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Klomp, Mirella; van der Meulen, Marten; Wilson, Erin; Zijdemans, A.

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The Passion as Public Reflexivity: How the Dutch in a Ritual-musical Event Reflect on Religious and Moral Discussions in Society

Mirella Klomp
Protestant Theological University
m.c.m.klomp@pthu.nl

Marten van der Meulen
Protestant Theological University
mvandermeulen@pthu.nl

Erin Wilson
University of Groningen
e.k.wilson@rug.nl

A. Zijdemans
University of Groningen
a.h.zijdemans@student.rug.nl

Abstract

This article analyses the public significance of *The Passion*—a televised retelling of the Passion of Jesus, featuring pop songs and celebrities in the Dutch public sphere. Using a multidisciplinary approach, the authors demonstrate how performances like *The Passion* offer spaces in which the Dutch can reflect publicly on important identity issues, such as the role of Christian heritage in a supposedly secular age. The article contributes to deeper knowledge of how Dutch late-modern society deals with its secular self-understanding.

Keywords

Passion play – digital media – public sphere – religiosity – morality – the sacred – secular national identity

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1 Introduction: Case, Problem, and Question

1.1 *Prelude*

It's Maundy Thursday, Easter 2014. Despite the pouring rain, thousands of people have gathered in the main squares of the city to participate in the annual public performance of the Passion of Christ. For that one night, the city has been transformed into first-century Jerusalem, providing the backdrop for a popular retelling of the last hours of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. In addition to the performance, hundreds of people participate in a pilgrimage-like procession, carrying a giant illuminated cross through the city. The event is truly a spectacle. National celebrities play the roles of Jesus, his mother Mary, Peter, Pontius Pilate, and Judas, the verbatim text of the Christian Gospels provide the script, and secular pop songs, selected for their appropriateness to the respective moments in the narrative, are interspersed throughout. The sense of anticipation before the performance commences is palpable, with giant screens set up in the two main squares counting down the minutes and seconds until it begins. During the show, the crowd sings along to their favourite pop songs, joining in the chants of "(Free) Barabbas!" and "Crucify Him!" at the appropriate moments, laughing and enjoying the party. The city has been building up to this moment for months. The city's government lobbied heavily to bring the event here. In the weeks beforehand, shop owners changed their window displays to feature large white cardboard crosses to help promote their merchandise. Local bars and cafes offer "Last Supper" special menus that all feature bread and a red drink of some sort. Local churches, city authorities, schools, and universities have planned and hosted multiple side events. National television and newspapers are filled with discussion and commentary about the event in the days leading up to it. It seems as though the Passion of Jesus has truly taken over the city and the country.

One may well think that the scene we have described above took place in an area in the Philippines or Nigeria, countries that are known for high religiosity and the pervasive influence of religion in society.[1] It could also have described a scene in southern Europe, where the percentage of Christians is high,

1 William Petersen, "Holy Week in the 'Heart of the Philippines': Spirituality, Theatre and Community in Maranduque's Moriones Festival," *Asian Theatre Journal* 24/2 (2007), 309–337, at 309; Ruth Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009); Maia Green, "Confronting Categorical Assumptions about the Power of Religion in Africa," *Review of African Political Economy* 33/110 (2006), 635–650.

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especially in comparison to western and northern Europe.[2] One might even expect it to describe an event that took place in the southern or middle United States, where the percentage of Christians is higher than the rest of the country.[3] This, however, is not the case. The scene we described above occurred in Groningen, in the Netherlands, frequently assumed to be one of the most secularised countries in Europe.[4]

The popularity of *The Passion* in the Netherlands has, in general, come as a complete surprise. It was the largest live television event in the Netherlands for the years of 2011, 2012, and 2013, and in 2014 won an award for best entertainment program of the year.[5] The ritual—created and organised by the production company Eye2EyeMedia, the Evangelical Broadcasting Company (EO), and the broadcasting company on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church (RKK) in cooperation with several other parties—was first performed in Gouda in 2011 and broadcast live on Dutch national television. It has seen seven editions in the Netherlands so far.[6] Since the first edition in 2011, it has drawn an increasing amount of attention—millions of TV viewers and around 20,000 visitors to the square per year, and some 1000 people participating in the procession of the cross, as well as thousands of people in the online procession that was offered as a second screen application.[7] The production company recently sold the format to FOX Broadcasting Company in Hollywood, which staged *The Passion Live* on Palm Sunday 2016 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Editions elsewhere in western Europe are expected. The success of *The Passion* can be measured by the national reception but also by its international appeal.

2 Joep de Hart, Paul Dekker, & Loek Halman (eds.), *Religion and Civil Society in Europe* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 174.

3 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *US Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation. Diverse and Dynamic* (Washington, D.C.: 2008), 8. http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/05/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf (accessed 23 September 2016).

