconic narrative, the youth is done with their parents, they revenge their past through a violent settling score, a clear move away from the strict and outdated older generation. In these narratives, however, we find children that yearn for their parents’ love and acknowledgement. The emotional script has changed from looking for revenge to looking for recognition.

3.3.5 Episode Four *Vrijheid* [Freedom]

The final episode is about the supposed freedom that the participants would arrive at after leaving religion. The structure of the series thus follows the iconic narrative of Wolkers and ‘t Hart wherein the individual is liberated from the suffocating religious milieu and enters into an blessed sate of secular freedom. During the episode however, it becomes clear that leaving religion does not provide this jubilant and unproblematic freedom. And even though the participants do get a sense of ‘liberation’ through living an authentic life according to their own selves, this does not come easy and is surrounded by pain, feelings of loss, and struggle.

After displaying the good and the bad sides of growing up inside a religion in the first episode, the conditions that led to ‘doubting’ the faith in the second episode, and the coming-out of the third episode, the final episode focuses on living a life after leaving religion. Did the participants really get free of religion? And how do they construct their new identities? The final episode revolves around living a life of authenticity, which is not presented as one big happy ending, but as a continuous struggle. Although the episode ends with a positive message, “it has brought me closer to myself and that brings me happiness,” ample room is given for negative emotions

Veerle, Inge, Sofyan, Rajiv, and Dina-Perla describe how they struggled in finding a new identity. Veerle left the Jehovah’s witnesses behind when she was forty-five years old. She had never learned to listen to her “own authentic feelings,” she had been “playing the role of the Jehovah’s witness” all her life. As we saw in the first episode, Veerle equates her religious life with alienation and inauthenticity. When she left her religion, she did so because she wanted “to live according to myself”. Nevertheless, the thought of listening to her own feelings terrified her greatly. She had to learn to listen to herself through therapy, which went “small step by

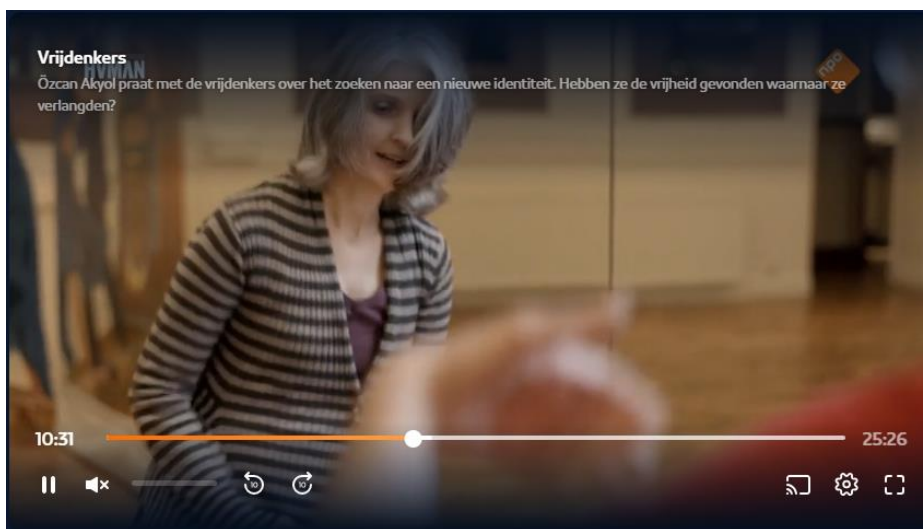


Figure 21:
Veerle is following body focused therapy. She is breathing and moving in a rhythm as directed by her coach. Score: *They Sink* by Ólafur Arnalds (De Breed 2021d).



Figure 22:
Rajiv is dancing alone in front of an empty hall. Score: *Kindred Spirits* by Floran Weber and Eric Vloeimans. (De Breed 2021d).

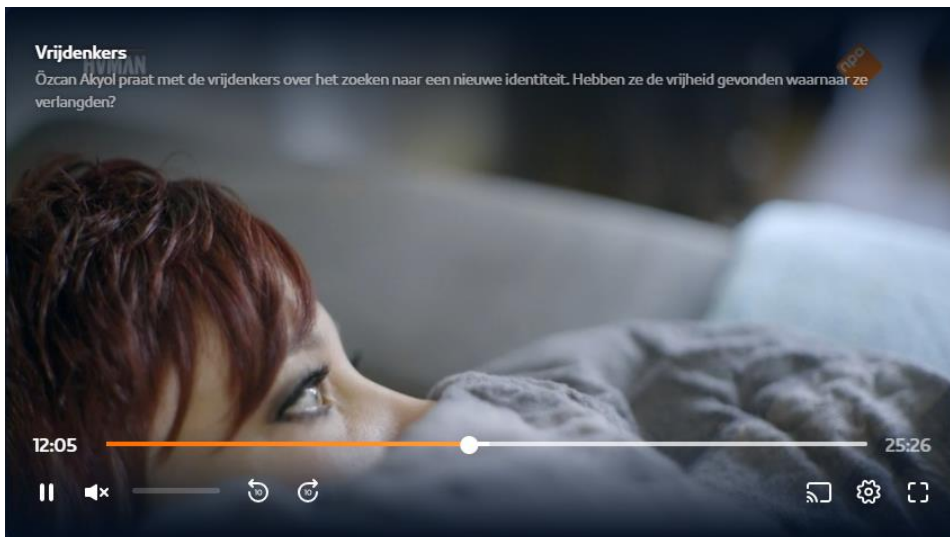


Figure 23:
Inge lies on a couch, almost completely covered by a blanket. She gazes absent-mindedly into the distance. Score: *They Sink* Ólafur Arnalds (De Breed 2021d).

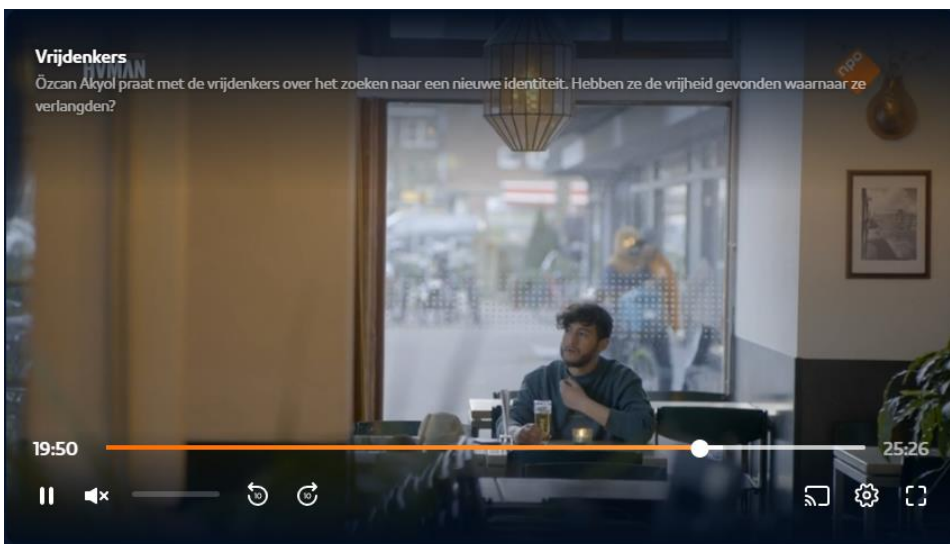


Figure 24:
Sofyan is sitting on his own in a bar, drinking beer. He looks absent-mindedly into the distance. Score: *All I Can't Say* by Ibrahim Maalouf (De Breed 2021d).

small step” (Figure 21). Leaving religion was not a victorious and jubilant liberation for Veerle, but a difficult and ailing process of learning to walk on her own. The images of Veerle following body focused therapy are underscored by music that is nor powerful nor warm, but sensitive and melancholic; *They Sink* by Ólafur Arnalds. These images are directly followed by images of a dancing Rajiv, he has followed his passion despite the religious path that was prescribed for him. The dancing scene portrays a solitary dancer in front of an empty room underscored by gentle and sensitive music; *Kindred spirits* by Floran Weber and Eric Vloeimans (Figure 22). Inge describes how she came to be bedridden for a while (Figure 23). The sensation of sudden freedom when she left her religious environment was not a liberative one, but went through her “like a wave of pain.” It was as if the stress that had been building up in her body was suddenly released. She felt chronically tired and chronic pain. The image of Inge lying under a blanket is underscored by the same music that underscored Veerle in therapy; *they sink*

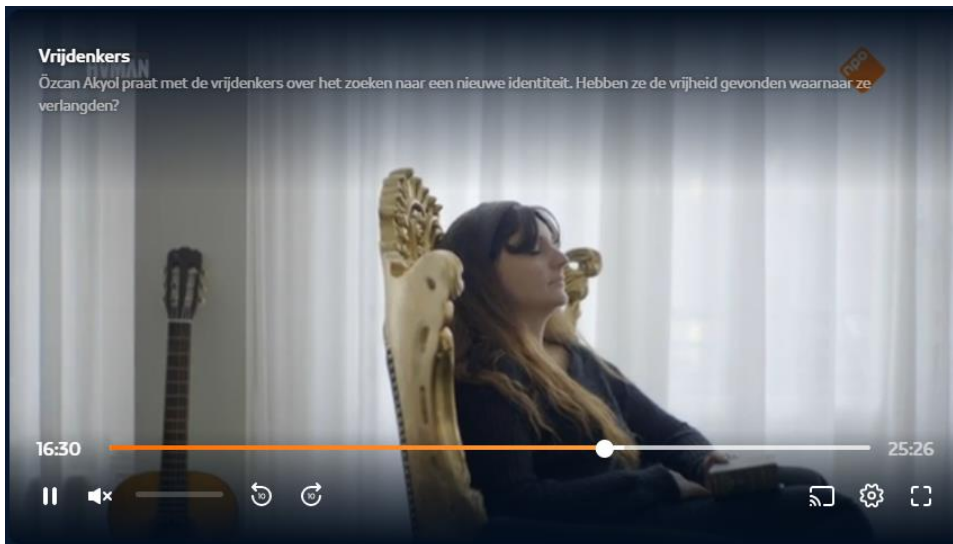


Figure 25:
Dina-Perla sits on a chair by herself. Her eyes are closed and notice how she is holding a Thora in her hands (De Breed 2021d).

by Ólafur Arnalds. Sofyan describes how the absence of religion gave him an existential crisis, he no longer knew the meaning of life and fled into all kinds of escapism. He started to drink and to lose himself in music (Figure 24). Eventually he had to go into therapy as well. Dina-Perla describes how she is unable to get children today because of her strict religious upbringing. As a teenager she wanted to get the pill, but her mother denied her any form of contraceptives. Dina-Perla suffers from endometriosis and is unable to get children, but if she would have been allowed to take the pill at a young age, this could perhaps have been prevented. The realisation that she will never have children was a shock for Dina-Perla, since she felt the grave responsibility to pass life on to the next generation as Jewish woman. Akyol asks her who she blames for her infertility. “Do you blame your mother? Or do you blame the super orthodox environment you grew up in?” Dina-Perla responds that she does not blame anyone. She is convinced that if she would rail at Jewish orthodoxy, just to rail at something, that it would totally miss any purpose. She does not rail against an oppressive system, but deals with negativity herself (Figure 25).

Although the participants do arrive at a certain freedom, leaving religion is not depicted as something victorious and jubilant. The freedom-phase is redefined into a phase of struggle, uncertain authenticity, and self-discovery. The road towards authenticity is a contested one, it comes with struggle and negative emotions, but it is an ideal that everyone wants to follow. All participants describe how they “finally” started to live according to their selves.

Inge: I began to live more and more as it suits *me*. I have become more and more Inge, who *I* truly am.

- Rajiv: That is the path to true self-actualisation. Do you continue to stand in the shadow of your parents? Or do you dare to step out of the shadow and stand in your *own* light? I think that it is very scary and that it can be very painful. I have experienced that myself. But at the same time, I think that it is absolutely the best decision I have ever made. It has brought me closer to *myself*, and that brings me happiness.
- Veerle: Who am *I*? I really had to learn that. What do *I* want? What do *I* wish for? Also in therapy, over and over again.
- Dina-Perla: Now it is time for *my* life, *my* choices etcetera [...] *I* decide.
- Oliver: I am definitely not detached from who *I* am, but the label is not preacher. The label is Oliver. I have my parish where *I* am.
- Sofyan: I allow myself to have *my own* ideas [...] to be able to be and become who *I* want to be.

The guiding principle in the stories of leaving religion by the participants is not the loss of belief, but the strive towards authenticity. The participants describe their journey of leaving religion as a move towards an authentic life. Although they were born in an environment that prescribes one's life to a great extent, the participants started to live according to their selves. This authentic life is in line with how Lindholm describes the ideal of the authentic individual. "I am authentic if I am true to my heritage and if my life is a direct and immediate expression of my essential being" (Lindholm 2013, 363). Interestingly, James Bielo describes a similar dynamic in de-conversion stories among U.S. emerging evangelicals, wherein the "spiritual autobiography" is understood through gaining authenticity, rather than through changing beliefs (Bielo 2012, 269). Upon closer look, only one participant, Sofyan, made an explicit movement from religion towards atheism/irreligion. The other five participants kept a form of spirituality and/or religiosity. The reshaping of their lives according to their own authentic beliefs did not mean that they had to leave religion altogether, but that they experienced changes in their religion/spirituality.²⁵ The series is not interested in the process of becoming secular, but in the

²⁵ Oliver describes how he has redefined 'God' into a more anonymous 'power' and that he is still a spiritual councillor. Rajiv describes how he finds the spiritual truths of the Hindu faith outside of Hinduism, but that he still believes in them. Dina-Perla describes how she is still related to the Jewish community, but only on her own terms. Inge and Veerle do not describe their current stance towards religion/spirituality.

process of becoming one's true authentic self. It is through this focus on individuality and authenticity, that the series can celebrate religion-leavers as freethinkers without criticising religion.