4 Paul Mepschen, Jan Willem Duyvendak, & Evelien Tonkens, "Sexual Politics, Orientalism and Multicultural Citizenship in the Netherlands," *Sociology* 44/5 (2010), 962–979, at 966.

5 See De TV Beelden, "Winnaars de TV beelden 2014." http://detvbeelden.nl/winnaars/winnaars-2014/ (accessed 23 September 2016).

6 Gouda 2011, Rotterdam 2012, The Hague 2013, Groningen 2014, Enschede 2015, Amersfoort 2016, and Leeuwarden 2017.

7 Absolute viewing figures and market share per year were respectively: 1.0 million and 17.6% (2011); 1.9 million and 25.9% (2012); 2.5 million and 32.4% (2013); 3.6 million and 44.9% (2014), 3.8 million and 45.7% (2015), 3.4 million and 44.2% (2016). Source: PDF-document created by Petra Moonen, market researcher at broadcasting company KRO-NCRV (obtained by Mirella Klomp on 30 May 2016). The slight drop in 2016 may be explained by a competing broadcast on the other national channel on the same evening, which was dedicated to the life of world famous Dutch soccer player Johan Cruijff, who had passed away earlier that day.

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1.2 *Problem and Research Question*

Although there are some indicators that partly explain the success of this event (e.g., a strong link with popular culture by means of the use of Dutch pop music and the participation of celebrities, the accessibility of a free open-air event that is live and broadcast on prime-time TV), it is striking that the story on the suffering and death of Jesus Christ has captured such a central place in the Dutch public sphere. Considering the decline of established religion, and the assumption that among Dutch inhabitants many people do not know what the Passion narrative or Easter is about, it is safe to say that *The Passion* does not necessarily reflect a revival of Dutch Christianity, although it does show a continuing attachment to Christianity.[8] But what exactly does it reflect then? Does it say anything about religious and social processes currently going on in this late-modern society? That is the problem we are addressing in this article. Our research question, therefore, can be formulated as follows: *How does a public religious event engender public reflexivity about contemporary religious and moral debates?*

The term 'public reflexivity' in the research question comes from anthropologist Victor Turner, who argued that all societies have their public metasocial rites, "performed at crucial points in the turning year, or on occasions

8 As far as we can see, no academic research with quantitative data on what the Dutch believe to be the meaning of Easter or Good Friday is available. Our ethnographic research shows that, in the field, people (interviewees, but also media) talk about some research report indicating that 75% of the Dutch youth do not know what Easter is about. What report they are referring to remains vague, and it often regards hearsay. We have not been able to identify the research mentioned. Our best hunch is that it regards non-academic research on the meaning of Easter in 2009 and 2010 by marketing company N.A.W. Plus. See the reports N.A.W. Plus, *Onderzoek religie en levensbeschouwing thema Pasen* (2009). http://www.nawplus.nl/images/fck/File/Onderzoek%20Pasen.pdf (accessed 7 December 2017); and N.A.W. Plus, *Onderzoek religie en levensbeschouwing thema Pasen* (2010). http://www.nawplus.nl/images/fck/File/Onderzoek%20Pasen%202010.pdf (accessed 7 December 2017). Yet, based on good intelligence, we may suspect that a substantial amount of people in the Netherlands are unaware of the meaning of Easter, or, in other words, ascribe their own meaning to the feast of Easter (whether this includes Christ, or chocolate eggs, or Easter buns). The decennial quantitative study 'God in Nederland' in 2016 showed that adherence to traditional Christian beliefs, church membership, and church attendance continue to decline in the Netherlands. Three questions in the survey explicitly regarded *The Passion*. The results showed that 60% of the respondents (much) appreciated *The Passion*, yet 34% found it kitschy, 30% said that it did not at all strengthen their faith, 58% indicated that it did not or not at all make them more curious of Christian faith. See Ton Bernts & Joantine Berghuijs, *God in Nederland 1966–2015* (Utrecht: Ten Have, 2016), 219.

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of collective crisis when a whole society faces a major change."[9] In this paper, we use Turner's theory to understand the social and public dynamic surrounding *The Passion*. We first elaborate on Turner's theory (section 2) and then sketch the background of the public religion and post-secular debates in Europe and the Netherlands (section 3). After that, we elaborate the case on the basis of three particular topics we encountered during our empirical research on *The Passion* in 2015: the general character, demeanour, and appearance of Jesus in *The Passion*; Jesus as a prisoner, specifically the choice for Jesus to appear in an orange jumpsuit, and the character of the actor playing Jesus (and also Barabbas), in particular discussions about morality, which predominantly focused on the actors' past and how suited they are to be part of an event like *The Passion* (section 4). A discussion and some implications will conclude this article (section 5).

2 Theory

In 1979, Turner claimed that drama and reflection are very close: a group communicates itself to itself in various ways, verbally (through speech) and nonverbally (through "gestures, music, dancing, graphic representation, painting, sculpture, and the fashioning of symbolic objects").[10] Ritual and drama, in Turner's view, are forms of plural reflexivity, i.e., "the ways in which a group or community seeks to portray, understand and then act on itself."[11] Since drama is a public event, *plural* reflexivity is often *public* reflexivity. Drawing on the distinction (by folklorist Arnold van Gennep) between rituals performed at life-crises and rituals performed at crucial points in the turning year or on occasions of collective crises, Turner focused on the latter: rituals public in character, performed for collectivities. This major type of rites has aspects of 'ritual or status reversal,' but also shows the constant presence of a meta-language "that is, codes or presentation and expression which enable participants and spectators to realise just how far they have fallen short of or transgressed their own ideal standards, or even, in some kinds of ritual, to call those very ideals into question under conditions of sharp social change."[12]

9 Victor Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6/4 (1979), 465–499, at 466.

10 Ibid., 465.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 467.

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These public meta-social rites, as Turner has called them, which are often performed in the village or town square where they are visible for everyone, use day-to-day spaces as their stage and 'consecrate' them for a liminal, 'transitory' time. According to Turner, it could, slightly simplistically, be stated that "for every major social formation there is a dominant mode of public liminality," thus indicating a relationship between social processes and performative genres. When self-reflecting, a society sets up "a frame within which images and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be scrutinized, assessed, and, if need be, remodelled and rearranged."[13] What is put inside the frame is often considered to be the sacred, according to Turner, and it is separated from 'the profane,' 'secular,' or 'mundane.' Rituals have a scenario or score. They mostly contain festive, joyful, and playful episodes and incidents: they are serious and entertaining, solemn and ludic at the same time.[14] In stage drama—which Turner identified as a major reflective genre—authorship of scenarios is attributed to individuals. Nevertheless, stage plays are as much public as private performative modes: they involve "actors, audience, producers, stagehands, often musicians and dancers, and, most of all, their plots and messages are communicated by various written and oral networks to a general public which varies in span and composition from society to society and from epoch to epoch."[15] In stage drama, the descriptive narrative and reflexive commentary are interwoven. This reflexivity is not only found with the performers, but also with the author and the public. The author reflects, whereas the actors flow (i.e., their "action follows action according to an inner logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on [their] part, [...] there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present and future"), and the audience is moved.[16]

Another conceptualisation of the sacred has been offered by Gordon Lynch. Like Turner, Lynch based himself on Durkheim, with his emphasis on the sacred and processes of sacralisation in daily life. In Lynch's view, the sacred consists of the things and events that are of ultimate significance to people. In society, one will find sacred forms, which are "specific instantiations of the sacred" where "symbol, emotion, normative claims, ritual practice, and social

13 Ibid., 468.

14 Also see Mirella Klomp & Marten van der Meulen, "The Passion as Ludic Practice: Understanding Public Ritual Performances in Late-modern Society. A Case Study from the Netherlands," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32/3 (2017), 387–401. https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2017.1362879 (accessed 7 December 2017).

15 Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection," 486.

16 Quote from ibid., 486–487. See also ibid., 490.

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collective" intersect.[17] These sacred forms may be religious, but can also be secular, without any reference to transcendence. He thus tried to entangle the two concepts of the 'religious' and the 'sacred' that have often been confounded in social theory.

In their reflections on contemporary liturgical ritual, Marcel Barnard, Johan Cilliers, and Cas Wepener recently updated the liminal theories of van Gennep and Turner, stating:

> [the renewal of liturgical ritual] moves between the established churches and their traditional liturgical forms, on the one hand, and less defined spaces, times and groups on the other hand. [...] Late-modern culture is also characterized by notions such as transformations, transgression, transcultural and border crossing. However, instability still—and ever more so—evokes the opposite notion and desired condition of stability, perhaps a consequence of a lack of late-modern cultural awareness.[18]

In combination with their reflections, Lynch's argument is even more compelling: the sacred moves and is also found (in liturgical ritual, as well as in other shapes) outside the religious domain: it cannot be fenced in by religion.

The Passion, seen as a contemporary form of annually performed Passions, is a public ritual, performed for collectivities, as described by Turner. In the twenty-first century, such public ritual takes shape in a culture that is influenced by mediatisation, by leisure time characterised by increasing eventfulness and hyperfestivity, and by ludification.[19] These developments do not pass by without affecting religion and religious practices. Thus, when

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17 Gordon Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9 and 26, respectively.

18 Marcel Barnard, Johan Cilliers, & Cas Wepener, *Worship in the Network Culture: Liturgical Ritual Studies. Fields and Methods, Concepts and Metaphors*. Liturgia Condenda 28 (Leuven, Paris, & Walpole: Peeters Publishers, 2014), 65–114, here 65.