The emotional script of the final episode is driven by authenticity, by the sense of becoming true to oneself. This process of self-discovery is both similar to the iconic representation that is provided by Wolkers and 't Hart and fundamentally different. It is similar in its structure that describes a movement from religion towards an expression of the own individuality. It differs in the (emotional) framing of this process. Whereas Wolkers and 't Hart described leaving religion as a liberation and a violent break from a negative religious past, the participants describe it as a move towards their vulnerable selves. They struggle in their path of self-discovery and sometimes have to follow therapy. The negative emotions of anger and resentment have made way for negative emotions of insecurity and struggle. Instead of railing at a negative religious past, they focus on their own traumas and how they try to overcome them. Throughout the series, the ideal of authenticity is uncritically followed by the participants, no matter how painful or stressful that can be for those who leave religion.

3.4 Conclusion – *from revenge to vulnerability*

In this chapter, we have investigated the representation of leaving religion by *Vrijdenkers* and its emotional scripts. *Vrijdenkers*, and its depiction of leaving religion, has to be understood in the larger context of the celebration of 75 years of the DHA. The title of the series, and the frame through with leavers of religion are understood, Freethinker, was chosen by the DHA to celebrate its anniversary. We saw that DHA mainly highlighted two interpretations of what it means to be a freethinker: the authentic freethinker, embodied by 17th-century Dutch philosopher Benedict Spinoza, and the engaged activist, embodied by the 19th-century American intersectional abolitionist Sojourner Truth. Both these aspects are embodied in the series *Vrijdenkers*. The narratives of leaving religion inside the series are framed as narratives of authenticity and the series itself is part of a larger agenda that calls for an awareness surrounding freedom of thought and non-religion in the Netherlands. By embodying both aspects of freethinking, *Vrijdenkers* maintains a difficult balance between praising leaving religion, on the one hand, and staying away from religion critique, on the other. How this balance is maintained is made visible through the emotional scripts that are part of the series.

The emotional script of the first episode, *de weg*, has two sides, a positive and a negative one. In the first part of the episode, religion is rendered present as something that is positive and a warm place through the safe temporal distance of nostalgia. The second part of the episode

shifts towards the negative sides of growing up religious and presents it as a place of alienation and fear. The second episode, *twijfel*, has an emotional script that has a clear gender gap. Although both the men and women do describe the negative feelings that came with doubting the faith (crisis, struggle, anxiety), the series puts more focus on the negative feelings with the women. Whereas leaving religion is presented as a cognitive process with the men, the process of leaving religion is reinterpreted by the women as an emotional struggle. The emotional struggle that is described by the women is one of vulnerability and insecurity. The third episode, *coming-out*, elaborates further on the emotional script of vulnerability. The participants yearn for love and acknowledgment by their parents and their peers. The participants are uncertain and afraid. The participants feel lonely, wronged, and disacknowledged. The final episode, *vrijheid*, has an emotional script that is driven by and framed through the notion of authenticity. This process of self-discovery is both similar to the iconic representation that is provided by Wolkers and 't Hart and fundamentally different. It is similar in its structure that describes a movement from religion towards an expression of the own individuality. It differs in the emotional framing of this process. Whereas Wolkers and 't Hart described leaving religion as a liberation and a violent break from a negative religious past, the participants describe it as a move towards their vulnerable selves.

The representation of leaving religion by *Vrijdenkers*, and its emotional scripts, revolve around authenticity and self-discovery. It presents leaving religion as a vulnerable and challenging process. The participants struggle with insecurity, anxieties, and longing for acknowledgement and acceptance by their social environment. Despite the emotional difficulties of leaving religion, the participants do believe that being authentic is the way forward. Only through being authentic can they become truly happy. By focussing on self-discovery and authenticity, *Vrijdenkers* is able to praise leaving religion without depicting religion as a negative force that has to be revenged.

Chapter 4 | Space 3
Blogosphere on leaving religion



Figure 26: Banner (left) of the website *Dogmavrij.nl*. Translated (right) by GN. It clearly states the mission of the website: to point where it hurts, by giving attention to religious trauma, so that victims can be aided in their healing process and new victims of religious trauma can be prevented (Dogmavrij n.d.).

Next to the banner that states the mission and content of the website, *Dogmavrij.nl* provides a longer disclaimer that elaborates on its mission. Bosscha indicates that she “**points where it hurts**” on the website, but that “it is certainly not my intention to ridicule or disrespect the Christian faith here!” (Bosscha 2015e). Just as is the case with the series *Vrijdenkers*, the creator of the leaving religion representation feels the need to stress the fact that she does not intend to rail at Christianity. In my view, this is an attestation to the power of the iconic narrative by Wolkers and ‘t Hart who have created an expectation of bashing a negative religious past when it comes to representing leaving religion in the Dutch public context.

Dogmavrij.nl is a versatile blogging platform that represents the story of religious trauma and leaving religion in a variety of modes on a variety of pages. The story of leaving religion and of religious trauma is told through 1) general informative pages on Religious Trauma Syndrome with a more distant and psychological tone, through 2) a range of different personal blogs by Bosscha that differ in length and emotional intensity, and through 3) short personal blogs by guest bloggers that relate their own de-conversion stories. Almost every page comes with an 4) (emotional) image that guides the reader and with a 5) comment section that reflects how the community read the page. Even though the authors, the tone, the length, and the style of the pages differ, they all represent a similar story with a similar “emotional script”. I use the term “emotional script” to construct an emotional structure and evaluation that is (un)consciously presented inside a narrative and has an exemplary function for the audience to relate to. In this chapter, I inquire into the emotional scripts that *Dogmavrij.nl* provides by focussing on Bosscha’s blogs and use of images. In the next chapter, I investigate how this emotional script is taken up by the audience of *Dogmavrij.nl* in the guest blogs and the comment section (Chapter 5). Before we get into these two chapters that focus on the emotional scripts of *Dogmavrij.nl*, I start with a short sketch on the media-particularities of the “blogosphere” in order to understand the media-specific context wherein the emotional scripts are performed.

The website *Dogmavrij.nl* operates as the main Dutch blogosphere on *dealing with* leaving religion and religious trauma. There are other Dutch online platforms that treat de-conversion and the downsides of religion to some extent, but their tone is fundamentally different. These websites focus mainly on criticizing and bashing religion from an atheist standpoint. The stories of de-conversion are used as examples of how bad religion can be. *Dogmavrij.nl* however provides blogs and emotional scripts that focus on the daily reality of leaving religion and of dealing with religious trauma. The majority of the website is taken up by blogs of by Inge Bosscha.²⁶ Nevertheless, the character of the different posts by Bosscha varies, causing some posts to not fit well in the strict sense of blogging.

One aspect that stands out on *Dogmavrij.nl* is the testimonial character of the blogs, guest blogs, and comments. *Dogmavrij.nl* showcases a tendency to share personal stories and to open up about one’s own experiences. The guest blogs are the prime example (see the second part of this chapter). In her research on ex-Mormon online platforms, Rosemary Avance focusses on the online testimonies, or extimonies, that narrate the de-conversion process of ex-Mormons. These extimonies function as a means of performative identity construction. Avance

²⁶ Of the more than 250 posts, only 37 are posted by guest bloggers.

makes a direct link between the de-conversion testimonies of the online blogs and the former Christian testimonial environment. In Mormonism, conversion is directly linked with “the telling of one’s faith narrative, or bearing a testimony. Likewise, [...] former Mormons construct their new negotiated identities through the sharing of their own heterodox testimonies or deconversion narratives” (Avance 2013, 19). Testimonies have the power to perform and assert a new identity.²⁷ Testimonies not only perform a new identity, but may also provide tools for coping with one’s past. “It may function ‘to make sense’ of the transformation of the self” (Vliek 2019, 4). Testimonies give structure not only the self, but also to the emotionally charged and confusing experiences.

The blogosphere can function as a safe space, a “sanctuary” (Avance 2013, 16) for those who want to explore their new (ir)religious identities online, but who are not ready to deal with it in the offline world. The disembodied and anonymised character of the online world provides the reader/commenter room to safely “process the emotions of deconversion, giving them the social support that they lacked offline” (Starr, Waldo and Kauffman 2019, 505). *Dogmavrij.nl* functions as this safe space as well. It explicitly aims to create a safe atmosphere for the readers and the guest bloggers. Unwelcome comments are deleted, and the host actively intervenes if a discussion threatens to become divisive and nasty. Interestingly, most of the blogs are posted under the own name and Bosscha has specifically chosen to post under her own name as well. “People said, ‘How nice that you are posting this under your own name,’ I thought ‘Yes, of course! A Christian who says how much he likes the church is allowed to do so under his own name right? I’m just telling my own story and I’m not doing anything wrong’” (Hoogwout 2019).²⁸ Bosscha uses her own name, because why would not ex-Christians be allowed to talk about leaving the faith when Christian freely talk about the faith? This shows the duality of *Dogmavrij.nl*, on the one hand, it aims to be a safe space for those who talk about leaving religion, and on the other hand, it has an educative and public function. It wants to prove a point to the Dutch public, namely that religious trauma is real.

Many of the blogs by Bosscha read like a *public diary* for the audience to participate in. Bosscha shares episodes of her life that showcase the reality of religious trauma. The episode of following intensive trauma therapy especially stands out. Her blogs are long and very detailed and stretch over multiple weeks. In her research on mommy blogs, Deborah Whitehead, describes this process of sharing one’s personal narrative with a large audience as “intimate

²⁷ See also Roy Rappaport’s notion of “factive performances” (Rappaport 1999).

²⁸ Note how she mirrors her own blogs with Christian testimonial culture (Avance 2013).

universality” (2015a, 121). This intimate universality facilitates a sense of virtual community, that hinges on the credibility of the author. Whitehead focusses on the importance of a sense of authenticity, “the more ‘real,’ meaning imperfect, an author and her blog seem, the better” (Ibid., 129). Bosscha and the guest bloggers deploy strategies of authentication as well, balancing on the line “between sharing and oversharing, between revelation and exploitation” (Ibid., 135). It is, however, in the (emotional) interaction with the readers who respond with their own stories that the blogs acquire final meaning.

Unexpressed, the complex feelings that are so much a part of the grieving process swirl and tangle together inside; written down and published, they begin to acquire shape and form; responded to by readers who leave comments on the post or send emails, they acquire meaning, in part because they make sense to and have meaning for others (Whitehead 2015b, 46).

The blogs acquire meaning because they make sense to others. The comments on the blogs of *Dogmavrij.nl* function as a site where meaning is acquired. Inside the comment section emotions are shared and the meaning of them is processed.

Interestingly, one of the few recent psycho-therapeutic studies on religious trauma (Stone 2013) proposes a treatment of religious trauma that has dynamics that are similar to the blogosphere. Alyson Stone a form of group therapy that functions as a safe space for the members to express themselves. They can share their emotions which acquire meaning through the comments of the other members. Stone calls it an “unique interpersonal environment” wherein the “entire range of human experience is normalized and accepted, [which] facilitates healing from religious trauma and spiritual harm” (Idem, 329). Through repeatedly sharing the story of religious trauma and leaving religion, *Dogmavrij.nl* normalises the narrative, and the emotional scripts, that it wants to share.

Dogmavrij.nl contains blogs and comments that narrate the personal life stories of those who deal with leaving religion and religious trauma. These blogs function as performative testimonies that perform the new identity as religion leaver. The testimonies are related to the Christian culture of testimonies of the faith, they not only structure the self, but also structure emotionally charged experiences. Another function of the website is that it aims to be a safe space, unwelcome comments are deleted and the host actively intervenes in discussions. The personal blogs have a sense of “intimate universality”, deploying tactics of authentication, balancing on the line between sharing too little and sharing too much. Interestingly, only several blogs are posted anonymously, the majority of the bloggers use their own name. *Dogmavrij.nl*

is a blogosphere that partially fits previous research into religious blogs. On the one hand, it functions as a safe space for those who interested in religious trauma and leaving religion, the comment section and the guest blogs demonstrate that. On the other hand, the website has a clear agenda. The website's main function is to normalise the narrative of religious trauma and leaving religion. (Which also explains the lengthy informative pages on the particularities of Religious Trauma Syndrome that do not fit the blog-structure.) The propagation of the actuality of religious trauma is achieved through personal testimonies and the public diary by Bosscha. In this chapter, I investigate how Bosscha's narrative and the emotional scripts that she provides. How does she represent leaving religion? And which emotions are tied to it?

4.1 "I am an apostate"

In June 2015, Inge Bosscha decided to share her story of leaving religion via an online blog: www.ikbeneenafvallige.wix.com/ik-beneenafvallige [iamanapostate.wix.com/iamanapostate]. In this blog Bosscha tells the story of her deconversion and her life with religious trauma. It is the story of how she was raised in the Vrijgemaakt Gereformeerde Kerk²⁹ and how she eventually de-converted. It all began with a severe personal and emotional crisis. At the early age of 20, Bosscha got married in a toxic marriage with a fellow church member. Her husband physically abused her, and when Bosscha got pregnant in the following year, she realised that this was not a safe environment for her baby to grow up in. She wanted to divorce. Three months into the pregnancy, she fled to a women's shelter where she would eventually have her baby. Her family and her church were against the divorce, since it was not allowed according to their faith. They pushed and pleaded Bosscha to go back to her husband. Nevertheless, despite the bidding of her family and the elders of her church, she decided to listen to her own voice. A voice that went against all she knew, even against God. She felt abandoned and feared eternal loss and death. Now, years later, she no longer believes, and hasn't been a member of the church for a long time. Her intense crisis, however, and the religious indoctrination of her childhood, were traumatic for her. It was so traumatic that Bosscha has been fully incapacitated at home for the most part of her life after the divorce and de-conversion.

Bosscha makes sense of her situation through the term "Religious Trauma Syndrome" (RTS), coined by Marlene Winell in her book *Leaving the Fold*, published in 1993. Several chapters of *Leaving the Fold* and other general information on RTS can be found on the website

²⁹ The Dutch Liberated Reformed Church, see p. 46, n. 18.

<https://www.journeyfree.org/> that is founded by Winell. It also contains blogs and testimonials of deconversion and RTS.

Religious Trauma Syndrome is the condition experienced by people who are struggling with leaving an authoritarian, dogmatic religion and coping with the damage of indoctrination. They may be going through the shattering of a personally meaningful faith and/or breaking away and deconstructing from a controlling community and lifestyle. RTS is a function of both the chronic abuses of harmful religion and the impact of severing one's connection with one's faith (Winell 2011).

RTS however, has received little to no attention in academic psychology. There are “virtually no references to religious trauma” (Stone 2013, 323). Scholarly investigations into the possible traumatising effects of religious practices and teaching remains very scant. “The scholarship is sparse” (Downie 2022). Interestingly, when attention is given to RTS, or religious trauma in general, it is not uncommon to find that the author(s) experienced deconversion and religious trauma themselves as well. Winell for example was a child of Christian missionaries and left religion herself. “Over the years I have dealt with all the issues addressed in this book” (Winell 2007, chap. 2). And take for instance Mari Ramler, who investigates the rhetoric of religious trauma and uses their own life to write about it. “My testimony of religious trauma began, nearly a decade ago, when I reached out for professional help” (Ramler 2023, 202). The author of this thesis has experienced de-conversion as well, and I recognise pieces of Bosscha's story about struggling with losing faith and finding a new path in life.

After posting her “I am an apostate” story online, Bosscha immediately received a lot of “personal, often emotional reactions of people who recognized themselves in her story” (Idema 2015a). Within a few months she got interviewed by the online platform *NieuwWij* and by the Dutch daily paper *Trouw*, with both interviews containing a link to her website. As a result, Bosscha received hundreds of emails from people responding to her story. “The reaction that I get the most, is that people find it brave and uniting and that they deeply recognise themselves in the feelings that I put to words, which are often still taboo” (Idema 2015b). People not only indicated that they recognised themselves in Bosscha's story, they often also started to tell their own story of de-conversion and of dealing with a religious past. The audience of the website kept growing and within a year Bosscha received over a thousand different reactions. To her surprise, there were many more people who have had similar experiences like her, yet they often feel lonely, just as she did. They don't have a place to talk about it and were anxious

to share their story, so they confided in Bosscha. “I realised that there are a lot of people who don’t have a place and who can’t speak about this. They never talk about it with anyone else” (Dogmavrij 2020). She felt that “there has to be a place, there has to be a place for these people” (Ibid.).

In July 2015 Bosscha started with an online “I am an apostate” private support group on Facebook. It is now called the “DogmaVRIJplaats” [DogmaFREEplace]. “A safe place for doubters, church-leavers, faith-changers and faith-releasers” (Bosscha 2021b). It is a virtual place for everyone who wants to share, read, and comment on stories of leaving religion, so that they can support each other and know that they are not alone.³⁰ She also started a new blog website, in September 2015, that replaced the original “I am an apostate” website: www.dogmavrij.nl [dogmafree.nl]. In contrast to the support group, this website is open and public and serves as a public representation of leaving religion and dealing with religious trauma. Four years later, in 2019, she started another website that focusses specifically on the Religious Trauma Syndrome: www.religieustraumasyndroom.com. It contains information on RTS and translated parts of Winell’s book on RTS. These parts are carefully translated by Peter van Montfoort, a Dutch atheist who does not suffer from RTS himself, but deems it important to share the downsides of religion from his atheist standpoint.³¹

In the previous chapter we have already encountered Bosscha and her story in another media form: the interview series of HUMAN, *Vrijdenkers* [Freethinkers]. Bosscha was one of the six participants and her story is encountered through the neat (emotional) structuring of the TV series. The series had a clearcut process-driven structure that focussed on the process of de-conversion. The story of Bosscha was not only structured through the careful preparations and the questions of the host, Özkan Akyol, but also through the cutting up and neat rearranging of the story through the editing of the director. Bosscha’s story came to fit the four-phase structure of HUMAN, together with the specific emotional script of nostalgia, struggle, vulnerability and the positive ideal of authenticity (see Chapter 3). The narrative that was told in *Vrijdenkers* differs from the narrative on *Dogmavrij.nl*. The latter provides not only much more, but also different information. One of the most salient points of difference between the emotional script of *Vrijdenkers* and of *Dogmavrij.nl* is that Bosscha does not (get to) mention the term ‘Religious

³⁰ I have asked if I could investigate this group, but after some consideration I was not allowed.

³¹ (The main audience of *Dogmavrij.nl* consists of people who have experienced de-conversion and religious trauma themselves and of people who do not have RTS, but are staunch atheists with a very negative view on religion/Christianity.)

Trauma Syndrome' in the series. The closest she came to the term so intricately related to her sense of self-understanding and to her websites, is in the final episode of *Vrijdenkers*:

Bosscha: As my faith continued to crumble, I kept getting sicker. The pain in my body kept increasing. I was chronically weary, chronically in pain. I ended up lying in bed and couldn't take another step. Those unconscious fears were [already] present, but in my system, in my body. That's **my explanation**. When the fears were gone and I finally realised my 'freedom', as you just mentioned, it did not come as a relief, but mostly as a wave of pain coursing through me. I retroactively felt the stress. It's a **bit** like the soldiers returning from the front that develop PTSD when they are safe at home. Only then they get the nightmares and the stress. I reckon it was **like** that with me as well. Such stress!

Akyol: Listening to it **like that**, it **almost** makes me think: 'it is traumatic.'

Bosscha: Yes. I **believe so myself** (De Breed 2021d, emphasis added).

Bosscha all keeps it to herself, never gets to mention RTS, and downplays religious trauma on every point. Akyol *almost* starts to think that leaving religious could be traumatic when Bosscha *puts it like that*. Clearly the makers wanted to stay away from the whole 'religion can be traumatic' story and a long-time impeding force after choosing your own path. When I watched the series, I was under the impression that Bosscha had been in bed for only a few weeks, or at most several months. On *Dogmavrij.nl*, however, we find out that this is certainly not the case. On *Dogmavrij.nl*, we encounter Bosscha's story on different terms. We encounter her story on the terms of her own blogosphere. Bosscha shares her story on *Dogmavrij.nl* through different modes and media. I have categorised her expressions in four categories, which I treat in the remainder of this chapter:

- 1) Bosscha's narrative of de-conversion. She has made a specific page for sharing her de-conversion story. Surprisingly, this story does not refer to religious trauma and neglects the emotional dimension.
- 2) Bosscha's personal blogs. These personal blogs are a mixture of personal and general reflections on religious trauma and how to deal with it. Religious trauma and emotions are treated extensively through the eyes of Bosscha.
- 3) A string of blogs that are very personal and relate Bosscha's experiences with trauma therapy. These blogs focus solely on the experiences and emotions of Bosscha.
- 4) Emotional images that Bosscha has added to virtually every page on *Dogmavrij.nl*. These images colour not only Bosscha's blogs, but also the guest blogs.

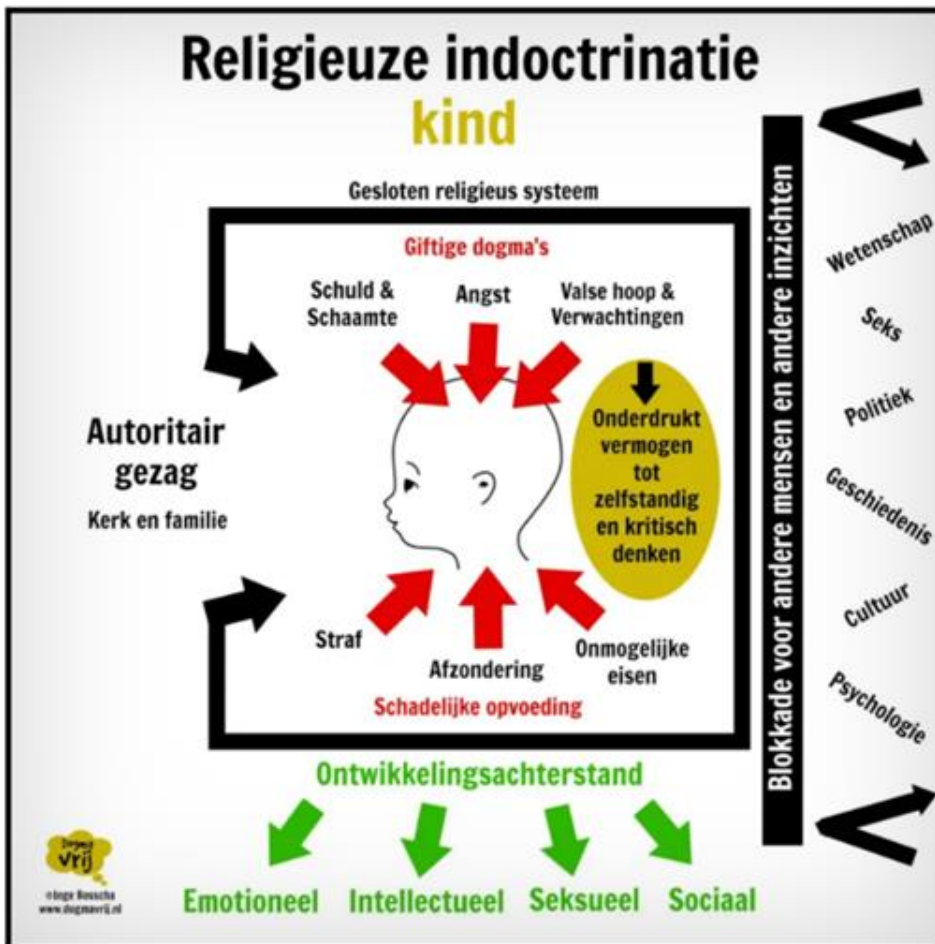
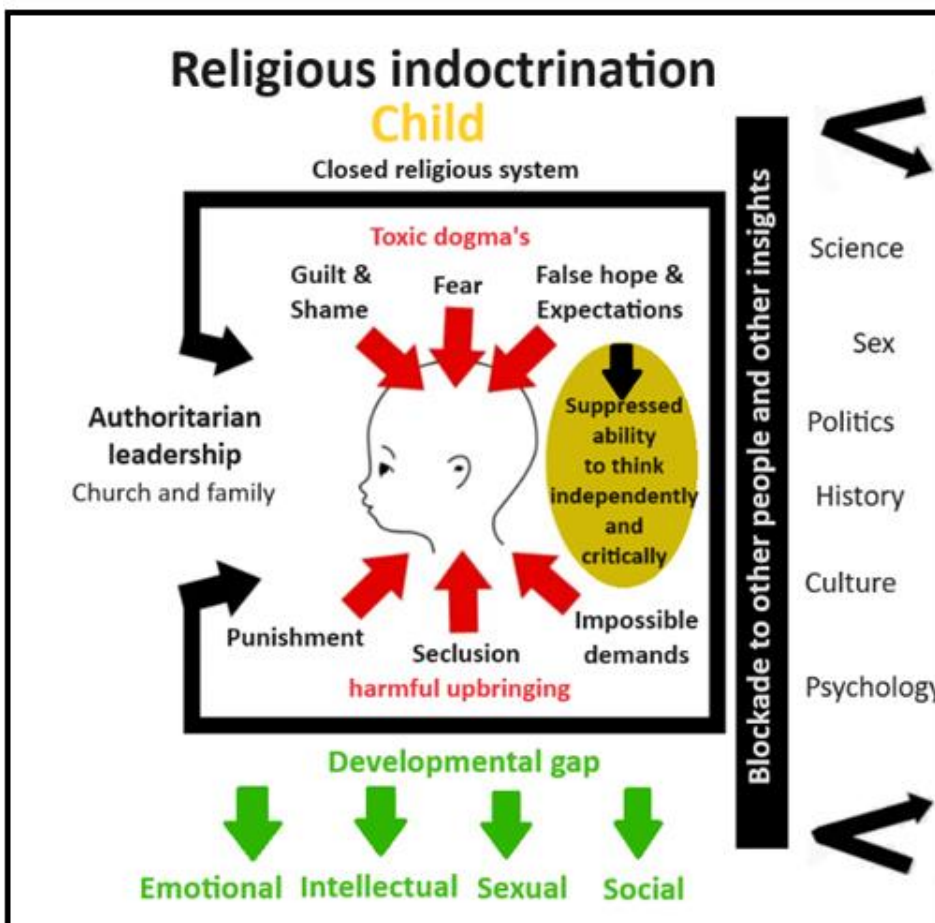


Figure 27:
The religious indoctrination of a child that grows up inside an orthodox religion.

Notice how Bosscha focusses on ‘the child’, which is in line with the therapeutic narrative (Illouz 2008) that focusses on childhood trauma and blocked self-realisation.

(Above: Bosscha 2015f, below: translation by GN).



4.2 Bosscha's de-conversion narrative – *devoid of emotion*

Bosscha starts with a disclaimer, “my faith was real”. She *really* did believe, but through a long process of de-conversion, she eventually came to realise that she does “not know anything.” She became free of dogma. Her de-conversion started when she was 21, pregnant and wanted to divorce. “Up to that point I had been a good reformed girl that neatly followed her parents suit” (Bosscha 2016c). Bosscha wanted to divorce, but the church and her family were against it, since divorcing is prohibited by the 7th commandment, ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery’. “They placed their dogmatic rightness over my severe and personal reason for wanting a divorce” (Ibid.). It was in this period of conflict and personal crisis, that Bosscha started to take the church less seriously. She started to picture the churchgoers as ants, the elders and the pastors as beetles, and God as a horse. “And then the beetles would explain to the ants ‘how the horse in the meadow’ was thinking.” This felt very wrong to her. How could the beetles know more about the horses’ thoughts than the ants? The beetles were only trained “by others ‘beetles’ or ‘top-beetles’ and not by ‘the horse’ itself” (Ibid.). Bosscha decided that she could no longer find (ultimate) authority at the pastors and elders, this could only be found in God and in God’s word, the Bible. But then she started to question the authority of the Bible as well. “Who for that matter had actually decided what was going to be included in this book?” (Bosscha 2015c). The Bible started to lose its authority, the last stronghold of knowing God became God himself. Bosscha looked at all kinds of places, Christian and non-Christian, to find out who God “really was” and entered the realm of the mystical and the spiritual. She decided that God could not be found through the right faith, but through experiences. “For me, it was no longer about a particular doctrine, but much more about experiences in the here and now” (Ibid.). With only her personal experiences left, she felt a great freedom. Still, she started to wonder: to what extent could she trust her own experiences? Bosscha started to experiment with her imagination. Would it be possible to change her experiences of the divine if she imagined the presence of the divine in random situations? To her surprise, she found out that she could. She altered her experiences of the divine on a fundamental level by sheer imagination. “*So I did it all by myself!*” (Ibid.). At the end of the story she simply had no idea anymore:

Things are what they are, regardless of whether I can perceive them or not and regardless of whether I put a label on them or not. I do not know anything. I just have all kinds of experiences and I marvel. *And actually, I think that’s enough* (Bosscha 2015b, emphasis original).

Bosscha's de-conversion story is a story about changing convictions. It is a mental story that relates the gradual steps from belief to disbelief in an orderly structure. First the church went, then the bible, and eventually any image or experience of God. At last, Bosscha simply does 'not know anything'. The course and the structure of the story have a philosophical nature. The de-conversion is framed through a philosophical framework, just like the Platonic dialogues wherein Socrates carefully deconstructs false beliefs step by step only to end up in a state of aporia, an impasse of not knowing.

Bosscha's narrative of her way to becoming dogma-free is devoid of emotions. In her de-conversion story, the emotional dimension is ruled out and there is no mention of trauma. This seems paradoxical, since *Dogmavrij.nl* is first and foremost a website about trauma, about emotions and about therapy to deal with these traumas and emotions. Bosscha's decoupling of her emotional experiences of religious trauma from the rational progress of de-conversion shows that even though the cognitive de-conversion can be completed, the emotional aftermath is not. Leaving religion has a rich emotional afterlife. Her cognitive portrayal of her own de-conversion makes up for only a very small portion of her website, the remainder of the website focusses on emotions and trauma.³²

4.3 Personal blogs by Bosscha – *accepting and acknowledging suppressed emotions*

Bosscha's personal blogs contain a mixture of personal reflection and general reflections, wherein she always connects her personal experiences with Religious Trauma Syndrome. Interestingly, Bosscha often posts her blogs around special dates. *Dogmavrij.nl* follows a specific calendar that follows religious holidays, on the one hand, and special moments around suppression and abuse, on the other: Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, Valentines day, Bosscha's birthday, Women's day, and The Week against Child Abuse. Even though the blogs differ from each other, in focus and length, they form a singular story together. It is the story of the road from toxic religious repression of the self towards a difficult acknowledgement of the self through psychotherapy, despite the disregard by others. All of Bosscha's blogs are related to the dynamics of suppression and enhancing of the self and the emotions that come with it. It is a narrative about suppressed emotions, resilient emotions, and releasing of emotions. I have categorised the narrative into five stages that follow each other in a more or less chronological

³² About 1.2 % of her website (3/±260) reflects the cognitive approach to leaving religion as a process from belief to disbelief without emotion, the other 98.8% of her website focusses on emotions and trauma.

order which I display in the following sections. At the end of the five stages, I treat the emotional scripts presented in Bosscha's narrative.

Suppression of the self. Bosscha grew up inside an orthodox religious environment, wherein she learned not to listen to her own self but to first listen to others: to the church, to God, and to the family. People were taught to do and think as they were told. They were thought *what* to think, but not *how* to think (Bosscha 2015g; 2016e; 2016h; 2020f). Inside Bosscha's religious background, femininity was repressed. Vulnerable personal feelings and emotions, were subdued by masculine rationality (Bosscha 2016h; 2020c; 2022i). As a result, Bosscha had no good sense of self and a terrible sense of boundaries. Not only her boundaries were absent, but her personal feelings as well, they were hidden so well that she couldn't reach them (Bosscha 2015d; 2015h; 2016e; 2016h). Bosscha links the orthodox religious environment with narcissism. A narcissist is self-centred, looks down upon others, and is nonsensitive to thoughts and feelings of others. She states that this kind of ultimate and suppressive authority is also present in orthodox religion (Bosscha 2021b). The orthodox religions are always sure that they are right, according to Bosscha. They feature an 'us-versus-them' mentality, wherein the 'us' is right, and the 'them' is wrong. Those outside of religion are denied and disregarded (Bosscha 2016j; 2016g; 2020i). Not only the 'others' are denied and disregarded in their validity, but the members of the orthodox religion are taught that they are inherently bad as well. They learn that they always have themselves to blame, that they are always guilty and in need of salvation. Bosscha deems these messages of denial of personal value as degrading. They instil overwhelming fear, lead to the suppression of personal and authentic feelings and can have severe psychological damage (Bosscha 2015h; 2016m; 2016r; 2017d; 2019b; 2021a; 2021c; 2021g).

In one of her personal blogs, Bosscha describes a scene that captures the dangerous sense of self-suppression inside a toxic orthodox religion quite well. She describes a moment of when she lived in the women's shelter and wanted to divorce her abusive husband. One of the elders of the church visited her to inquire about the abusive nature of her marriage. The sole justified exception for getting a divorce was (severe) physical abuse.

On my tightly made bed, in my little room in the women's shelter, I held my trembling knees together as stiffly as I could, my eyes fixed on my pregnant belly. He sat wide-legged on the only chair in the little room, leaning back comfortably with his hands behind his head. It was all already clear to him. He interrupted me with a scornful laugh and the words, "Ah, those are just arguments with a rough hand!" All sorts of thoughts raced through me, but I said nothing. I felt

anger because he was already brushing my story aside when I had only just started. I felt despair, because there was so much more to tell and I knew I didn't dare to. Not to him. I wanted him to go away, but all I did was make sure he couldn't hear and see how fast my breathing was and how I almost cried. All that I had learned was to keep quiet, take up as little space as possible and be submissive. I did not know my boundaries and was not in my power. I was totally unbalanced because I did not yet have permission to be who I am (Bosscha 2016h).

The first stage of Bosscha's story describes the religious suppression of not only the self, but also of the emotions of the self. The young woman sitting on the bed, withholding her tears, unable to express her abusive relationship because of the masculine and self-righteous elder next to her captures this sense perfectly.

Acknowledgement/room for the self through therapy. Bosscha warns that it is very unhealthy to repress the (emotions of) the self. She calls for breaking the toxic circle by feeling the things that weren't allowed (Bosscha 2015h; 2016i). Bosscha emphasises the importance of taking (emotions of) the self seriously, one has to acknowledge and accept their own feelings (Bosscha 2020a; 2021a; 2021c; 2021e; 2021h; 2022j). All emotions have to be allowed free reign: sorrow, sadness, and fear, but the emotion that Bosscha gives the most attention to is *anger*. Bosscha writes repeatedly that one has to learn to get in touch with one's own anger even though it can be very tough to do so, since being angry means to take in a lot of room for the self and the negative feelings (Bosscha 2016d; 2016s; 2017g). Professional psychotherapy is often needed to confront the own feelings and to fix the broken, neglected self. Bosscha learned through therapy her own boundaries, her own feelings, and to take her own self seriously, she found her personal voice (Bosscha 2016e; 2020f; 2021g). The second stage moves from the unhealthy suppression of personal feelings to the necessary acknowledgement of these feelings. This can be very difficult and painful to do, oftentimes professional therapy is needed. It is through therapy that the self is finally taken seriously and the own voice is found.

Connection and acknowledgement. Bosscha describes the loneliness that she experienced when she left religion. And if there is one thing that she yearns for, it is to be in connection and to be acknowledged. One of Bosscha's aim with her website is to enable and to enhance the connection between religion leavers and stayers (Bosscha 2015a). Not only does she proclaim a uniting stance, she also describes how the connection can be established. For the connection to exist, two things have to be met: one mustn't place one's own right over the other, and one must acknowledge oneself and the other just for who they are. No judgement, only acknowledgement (Bosscha 2016b; 2016g; 2016j; 2017b; 2017e; 2017h; 2018a; 2018c; 2019b;

2020g). The third stage mirrors the second stage with its ideal of connection and acknowledgement. Whereas in the second stage the connection and acknowledgement is limited to the relationship with the self, in the third stage this is extended to the surroundings. Bosscha aims to stay in touch with the religion stayer.

Listen to no one, but to yourself, just be you! According to Bosscha, it can be very emotional to find out that one's self has been disregarded and not acknowledged in their religious youth. People always seek acknowledgement and acceptance. To realise that this has been absent, and still often is, can release all kinds of feelings: sorrow, anger, sadness, and mostly pain (Bosscha 2015f; 2021h). After one has left one's religion, the relationship with the social context can get very tense and one is often still not acknowledged and not accepted (Bosscha 2017c). Bosscha stresses that it is important that one does not seek validation with others, but sticks to oneself and knows that one is allowed to be just who one is. To only listen and live accordingly to one's self. To let no one else dictate what is right or wrong. One does not have to be perfect, or the best, one just have to be honest and at home with one self (Bosscha 2017d; 2017e; 2017g; 2020b; 2020d; 2020e; 2020f; 2020h; 2020j; 2020k; 2021f; 2021h; 2023a). The fourth stage is a critical note to the utopic connection with an acknowledgment of others in the third stage. One has to always keep oneself as the first priority. If the connection cannot be established, Bosscha reminds the reader, what really matters in the end is the acceptance of the self.

Accepting and acknowledging uncertainty. At first Bosscha knew exactly who God was, he was omnipresent and she feared him. She had a very clear image of him but now she simply does not know anything about God (Bosscha 2016d; 2016t). When she started to question her faith, she did not want this to happen. She felt fear, uncertainty and guilt. For years she has been struggling with the emptiness and the uncertainty, she looked everywhere to find God, everywhere for new certainties. Until she realised that the vulnerability of not knowing and of no answer gave her freedom. She found 'God' beyond God, in the flow of life. The necessity for certainty is gone (Bosscha 2016g; 2017e; 2017f; 2018b; 2018d). The fifth stage sheds new light on Bosscha's de-conversion story. She experienced negative emotions when she had to let go of God, she struggled with the emptiness at first. In the end, however, she has found freedom in letting go of any certainties. Just as the acknowledgement and acceptance of feelings of the self, she has learned to accept the absence of God.

The emotional script is one of acknowledgement and connection, both with the (emotions) of the self and with others. The narrative starts with the unhealthy suppression of the self and its feelings. At the start, the self is not acknowledged, and the connection is lost.

The self is made absent in the religious “emotional regime” (Woodhead and Riis 2010) in which Bosscha was raised. In the religious regime, the emotions that do relate to the self, comprise mostly of shame, guilt, and fear. The remainder of Bosscha’s narrative describes a move away from the toxic religious self-suppression. The way forward is one of acknowledgment and connection. This can prove to be very difficult and painful, therapy is needed and emotions of anxiety, anger, and sadness come to the fore. Even though these emotions are negative, they all have to be acknowledged and released, so that one can move on. Once the own voice is found, acknowledged, and accepted, space becomes available for accepting and acknowledging others, even for the non-accepting background. This is the ultimate end-stage of leaving religion according to Bosscha, for everyone to acknowledge who they are, and to acknowledge each other for who they are, both religion leavers and religion stayers.

Bosscha’s personal blogs are perfectly in line with the modern ideal of authenticity (Lindholm 2008) and the therapeutic narrative of self-actualisation (Illouz 2008). Charles Lindholm describes the modern ideal of authenticity as a “communion with the unique inner self resistant to all social pressure” (Lindholm 2008, 10). Lindholm argues that French philosopher Jan-Jacques Rousseau invented this ideal as he conceptualised modern westerners as alienated through civilisation which have to move beyond their alienated state by getting in touch with their innocent and pure self. In a similar vein, Song Seu Kim, argues that according to the modern narrative of authenticity, “to not listen to one’s inner voice or find one’s true self is imagined as morally wrong” (Kim 2017, 128). The “inner self” has to be found and followed. The blogs by Bosscha revolve around this ideal of authenticity and the ideal of finding the true self. Her blogs can be read as an emotional elaboration of the inauthenticity-authenticity framework. Whereas religion is presented as alienating and inauthentic, leaving religion is presented as movement towards a life of authenticity and communion with the true self. The ability to feel one’s true emotions is presented as the embodiment and mediation of finding one’s true self. The ideal of mutual acknowledgement of everyone “for who they are” endorses the authenticity narrative as well. Bosscha’s story connects the ideal of authenticity with a therapeutic narrative. It is through therapy that she aims to reach the ideal of authenticity. In her monograph *Saving the Modern Soul* (2008) Eva Illouz describes the therapeutic narrative that has come to pervade the modern idea of self-hood. This therapeutic narrative equates self-realisation and actualisation with the idea of health and Illouz is critical of this narrative, because by “the effect of putting self-realization at the very centre of models of selfhood was to make most lives become ‘un-self-realized’” (Illouz 2008, 161). The goal of self-actualisation is never actually given clear positive content, “it in fact produces a wide variety of un-self-

realized and therefore sick people” (Ibid., 176). The critique by Illouz on the therapeutic ideal of self-realisation is in line with the critique by critical scholarship on the ideal of authenticity. Just like full self-realisation, authenticity is never fully acquired. Authenticity is an ideal, a “myth”, that drives people forward even when they are aware of its mythical character (O’Neill, Houtman and Aupers 2014, 598).

The emotional script of Bosscha’s blogs, to fully accept one’s self and to be in communion with one’s own emotions is a normative ideal that is in line with the authenticity-therapeutic narrative. On *Dogmavrij.nl*, Bosscha strives and longs for the acceptance and acknowledgment of herself, her own emotions, and of others and their emotions.

4.4 Bosscha’s diary on trauma therapy – *healing fear*

The difficulty of getting connected to the uninhibited self becomes clear in a string of blogs that Bosscha wrote on her experiences with trauma therapy. These blogs differ in the tone and style of the other blogs by Bosscha, they focus solely on Bosscha’s experiences. Bosscha takes the readers with her into her personal life, as if they get to read the pages of her diary. The realist and personal tone and style of the pages suggest a sense of “intimate universality” and of true authenticity (Whitehead 2015a, 121).

In the fall of 2016 Bosscha followed an “innovative INTENSIVE8 PTSD-treatment programme by Psytrek in Bilthoven” (Bosscha 2016p). Bosscha wrote about her plans, the treatment, and its effect in the weeks leading up to and afterwards the treatment. The programme took place from September 25 to October 6 and Bosscha first heard about it in July 2016 through her ‘anxiety dentist’. Bosscha writes about how it is to life with RTS and how she got to learn about this programme.

And although I no longer fear God or the devil, the ever-present, insistent feeling that someone is watching me and judging my thoughts, words and behaviour has caused me to develop a high sense of self-consciousness and I still feel as if I am being watched and judged. Added to this, there is the feeling of constant threat. No, I no longer fear the devil, but I still startle very quickly and shoot into my fear-response as a first reaction. [...] I went to the anxiety dentist. For the first time. I have had some unpleasant experiences with several ‘regular’ dentists, all of which came down to the fact that I felt like I was not taken seriously. And that triggered too much old pain. The stubborn ‘rule’, deeply embedded in my blueprint, that my feelings and thoughts would not matter, always plays tricks on me when I am—literally—gagged at the dentist. [...] Maybe it is not professional for a dentist to tell something about herself, but I admire her courage. She was humane, alongside me. Since she recognised so much from my story, she

briefly told me something about herself and especially about a therapy she had attended for the past year that had helped her get rid of her fears. Two intensive weeks internally and then she was done. Just two weeks?! (Bosscha 2016l).

Bosscha decided to register for the treatment, and she got accepted. Just days before the start of the treatment Bosscha writes about her expectations and fears.

And what will I do myself when the slurry pit lies open and I take a plunge into it every day?
What am I going to (re)experience and feel?
And what if it doesn't work? If it's just not my therapy?
I fear for disappointment, but I also fear success. Because what if it helps me so much that I can begin reshaping my life completely differently? That prospect is both appealing and terrifying (Bosscha 2016n).

Right before she takes the train towards the treatment in Bilthoven she shares a poem that she wrote, it is a rewriting of Psalm 122.

I was delighted when I decided:	I pray peace to my soul
Let me go to the home of my own self.	Peace flows in my fortresses.
My feet are standing	To be good to others
at the gates of my heart.	I take care of myself first.
I behold how everything comes together	For my being, my being,
in a perfect way.	I will continue to seek the good
Thoughts, feelings, needs and dreams	(Bosscha 2016o).
have their seats here.	

After her treatment, Bosscha posts three blogs on how it went. After only three days she already posts her first blog. “I benefited tremendously from the therapy!” (Bosscha 2016p). The next one follows four days later, and the last one is posted six days after that one. In the first blog, Bosscha shares some “general information” on the treatment. What did she do? What was the schedule? Where did she sleep? What did she eat? Et cetera. The treatment consisted of physical exercise, imaginary exposure, EMDR, and psycho-education. Bosscha followed trauma therapy to deal with two major core anxieties that kept recurring and had a “direct link to religious anxiety.” The fear of ‘becoming lost’ forever and the fear for dominant men. “Men that are ‘right’ and have the power to punish, inflict pain and exclude” (Bosscha 2016q). In the second

and the third blog she vividly paints the traumatic events that are linked to her anxieties. She has to visit them over and over again. She shares the negative emotions that she feels during these exposure and EMDR-sessions and takes the reader with her into her intimate road of overcome those fears, of letting go and learning to trust herself.

“What do you fear?”

“That I am going to hell. I know that I am never going back to my husband and I am panicking because I am very consciously saying ‘no’ to God. But I’m pregnant! I want to protect my baby! I am afraid that I will make a horrible mistake and drag my baby with me in my fall. That because of me, my baby too will burn eternally in hell.”

I feel the fear very intensely. It squeezes my throat and breathing becomes more difficult. I go through this feeling a few times as I keep recounting it over and over again. I find it a heavy session, but I feel how the anxiety slowly but surely subsides. It gives me a strong almost triumphant feeling. *As if I am stronger than my fear* (Bosscha 2016q).

In these blogs on the trauma treatment, the reader is taken by Bosscha into the reality of religious trauma and into the therapy that Bosscha follows. The blogs have an intimate and realistic tone, Bosscha describes her life with trauma and the therapy with vivid colours. The blogs are so realistic and personal than one could wonder why Bosscha decided to share these intimate episodes. Multiple answers can be given, for instance how through sharing these episodes Bosscha performs her identity as someone who struggles with religious trauma and that her intense emotional experiences acquire structure and meaning, but it is my contention that Bosscha first and foremost provides a normalising narrative. By sharing her story of religious trauma and trauma treatment, Bosscha authenticates her claim that religious trauma is real and that it needs much more attention. The realistic and authentic scenes enhance the sincerity of her condition for the sceptic on the one hand, and it gives the readers who feel that they struggle with religious trauma as well a narrative that they can identify with.

The emotional script of this personal episode revolves around resolving the inhibiting emotion of fear. Through her traumatic religious upbringing, Bosscha’s (emotional) life is taken over by fear. And although she has lost her religion, she did not lose her fear for judgment, and she kept feeling threatened. Her anxieties play an impeding role in her daily life, since her toxic blueprint comes up through all kinds of triggers. She has been at home fully incapacitated for fifteen years when she decides to take up trauma therapy. Bosscha takes the reader with her to her therapy sessions. Inside these sessions she learns to accept her fears and how to overcome

it. The emotional script is one of negative and obstructing emotion, anxiety, that has to be acknowledged and subsequently resolved. In the rewriting of Psalm 121, Bosscha writes how she is going “to the home” of herself. The script revolves around the uninhibited self that was made absent through religion and kept at a distance through religious trauma, but that is made present through acknowledgment and resolution in therapy. Bosscha’s script is one of therapeutic authenticity, through therapy the aim of authenticity is pursued.

4.5 Emotional images – *the absent and distant self*

In the material approach of religious studies, it is commonplace that images have the power to contain and provoke powerful emotions (see, for instance, Freedberg 2021; Meyer 2019; Gruber 2016). As a means of emotional colouring and guidance, Bosscha uses images extensively on *Dogmavrij.nl*. Almost every page has an image that accompanies the written text. Both Bosscha’s personal blogs and the guest blogs always start with an image. The image sets the emotional tone of the blog. Together with further images it guides the reader into the right mood. Several blogs have three images that follow the structure of the written text. One at the top, one in the middle, and one at the end. Take for example Maria’s guest blog on the fear she felt as a religious child for her baby sibling that was born in sin and perhaps did not get reborn in time before Jesus’s return. But now that she has left religion, she has outgrown faith and became a strong and independent woman (Maria 2016). Bosscha choose three images that give the story emotional colour: a troubled lonely child gazing into the distance (in sepia), a sleeping innocent baby with eyes closed (in sepia), and a woman standing in front of a bright coloured sunset, with her arms spread out wide open and her gaze upwards (in colour).

The images that Bosscha has chosen are often in sepia or black and white, suggesting distance and bleakness, setting a grim and moody tone. The people depicted on the images are anonymous, random people. The pictures have a clear stock photo feel (Bosscha gets them from *Pexels*, an online stock photo database). The persons depicted are an open canvas for anyone to identify themselves with. Mostly children—innocent and vulnerable—and grown-up women are depicted. They are alone, gazing downwards or in the distance. They have a troubled, pensive, absent gaze. As if they are not present in the moment. The road of leaving religion is solitary and draws one inward. Even though the images express a certain emotional mood, they are rarely expressive or dynamic in tone. They show a kind of stillness, in line with the suppressed emotions and feelings. The pictures that accompany the blogs rarely depict happiness or freedom, most of the time a blog only has images at the (negative) start of the

blog. When positivity is shown, it is often shown through fragile images: a budding flower in the morning sun (Bosscha 2018b), or a dragonfly resting on a branch (Bosscha 2016n).

The emotional script of the images is one of solitary, moody, pensive gazing in the distance. Of damaged innocent children and damaged grown-ups. Because of their religious abuse, their world stops and falls silent. Emotions seem to overwhelm the persons depicted, and instead of throwing it out, they turn inwards. They become separated from the outside world, while they absent-mindedly sit with their emotions. Just like Bosscha who has been retreated into her house for the last two decades, absent from the outside world, working to become more present inside the self, to bridge the alienation and become authentic.



Figures 28—30: Images that accompany a guest blog by Maria. Maria describes the fear she felt in her religious youth. She feared that her baby sibling might end up in hell if Jesus returned to soon. She broke with religion and hated it at first, but she learned to let go and is now truly free. The images portray a pensive child and a sleeping baby in sepia (the past). And a woman with her arms held out at a sunset in bright colours (the present) (Maria 2016).



Figures 31—33: Images that accompany the guest blog by Marieke Visser. She describes her toxic marriage and the toxic religion that repressed her self. Even though she has left her marriage and religion, she still has to learn to trust her self. The images portray stillness and lonely introspection (Visser 2017).



Figures 34—38: Images that accompany a blog on dehumanising practices in orthodox religion. Not only homosexuals are being dehumanised (the thought bubble reads: ‘I am disgusting’), but also children. They learn that they are inherently bad, sinful, guilty and should be ashamed. The images portray shame and innocence in grim black and white (Bosscha 2019a).





Figures 39—41: Images that accompany a guest blog by Claudia. She compares her de-conversion to a bridge (her faith) that started to collapse. She did not want to doubt the faith, she did not want to disappoint her surroundings, but it was inevitable. The images portray thoughtful, solitary women and bridges. They gaze off into the distance, perhaps they are contemplating their future. Something to be feared, but also something positive (Claudia 2017).

Figure 42: Image that accompanies a blog on de-converted children that seek acknowledgement and love from their parents. It portrays as woman that sits all by herself in the fetal position on a large couch in the living room. Her gaze is downwards. The image shows loneliness, vulnerability and longing (Bosscha 2017c).



Figures 43 and 44: Images that accompany a blog on parents that privilege their faith over their children. They love their children under religious conditions. As a result the children get distanced from their own feelings and needs. They learn to listen to others, instead of to themselves. The top image vividly portrays a damaged child. A doll with the face of an innocent child has its eyes wide open and cracks all over its body, in sepia. The wide eyes gaze downwards, as if the doll is in shock. The bottom image shows a young girl that gazing into the distance in black and white. She has a serious look on her face and the text next to her reads: “I love God and Jesus the most, then daddy and mommy, then my brothers and sisters, then the people from my church, then the people of the world, and then myself.’ Maartje, 5 years old.” The images portray a certain contemplative stillness, in line with the blocked self and suppression of emotions and feelings inward (Bosscha 2021d).



Figures 45 and 46: Images that accompany a blog on parenting and the love for one’s children. Bosscha’s describes how some Christians place religion above their children, this is something she can no longer imagine. This blog is posted six years prior to Figures 42 and 43 and contains very similar images. Once again we find distant gazes and a sepia filter and the same hierarchy of love. The image on the right reads: “I sacrificed my little son” (Bosscha 2015f).





Figure 47—49: Images that show the pensive downward or distant gaze. The world stops and fall silent. The pictures above accompany a guest blog on sexual abuse inside a religious context (Bosscha 2017a). The bottom picture accompanies a guest blog on the chonical stress (Van den Berg 2023).



Figures 50—52: Images that show a specific gaze. The top left image accompanies a guest blog on why it can be so difficult to leave your religion (Lock 2018). The top right image accompanies a guest blog on how you have to rebuild your entire structure after leaving religion (Veerle 2022). The bottom image accompanies a blog on the importance of speaking out and addressing harm (Bosscha 2021g). It is a picture of Bosscha with her hand held over her mouth. Words are written on it: “Speak out. Talk about it.” Her eyes look straight into the camera seemingly challenging it. Challenging religious harm and the silence surrounding it.

4.6 Conclusion – *therapeutic authenticity*

The emotional script that Bosscha provides revolves around the inhibited and uninhibited self, whereby the inhibition of the self has to be resolved in order for the uninhibited self to take central stage. This process towards uninhibition is in line with the ideal of authenticity and the ideal of therapeutic self-realisation. The script follows a pattern from religious repression towards acknowledgement and connection with emotions of the true self through therapy. Inside the religious environment, the (feelings of the) self are suppressed, pushed away, and made absent. One does not learn to listen to their own self, and one does not have any healthy boundaries. According to Bosscha, the self is seen as ‘bad’ inside self-righteous orthodox religion, instilling its members with negative emotions of guilt, shame, and fear. Unsolicited personal feelings and emotions, which Bosscha calls the ‘feminine’ are pushed away by ‘masculine’ rationality. The suppression of emotions and the self is seen as negative, unhealthy and as leading to trauma. The de-conversion story, however, is presented as separate from these emotional troubles. Losing faith in the authority of the church, the Bible, and in God is presented in a neutral and philosophical tone. It is not the faith, and the subsequent leaving of the faith, that leads to emotional trauma, but the inhibition of the self in orthodox religion. After religion is left behind cognitively, one still has a lot of work to do. The post-religious self is still inhibited and traumatised and alienated from the personal feelings and emotions. These authentic feelings and emotions need to be acknowledged and accepted, both the positive and the negative ones. This can be very difficult and painful and therefore (trauma) therapy is needed. The liberative ‘breaking’ point in Bosscha’s narrative is not the break with religion, but the break with the inhibitions of the self. On *Dogmavrij.nl* Bosscha’s intimate and realist blogs on intensive trauma therapy highlight the therapeutical narrative. Through trauma therapy Bosscha learns to overcome her traumas/inhibitions. It is through therapy that the ideal of authenticity is embodied and mediated. The final aim of Bosscha is not only the acknowledgement of the personal emotions and the connection with the uninhibited self, but also an acknowledgement and connection with other people. An utopic state of authenticity that is shared by all and acknowledged by all.

Chapter 5 | Space 4
The audience of *Dogmavrij.nl*

In the previous chapter, I have investigated the representation of leaving religion by Inge Bosscha and the emotional script that she provides on *Dogmavrij.nl*. Bosscha represents leaving religion through the ideal of authenticity and the therapeutic narrative of self-realisation and self-discovery. She describes her process of leaving religion as a process from emotional alienation and trauma to emotional integration and a healthy sense of self. In this final, and much shorter, chapter, I investigate how the “emotional script” that is provided by Bosscha is adopted and/or contested by the audience of *Dogmavrij.nl*. *Dogmavrij.nl* is an interactive website that provides ample space for the audience to give their reaction and their take on leaving religion. The main audience of the blogosphere endorses Bosscha’s narrative and mirror her emotional script through a personal adoption. This is done, on the one hand, in the guest blogs and, on the other hand, in the comment section. A small part of the audience, however, contests the narrative that Bosscha and her participants provide. Despite the aim of *Dogmavrij.nl* to be an space where everyone and every emotion is acknowledged, Bosscha manages these contradictory voices and provides strict boundaries for her safe space. By investigating these two means of interaction, we get a sense of how Bosscha’s representation and emotional is understood and responded to and how Bosscha creates a specific room that only approves her own script.

5.1 Guest blogs – *second liberation*

The first of interaction that I investigate are the guest blogs. *Dogmavrij.nl* contains 36 guest blogs written by 30 different authors. The first one was published on January 11, 2016 and the last one on April 7, 2024. Bosscha states on the website that “Dogmafree aims to be a platform for stories” and invites everyone to share their “experiences with (letting go of learned) religion” (Bosscha 2016f). She stresses the safety of the guest blogger as well.

It is also possible to write a guest blog for dogmavrij.nl. This can also be done under a pseudonym. In any case, nothing will be posted without your permission. So it is very safe. 😊
(Ibid.)

Bosscha also sets several terms and conditions for the guest blogs. Amongst others, she states that “in most cases the blogs will be edited and sometimes it is decided that a blog as a whole does not fit with the aims of Dogmavrij” (Ibid.). In other words, Bosscha stays in charge of the blogs post on her website, and influences the structure, content, and message of the guest blogs

as well. Unsurprisingly, the guest blogs are in line with Bosscha's own narrative and share a similar narrative. The comment section, however, is a more contested place.

Next to *Dogmavrij.nl*, Bosscha also hosts a Facebook group that is used to share stories on leaving religion and religious trauma. Why then would people also want to share their story on the public website as well? There are several reasons that can be discerned for sharing these stories in a public sphere:

- i. Societal relevance. To generate attention for the victims of religious trauma. *It is real!* To break the taboo around de-conversion and normalise emotional suffering because of leaving religion.
- ii. Endorsing Bosscha's narrative. By sharing these stories, it is shown that Bosscha is not alone in her stance on religion and trauma. It reverberates and gives strength to her argument and to the societal relevance.
- iii. To show others that there is life beyond religion, beyond the emotional crisis. Often through therapy or emotional self-help.
- iv. Promotion of own website/book. Almost half of the guest bloggers has an own website or book related to their blog.

Take for instance the first guest blog by Aaltje Moesker-Eelsing. Moesker-Eelsing desperately wants to share her story of religious abuse inside Christian cults and had already finished a manuscript during the time of the guest blog. She wants to warn and inform the Netherlands on the dangers of Christian cults. Bosscha writes:

The story of Aaltje is an indictment against the freedom of religion that is maintained in the Netherlands and makes it possible for cults to exist. The prevailing opinion seems to be that only people who are unstable end up inside a cult. And that, moreover, it is an option to leave a cult fairly easily. That thing (?) are quite different is proven by Aaltje's story. How many children are victims of religious abuse? How many children suffer because of their parents' openness to harmful religious dogmas and practices? (Think of socially accepted customs like circumcision, healing through prayer, and indoctrination of children with sense of sinfulness.) (Bosscha 2016a)

Throughout the guest blog it becomes clear that the book got published by Moesker-Eelsing herself after all. It is titled: *When Faith Becomes a Prison, then..... From Dogmatic Faith to Thinking Independently*. The back cover of the book states:

The book is an indictment against dogmatic faith and destructive relationships. It serves as a warning [...] But above all, it is an ode to the human ability to turn a minus into a plus, to come out of darkness into Light, to regain trust in Life, to Love (Ibid.).

This first guest blog ticks all four reasons. There is societal relevance: “The story of Aaltje is an indictment.” It endorses Bosscha’s narrative of religious abuse and trauma: “How many children are victims of religious abuse?” It shows that there is life beyond religion: “to turn a minus into a plus.” And it is connected to Moesker-Eelsing’s own book and website.³³

Even though the guest blogs differ from each other, they all provide a similar emotional script. And just like with the TV-series in the previous chapter, a structure can be discerned. It starts with a bad sense of self and the avoidance of personal emotions, then it proceeds towards building a sense of self and learning to confront the emotions, in order to reach the end-stage of processed emotions and a good sense of self. The story of de-conversion and religious trauma follows a framework that I have divided in 5 phases.

One. Growing up as a Christian means developing a **bad sense of self**. Christians not only learn that their selves are worthless, they also have to be subservient. “As a result, you did not learn to set boundaries, and you did not learn to think for yourself” (Visser 2017). One can have a negative self-image, or no clear sense of self at all, since one has to listen to the authoritarian rule of the church, the parents, and ultimately of God. This can lead to toxic relationships wherein the self is discarded. If there was any sense of self, i.e. personal feelings and emotions, then these were not welcome. They were blocked or suppressed. “The pure feelings I had as a child, they couldn't be there. Other emotions were put in their place” (Veerle 2020).³⁴ Emotions that are mentioned most often are anxiety, fear, and guilt. Fear for hell and judgement functioned as a guide for how to think and act.

Two. Leaving religion was **not a choice**. “It happens to you, such a de-conversion process” (Claudia 2017). Faith gets lost gradually over time, until someone suddenly realises that they don’t believe any more. “And then, suddenly, one fine Sunday morning my entire charismatic faith collapsed” (Eduard 2017). This realisation is often surrounded by **fear and pain**. “Breaking away from the group to which you are attached by birth and which was your frame of reference for 20 or 30 years... that can feel like an impossible task” (Lock 2018).

³³ <https://alsgeloofeengevangeniswordt.blogspot.com/>, accessed 2024-02-08.

³⁴ This is the same Veerle that we have encountered in Chapter 3, in the series *Vrijdenkers*.

People are sometimes afraid that they make the wrong decision, that they end up in hell anyways. Oftentimes they are afraid to disappoint their families and their surroundings. To lose contact with the ones they want to stay in contact with so desperately: their parents and their family.

Three. The aftermath is not one of liberation. **Anger and hatred and sadness** are the emotions that are mentioned most often in relation to their religious past. When one has decided to leave religion behind, religion has not left them behind. It is resilient. People remain angry and sad for the years lost. They feel lonely, are often unable to make new friends. They are still unable to set boundaries, become pleasers and keep being afraid/insecure. “The very hardest thing ever to do was to develop some kind of ‘sense of self’, to let go of that inferiority” (Eleanor 2020). Sometimes people get in a burn-out, a depression, or suffer from religious trauma. They often have repressed emotions and feelings still residing in the body (underneath the anger) that have to be resolved in order to become truly authentic and truly free. There is need for a second break, for liberation through (trauma) therapy.

Four. The second break, or **liberation, is oftentimes reached through therapy.** Therapy is needed to get a sense of self, to get rid of trauma, to learn to set healthy boundaries, and to get to the deeper feelings. “I learned to deal with my own hidden feelings. This allowed me to leave everything behind and today I can say that I am very strong and very positive in life” (Bosscha 2017a). People have to learn to let go, which can be challenging and takes a long time. “It has taken me a long time to let go of the hatred and fears” (Maria 2016). True liberation and peace is finally felt when all the emotions of anger and hate have been released. “Forgiving my parents made me even more free. I did this not for them, but for myself, so that I could move on” (Roest 2016).

Five. Living with a **good sense of self.** Living authentically and freely to your own liking with healthy boundaries and resolved emotional trauma. “I can think freely and I can live more from my own feelings and wishes [...] I am a sponge who wants to philosophise, experiment and enjoy freedom. And all that at the pace that suits me. I have changed 180 degrees” (Claudia 2017). “I dare to dream with my eyes wide open because I have found faith. Not in God, but in myself!” (Roest 2016). Even though not every guest blog came to this point, it’s still clearly a desired state of being. “Surviving every day and getting a little closer to myself every day” (Maroeska 2016).

The representation of leaving religion and the emotional script of the guest blogs mainly endorses the one that is provided by Bosscha. These stories show how guest bloggers adopt Bosscha’s personal script for their own narratives of leaving religion. They script their own

experiences of leaving religion according to Bosscha's script. In it, religion is held to push people away from their true selves. Through religion, they developed a bad sense of self, in a twofold manner. Firstly, they have a poor sense of who they are, and secondly, the notions of self that they do have is that the self is inherently bad and in need of saving. Their de-conversion was not an active choice, but something that just happened. When they started to doubt the faith, this was surrounded by fear and pain. After they have left their faith, the prevailing emotions are anger, hatred, sadness, and loss. They live with unresolved emotions, insecurity and sometimes get in a depression or a burn-out. A second break/liberation is needed. The emotional baggage has to be resolved, emotions have to be released. After finally letting go of anger and hatred, releasing anxiety and sadness, they have arrived at a good and healthy sense of self. The ultimate aim is to become one with oneself without unresolved anger, fear, uncertainty, and sadness standing in the way.

5.2 Comment section – *contested meaning and disgusted by religion*

The second means of interaction on *Dogmavrij.nl* is by placing a comment in the comment section. About every page has a comment section containing comments ranging from zero, to a few comments, and up to ninety-five comments. The stories that are told by Bosscha and the guest bloggers acquire further/final meaning through the comment section (Whitehead 2015b, 135). When the comments correspond with the (emotional) tone and the intent of the blog, its initial meaning is buoyed. This is very often the case. Take for instance several reactions to Bosscha's blog on being disregarded as someone who has left religion by "Christians conversation stoppers" (Bosscha 2015h).

Recognisable!! I know a few more.

And:

Again, beautiful blog. Sadly, I know the clichés all too well.

Readers regularly share their own stories and similar experiences, endorsing the emotional tone and validity of the blogs. When the comments however go against the grain, the initial meaning is challenged. Regularly such a challenging happens, followed by lengthy discussion between the readers and Bosscha (accounting for the large amount of reactions of nearly a hundred comments under a single blog). On the first guest blog, by Aaltje Moesker-Eelsing on religious

abuse, “Poedy” post the first comment that directly challenges the intended meaning and tone of the guest blog (Bosscha 2016a).

What I miss in the story of Aaltje is where her own responsibility lies, where and which choices she made [...] I too am an apostate, but your story really goes too far for me, to just put these things on other people’s plate.

Not only does Poedy challenge Moesker-Eelsing’s own responsibilities, the comment also challenges the blog on a more meta-level contesting the sharing of highly personal and heavy information on a public website for the entire audience and thus critiquing the entire style of *Dogmavrij.nl* that aims to be a platform for precisely these heavy and personal emotional stories. Within three hours, Bosscha responded with a lengthy reaction on her own story of religious abuse. Other reactions have more sympathy for Moesker-Eelsing as well, and disregard Poedy. A little while later, the comment section starts to develop from a place where questions of responsibility, cults, and abuse are debated into a heated discussion on extraterrestrial life and complot theories. It becomes clear that the readers who are discussing in the comment section to the guest blog by Aaltje, already know each other from another discussion platform. “Sorry Inge. It was not my idea to bring the discussion I am having with Jos on Positief Atheïsme [Positive Atheism] to your blog.” Bosscha decides to intervene.

Dear people, we are having a nice chat about extraterrestrial life and whatnot 🤗, but the topic is ‘when faith becomes a prison’. Please get back to the topic, also for readers who visit this site especially for that reason. Thanks 😊

The comment section proves to be a contested space and Bosscha regularly has to actively intervene. She does this not only through reacting on the comments herself (see also: Claudia 2017), but through editing and deletion of the reactions as well (Eleanor 2020). Bosscha made various statements that provide the guidelines for posting a comment, they all focus on being constructive and connective. Take for instance the following:

Are you touched by this blog? Would you like to comment? You can! Constructive comments are much appreciated. If you scroll down a bit, you find where you can post your comment. Comments that are divisive and/or aimed at heated discussions will not be posted. The goal of Dogma-vrij is connection, not division and condemnation (2016k).

One of the most interesting challenges against the overall tone of the website are comments that have to do with validity of Christianity and Christians. Both by Christians that defend their faith and by atheists that find Christianity so disgusting that they denounce it entirely. Bosscha's wish for her website is to connect between those who stay religious and those who leave their religion behind. She is acutely aware that her website might suggest otherwise. The disclaimer reads: "It is certainly not my intention to ridicule or disrespect the Christian faith here!" (2015e). The comment section, however, shows a different world. In the comment section, ample room is given for critiquing and bashing religion. Negative views on Christianity/religion can be posted without critique. Those that defend Christianity, however, are challenged. These defences are seen as non-sensitive and inappropriate (Eduard 2017). Take for instance the reactions by 'henkkarsenberg' underneath a blog called "Let's keep it cosy" (Bosscha 2015h). He is an elder at the Dutch Liberated Church³⁵ and posts comments that defend/spread his Christian views. 'Johan Nijhof' gets very irritated because of this and reacts:

I'm sure it's rotten for you to evoke unease everywhere, but you are on the website Dogmavrij. [...] It would be good if you were already ashamed of that intrusive foot you keep sticking in the door for 20 years.

henkkarsenberg simply reacts by stating that he would never stick his foot in the door. Next, he promotes his church, and states that "there is freely spiritual water available" there. He also writes that "the church is not a cruise ship," it is not for pleasantries, "but a lifeboat" that saves lives. He is convinced that "what is confessed in the church (the 12 articles so to speak) is the truth." Johan Nijhof reacts:

I still get frustrated after no more than one year of Christian primary school by that sticky, anointing preaching of yours and I would like to continue following these blogs without feeling hampered by your "spiritual waters". I don't believe for a second that you don't understand the sense of having a foot in the door when you persistently evangelise here and thus, I consider your response to be highly insincere.

Bosscha also responds to henkkarsenberg:

³⁵ The same church that Bosscha used to be part of, see p. 46, n 18.

Henk, maybe shout less and listen more....? If you dare!

More responses react critically to henkkarsenberg, asking him why he even participates on this website and if he should not be banned. Before he can defend himself any further, he is silenced into the role of the 'fake martyr'. If one defends Christianity or religion, emotions of frustration and irritation come to the surface. Bosscha tries to cool down the heated responses and to mediate between the voices by reacting with a positive tone to both sides. She reacts approvingly of those who are frustrated by henkkarsenberg and responds to henkkarsenberg positively. She reacts to Johan, stating that his annoyance is very recognisable.

When I look at the image from the blog 'Authoritarian religion and traumatising', I see Henk sitting in that square. The closed religious system. And at the bottom of the image, the words by the green arrows are very telling as far as I am concerned.

With the words by the green arrows, Bosscha suggests that 'Henk' has an emotional, intellectual, sexual, and social developmental gap.³⁶ However, in the same comment she also suggests that henkkarsenberg has the right intentions. And she attempts to react to henkkarsenberg positively and respectfully. It is to no avail, he ends the conversation with a resentful comment.

Hi Inge,

Before I address your questions any further, let me state the following:

I was unpleasantly struck by the following, which is something you wrote in response to Jos: "I think HK is indeed prone to being a martyr and a victim. And I don't want him to come and disrupt our conversations with that and draw attention to himself. He is welcome here, but not with a secret mission and own interests. Should the latter prove to be the case, he can find another audience. That will save you self-control cramps again." [...] I can't reconcile it with other things, that you wrote towards me. It doesn't seem right to me, anyway, that anyone here should be written about in the third person. It is conceivable that you or someone else might conclude from the fact that I am responding to this that I am indeed assuming a victim role. If so, so be it. Pull a dog by its tail and then when it bites it behaves like a martyr. If you want to

³⁶ See page 89.

protect other potential victims from my alleged ‘secret mission’ and ‘own interests’ then that is your choice. I am affected by it, but not lying about it. But I don't want to go on in this fashion.

Regards, Henk

Henk provides an interesting case of someone who wants to join the conversation on leaving religion, but who does not fit the overall tone of the blogosphere. His defence for Christianity is read as an insult to the sincerity of the participants of the website who do not want to defend themselves or go into a conversation on Christianity. Even though *Dogmavrij* claims to be connective and respectful of Christianity, it fails to do so. The only appropriate place in the comment section for Christianity/religion, is a place of frustration, critique, and disgust. The comment section functions as a safe space to work through the negative emotions that they have surrounding the religious trauma and leaving religion. This safe space is held up by keeping different (authentic) voices outside. The dual aim of the website, to be both a safe space for leavers of religion and to be connective with religion stayers proves to be very difficult and does not materialise. The emotional script of the comment section is one of mutual endorsement and fierce negativity towards anyone who disagrees.

5.3 Conclusion

In this final chapter I have investigated how the audience of *Dogmavrij.nl* adopts and/or rejects the scripts that Bosscha provides. The guest blogs show a strong endorsement of Bosscha’s own narrative. Thirty-seven guest bloggers scripted their lives according to Bosscha’s script. In their guest blogs religion is held to push people away from their true selves. When they leave religion, they struggle with finding and accepting their own true selves, so after they have left the religion, the prevailing emotions are anger, hatred, sadness, and loss. They live with unresolved emotions, insecurity and sometimes get in a depression or a burn-out. Even though they have sensed some liberation by leaving religion, a second psychological liberation is needed. Wherein the emotional baggage has to be resolved and emotions have to be released. After finally letting go of anger and hatred and releasing anxiety and sadness, they have arrived at a good and healthy sense of self. The ultimate aim is to become one with oneself without unresolved anger, fear, uncertainty, and sadness standing in the way.

The comment section, however, proved to be a contested place. In it, the majority of the voices endorse Bosscha’s narrative and emotional script. For them, the comment section functions as a safe space where vulnerable emotions of leaving religion are shared and the

religious system is critiqued. A small part of the voices contest the script of *Dogmavrij.nl*, they contest the sharing of highly personal and heavy stories and the anti-religious tone of the website. These voices are immediately attacked by other comments on *Dogmavrij.nl* and get managed by Bosscha. Especially voices that defend Christianity evoke an emotional response of anger and disgust. Bosscha's emotional script of connection and acknowledgement of the self is endorsed by both the guest blogs and the comment section, but the script of connection and acknowledgement with (authentic) others is contradicted by the comment section. The therapeutic narrative of self-actualisation through connecting with the true self and living according to one's own emotions on *Dogmavrij.nl* has no room for voices that contest the validity of one's opinions and/or emotions. Despite the statement that *Dogmavrij.nl* does not want to rail at religion, in the comment section it does. The emotional script of the comment section becomes similar in a way to the one that is provided by Wolkers and 't Hart, but where they expressed their negative views of religion from a victorious point of view, *Dogmavrij.nl* does so from a point of protection.

Conclusion

The premise of this thesis is that one cannot understand leaving religion without taking the emotional dimension into account. In this thesis I have studied the lived afterlife of religion by investigating the *emotional scripts* presented in representations of leaving religion in the Dutch context. I devised the term “emotional script” to highlight the exemplary character of a script of emotions that an audience can relate to, the media-specific characteristics of the presentation of emotions, and how these emotions are structured in the representations of leaving religion. I started with the emotional scripts presented by the work of Jan Wolkers (1925—2007) and Maarten ‘t Hart (1941—). These two authors created an iconic representation of leaving religion that came to influence Dutch understandings of leaving religion since the 1960s. Both Wolkers’ and ‘t Hart’s emotional scripts present leaving religion as a move from negativity towards positivity. In their script, the increase in emotional positivity is structurally related to decrease of the religious past. The further religion fades away, the more positive the emotions become. Wolkers’ emotional script can be divided into three stages. In the first stage, free reign is given to negative and destructive emotions (anger, disgust, resentment) since the religious past is still very present and has to be revenged. In the second stage, we find a more casual emotional stance where there is room for reflection, since the religious past has become more distant and lost its grip over the protagonist. In the third stage, we find positive and joyous emotions of sexual liberation and vibrant materiality. The negative religious past has become totally absent. ‘t Hart’s emotional script follows the one that is proposed by Wolkers, it also views the religious past as something that has to be settled score with through violent and negative emotions (anger, frenzy, frustration), and it also focusses on a sexual liberation as a blessed state after religion. In ‘t Hart’s work, however, this state of liberation is never achieved, since the religious past keeps frustrating him on a sexual level. And thus, the emotional script of ‘t Hart is centred around the dynamic of frustration and release. This dynamic keeps reappearing in his work and never gets resolved fully. The negative and destructive emotions of religious frustration have to be constantly released in order to achieve a temporary state of liberation and tranquillity. The emotional script of leaving religion that Wolkers and ‘t Hart provide is one that moves through angry and destructive emotions, so that the religious past can be revenged and a liberated and blessed state without religion can be reached.

Next, I investigated two present-day emotional scripts of leaving religion. Both representations of leaving religion related explicitly to the emotional script that was provided by Wolkers and ‘t Hart about half a century prior to their own representations. The creators of *Vrijdenkers* and *Dogmavrij.nl* both stated that they did not want to bash religion (settling score) and they both questioned the supposed blessed state that would be reached after breaking with

religion. A similar structure can be found between the emotional scripts of leaving religion in the 1960s and 1970s and the representations in the present-day Dutch context. As in the case of Wolkers and 't Hart, both *Vrijdenkers* and *Dogmavrij.nl* view the break with religion as a path towards happiness, as a direction towards emotional positivity, but how (and if) they get to this blessed state differs fundamentally. In the TV-series *Vrijdenkers*, we find a four-phase emotional structure of leaving religion. In the first phase, the religious past is actively present and depicted as both positive (through nostalgia) and negative (alienation and fear). In the second phase, the process of 'doubting the faith' takes centre stage and is surrounded by emotions of crisis, struggle, anxiety, insecurity, and vulnerability. The third phase is structured around the metaphor of 'coming-out' which is connected to yearning for love and acknowledgement (by the parents and the family), uncertainty, fear, loneliness and dis-acknowledgement. The fourth phase, called 'freedom', centres around the ideal of authenticity. The participants strive for authenticity, to become one's true self, which is connected to feelings of vulnerability and struggle. Even though the ideal of authenticity is similar to the blessed state of liberation as proposed by Wolkers and 't Hart—in the sense that they are both positive ideals that justify the break with religion—the state of authenticity is not easily reached and so the participants struggle. A struggle that is depicted as a struggle with one's self. The emotional script of *Vrijdenkers* represents leaving religion as a journey towards "becoming one's true self." The emotions that the participants experience: loss, grief, anxiety, vulnerability, longing for acceptance, insecurity, struggle, crisis, and nostalgia – all relate to their processes of leaving religion, but are understood and presented through the lens of authenticity.

The third case study, a blogosphere on religious trauma, *Dogmavrij.nl*, provides an emotional script that revolves around the inhibited and uninhibited self, whereby the inhibition of the self has to be resolved in order for the uninhibited self to take central stage. The script that is provided by Bosscha has links with both authenticity and with the therapeutic narrative of self-realisation and development. Bosscha describes leaving religion as a journey towards her own self. Inside religion, Bosscha's emotions and true self were suppressed and replaced by a negative self-image and fear for judgement. When she left her religion, she became free of the suppressive religious system, but the system had left a lasting imprint on her own sense of self and emotions. She was not in touch with her own self and her own feelings, she was traumatised and had to learn to become herself through (trauma) therapy. The emotional script that Bosscha provides is about finding a connection with the true emotions without inhibitions. Bosscha wants to give all her emotions free range, so that she can live a healthy emotional life. Anger, sadness, happiness, loss, frustration, and fear – all these emotions have to be taken

seriously and to be worked through. The suppressed self has to be replaced with a healthy self, a process that is embodied in the ability of feeling one's true emotions without inhibitions. This process is given shape in therapeutical language and therapy sessions. Bosscha creates an emotional script that normalises religious trauma and functions as an exemplary script for others who have left religion and deal with similar emotional traumas. Bosscha's narrative is one that praises the ideal of connection and acknowledgement, to be connected with and acknowledge the personal emotions, and to connect and acknowledge others for who they are. Leaving religion is a process from emotional disconnection (judgemental norms) towards emotional connection wherein all emotions have to be taken seriously without judgement. *Dogmavrij.nl* has as its aim to normalise religious trauma and to function as an online safe space where emotions can be felt and expressed, and where there is mutual connection and acknowledgement.

In the case of *Dogmavrij.nl*, due to its interactive character of a comment section and guest blogs, we are able to get a sense of how the audience takes up the emotional scripts that are provided by Bosscha. And there are two things that stick out. Firstly, almost everyone agrees with and endorses Bosscha's narrative and emotional script that moves from suppression to connection. In the guest blogs, religion is held to push people away from their true selves and true emotions. When they leave religion, they have the difficult task ahead of them of connecting with their true selves and emotions. At first, emotions such as hatred, anger, sadness and loss prevail and they do not know how to deal with these emotions. They struggle with unresolved emotions and often need therapy to work through these emotions. Emotions such as anxiety, insecurity, and resentment have to be released in a "safe environment" in order to get connected to their true selves and arrive at an emotionally healthy life. The emotional script of the guest blogs is one that poses that the break away from religion is not enough. It describes a religious afterlife of unsolved emotional blockades that have to be worked through (often through therapy) in order to truly break away from the inhibitions of the religious past. Secondly, not everyone agrees with the emotional script and display of *Dogmavrij.nl*. In the comment section, which is managed by Bosscha, several voices can be found that challenge the emotional tone of the website and the negative view of religion as an alienation from the self. These voices are immediately attacked by both the main audience by Bosscha. Challenging voices incite strong and emotional reactions, since they are viewed as voices that do not take the emotional safe space seriously and do not acknowledge the validity of authentic feelings of the participants of *Dogmavrij.nl*. Especially voices that defend Christianity evoke an emotional response of anger and disgust. The comment section shows that the "safe space" that is provided by Bosscha to

connect and acknowledge all emotions and all voices fails to actually materialise, only voices that agree with her script and ideal are welcome. Even though *Dogmavrij.nl* states an ideal of mutual recognition, the comment section functions first and foremost as a place where religion can be criticized and emotions of leaving religion are taken seriously.

The fundamental change in emotional scripts

The emotional scripts in representations of leaving religion in the Dutch context have changed fundamentally between the 1960s and 1970s and the present-day context. They have changed from a violent settling score with the negative religious past followed by a blessed state of sexual liberation into scripts that resolve around the vulnerable struggle to become one's true self. In present-day representations of leaving religion the emotional tone has shifted from anger and jubilant liberation to a personal crisis with struggle, loss, vulnerability, longing for acceptance, and insecurity. This change is connected to the rise of the ideal of authenticity and the therapeutic narrative. Both ideals construct a conceptualisation of selfhood, of being in communion with your true self and your own emotions, that is uncritically followed in the present-day representations of leaving religion, yet it also proves to be difficult to reach. One aspects in the representations of leaving religion that I have investigated that depict the fundamental change in the emotional scripts is the relationship between the 'protagonist' and the religious parents.

In the case of Wolkers and 't Hart, the religious parents are depicted as either weak or terrible figures. Wolkers embodied the negative religious past by a tyrannical father figure that has to disappear, or even die (in the case of *De hond met de blauwe tong*). In *Een vlucht regenwulpen*, the religious mother is portrayed as a weak person, that perishes as well. Both Wolkers and 't Hart were considered to be part of the '*Afrekeningsliteratuur*' (settling score prose) that rebelled against the older generation and wanted to break with the negative influence of their parents: the child rejects the parents. In present-day representations of leaving religion, this dynamic has been reversed completely. Both *Vrijdenkers* and *Dogmavrij.nl* describe how they want to stay connected with both their parents and with their selves. On the one hand, they struggle with disappointing their parents and long for recognition and acceptance, on the other,

they want to be true to their own selves. In the present-day representations it are the parents that reject the child,³⁷ and the child has to find a way to deal with this emotionally.

Next to the change from revenge to longing for acceptance, the emotional scripts have shifted from a violent and victorious settling score to vulnerability, anxiety, and personal struggle. Whereas Wolkers and 't Hart had an emotional script that confronts the negative religious past, the present-day representations have an emotional script that confronts the self. *Dogmavrij.nl* views leaving religion in the therapeutic narrative of religious trauma that has to be overcome through therapy and *Vrijdenkers* views leaving religion as the struggle of becoming authentic. Both present-day representations focus on the self and the struggle of becoming one's true self. The emotions revolve around this ideal and are the embodiment of this ideal, the ability to sense one's own true feelings and to live according to them is presented as the fulfilment of authenticity. This ideal is difficult to reach and the emotional scripts focus on the vulnerability of the religion leaver who suffers from trauma and unresolved emotions. Not only is leaving religion presented as a difficult and challenging emotional process, the afterlife of religion is present first and foremost as an *emotional struggle* as well.

Notes on research

This thesis is a preliminary study that combines two fields of scholarly inquiry that only recently gained attention in the field of religious studies: leaving religion and religious emotion. In a time of rapid de-churching in the Dutch and West European context, the afterlife of religion is studied extensively, but (almost) solely with a focus on religious heritage. It is my argument, however, that we need to study the lived afterlife of religion as well. In order to do so, I have devised the notion of "emotional script." By studying the emotions of leaving religion, I focus on the lived and corporeal dimension of leaving religion. As I have argued in the introduction, studies of (religious) emotion all understand emotion as taking place in the interplay between the personal agent and the larger societal structure. In order to study the emotions that are experienced, mediated, and described by the subjects, one needs to take the larger structures into account. With the notion of "emotional script" I emphasise the structured presentation of emotions inside narratives of leaving religion. I investigated the specific mediation of the emotional scripts and point to the exemplary character of the emotional scripts that are

³⁷ The extent of rejection differs per representation, in both the degree and the temporality of the rejection. My point is that the dynamic of leaving religion has changed from victoriously breaking with the parents to fearing a break with the parents (which does occur nevertheless).

presented for a larger audience to identify with. The scripts take place in the interplay between the larger societal structure and the personal agent in a double way. On the one hand, the personal agent is influenced by their own larger context, and on the other hand, these scripts influence the larger societal context through their representational character. In this thesis, I study the presentation of emotion in the midst of the interplay between the society and the individual by focussing on how they present personal emotions of leaving religion to a larger audience. These emotional scripts are (un)consciously chosen by the authors and it is up to the researcher to describe, and in way, construct these scripts.

I have argued that the emotional scripts of the present-day context are related to the ideal of authenticity and the therapeutic narrative, which both proclaim an notion of selfhood as something that is not-yet-realised, or not-yet-authentic. I argue that leaving religion is presented as a way towards authenticity and therapeutic self-realisation in the sense of “becoming one’s true self.” As I argued in the introduction, authenticity needs to be mediated carefully in order to materialise. In the present-day representations of leaving religion, the authentic is mediated through the ability to feel one’s true feelings, to be in touch with one’s true emotion. In the case of *Dogmavrij.nl*, it is the therapeutic language and practice that embodies the ideal of authenticity. *Dogmavrij.nl* aims to be a platform that functions in a therapeutic way, where emotions are both expressed and validated.

By combining two fields that have only recently (re)gained attention in the study of religion, I started this thesis with the challenge of finding a research method that would do justice to what I envisioned: a study of the lived afterlife of religion. During my research it was never a question whether there would be enough data to make the argument that leaving religion cannot be understood without taking emotion into account, but the question was how one could approach the rich body of emotional data. I am aware that by choosing to investigate the emotional scripts that are presented in public representations of religion, I have delineated a field of leaving religion that does not reflect the entire reality of leaving religion, and its emotions, in the Dutch context. I do argue, however, that these public representations do inform us on the emotional dynamics of leaving religion in the Dutch context. The scripts that are presented by the authors are part of a larger and shared societal structure. The emotional dynamic of leaving religion encompasses a wide variety of emotion: anger, loss, disgust, vulnerability, longing for acceptance, insecurity, crisis, and happiness – these emotions are

connected to family relations³⁸ and to the ideal of authenticity and the therapeutic narrative of becoming self-actualised, to become and live according to one's true self.

For further research on the religious afterlife I would argue for an inquiry into the notion of the child and the parent-child relationship. I was struck during my research how often the notion of "child" was used in not only the representations of religion, but also in the ideal of authenticity and in the therapeutic narrative. Representations of religion often begin with a description of religious childhood and describe the process of leaving religion as way of growing up. In the ideal of authenticity, one needs to "get in touch with their inner child," since children are seen as repositories of the authentic. In the therapeutic narrative, the traumatic events and learned coping mechanisms in childhood need to be worked through and solved in order to fully self-actualise. Next, the parent takes a central role in the representations of leaving religion, be it as someone to rebel against, or as a source of acceptance and recognition. The emotional scripts were the strongest, and most clear, in relation to the religious parent. It would be very interesting to take the emotional dynamic of leaving religion and the parent-child relation into qualitative fieldwork research that goes beyond the public representations of leaving religion in the Dutch context.

³⁸ The relationship between the parent and the child.

Personal note by the author

The first question that I always got when explaining my thesis project to others, was if I had left religion myself as well. And yes, I have left my religion myself. Or perhaps better said: I am leaving religion. As with any research, the personal background of the researcher plays a role in the design and the execution of the study project. This is especially the case in religious studies where one's conception of religion, and how to study it, can differ per person (because of the differing personal histories with religion). This is even more so the case in leaving religion. Take for instance the creators of the TV-series that used their personal experiences with religion (and of leaving it) as a justification for making a series about it. Even more so than with religion, leaving religion is viewed as a subject that is only studied by those who have a personal interest in and/or experience with leaving religion.

For me, leaving religion has been an important and large part of my life for the past ten years. It was, and still is, an emotional journey that went very deep, into the very core of my being. Writing a thesis about emotions of leaving religion, then, seems perfectly suited for me and at the same time not suited at all. I must admit that it was sometimes quite difficult to study the emotions that were presented in the representations of leaving religion. When I watched *Vrijdenkers* for the first time, I continuously reflected on my own process of leaving religion and the same goes for the blogosphere *Dogmavrij.nl*. In studying a subject that is so close to one's self, one immediately relates it to the personal experiences. This effect of self-relation to the case studies, however, wore off after a while, which enabled me to investigate the data with a more analytical view.

And even though the process was sometimes quite difficult for me, I am thankful that I have chosen this subject. Firstly, I am convinced that my own history aided me in studying the case studies. On the one hand, I was already familiar with the subject of leaving religion, on the other hand, my own history differed to such an extent from the ones that I had to study that I did not take their stories and emotions for granted. The emotional scripts of the source material even surprised me, although parts of it resonated with my own story, it had never thought of leaving religion in such a way before. Secondly, I fell in love with religious studies for two reasons that both come together in this thesis project: it is the most versatile and wonderful field I have ever seen (with challenging and intriguing theory, where every subject is possible, and where religion always keeps amazing me) and because of my own history with religion. In one of the first courses that I followed in religious studies I noticed how I could not only shine with

all my Bible knowledge, but that I also could study the religious world from a whole different level. It provided me with completely different approaches and insights into a world that I thought I knew quite well. The same goes for this thesis, I could not only use my own experience of leaving religion to study this subject, but I was also surprised by the new insights that I received from approaching it from an academic level. I have never felt so much joy in academia as with religious studies. I am grateful for Carolina Ivanescu who made me fell in love with religious studies about four years ago and for Birgit Meyer who fuelled my enthusiasm only further and who showed me how amazing the study of religion can be with both amazing case studies and strong theory. I sincerely hope that this thesis conveys some of my enthusiasm for religious practice and theory. Thank you!

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