19 On mediatisation, see Stig Hjarvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 2013); Stig Hjarvard & Mia Lövenheim (eds.), *Mediatization and Religion: Nordic Perspectives* (Göteborg: Nordicom, 2012). On hyperfestivity, see Greg Richards, *Leisure in the Network Society: From Pseudo-events to Hyperfestivity?* (Tilburg: Tilburg University, 2010), esp. 13; cf. Paul Post, "Panorama der Ritual Studies: Trends und Themen der aktuellen Ritual Studies," *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* (2013), 139–181, esp. 164 where Post defines leisure culture as one of the fields where the sacred is found. On ludification, see Joost Raessens, "The Ludification of Culture," in: Mathias Fuchs et al. (eds.), *Rethinking Gamification* (Lüneburg: Hybrid Publishing Lab, 2014), 91–114. http://gamification-research.org/2014/06/edited-volume-rethinking-gamification-out/ (accessed 19 January

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translating Turner's theory to Dutch late modern culture, we might say that *The Passion* points to what may be considered a dominant mode of public liminality in this society.[20] *The Passion* shows many examples of public reflexivity, not only in the performance itself, but also in public domains, such as TV networks and Twitter. We see *The Passion* as a meta-social ritual that Dutch society uses to explore uncertainties around national identity. In the twenty-first century, these uncertainties, among other things, relate to the question of the supposed secular nature of the Dutch public sphere and the rising visibility of religion, particularly Islam. *The Passion* can also be seen as a sacred form, as it is an intersection of symbols, emotion, normative claims, ritual practices, and the social collective. Before we dive deeper into *The Passion* itself, we will first sketch the broader background of public religion. In particular, the debate about post-secularity in Europe and the Netherlands is relevant here.

3 Backgrounds

Europe, in general, and the Netherlands, specifically, are often mentioned as examples of secularised societies. For that reason, the popularity of a religious event like *The Passion* immediately raises many questions about the interpretation of this event: is it a resurgence of religion, a last twitching of religion on the way to death, or a form of cultural heritage? There has been a large and varied discussion about the secular character of European (and Dutch) society. We will discuss this here in order to sketch the backdrop against which *The Passion* takes place and to add the theory of Turner to this debate, which we think can make a fruitful contribution.

2016). On the ludification of culture in relation to religious ritual, see Klomp & van der Meulen, "The Passion as Ludic Practice."

20 Turner himself would have rather defined these events as "liminoid." This term indicates that modern events are, according to Turner, quite different from traditional ritual practices in pre-modern societies. He therefore was hesitant to use his theory of liminality and ritual to modern societies. He rather looked for modern functional equivalents, which he called liminoid. This distinction has been criticised by others: the correspondence between pre-modern and modern ritual, especially when it comes to large public events, seems too great to warrant a different term. Sharon Rowe, for example, argued that modern sport events can be rightly described as liminal. See Sharon Rowe, "Modern Sports: Liminal Ritual or Liminoid Leisure," in: Graham St. John (ed.), *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), 127–148. We concur with her.

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a *From Secular to Post-secular in Contemporary European Public Life?*

There are numerous incidents within the last decade that raise questions regarding the validity of Europe's assumed secularisation. These incidents include debates over whether to include reference to a common Christian heritage in the European Constitution; unease over Turkey's potential membership in the EU; debates about the presence of religious symbols in the public sphere, where Christian symbols are classified as 'cultural heritage' and headscarves, turbans, and other objects are classified as 'religious'; rising concerns over the growing presence of 'radical Islam' in Europe; the refugee crisis in which questions about the religious identity of refugees has become entangled in debates over security, the appropriate humanitarian response, and Europe's social cohesion; and the so-called 'burkini ban' in France that has provoked major controversy in Europe and around the world.[21] All of these incidents suggest that Europe's secular nature cannot be taken for granted.[22] Casanova has claimed the very formation of the EU is rooted in Christian thought and practice.[23] There is little acknowledgement of this apparently

21 On the classification of 'cultural' and 'religious,' see Lori Beaman, "Battles over Symbols: The 'Religion' of the Minority Versus the 'Culture' of the Majority," *Journal of Law and Religion* 28/1 (2013), 141–157. On the refugee crisis, see Erin Wilson & Luca Mavelli, "The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Beyond Conceptual and Physical Boundaries," in: Luca Mavelli & Erin Wilson (eds.), *The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Secularity, Security and Hospitality in Question* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2017), 1–22; Erasmus, "Diverse, Desperate Migrants Have Divided European Christians," *The Economist*, 6 September 2015. http://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2015/09/migrants-christianity-and-europe (accessed 9 December 2015); Andrew Rettman, "EU States Favour Christian Migrants from the Middle East," *EU Observer*, 21 August 2015. https://euobserver.com/justice/129938 (accessed 9 December 2015). On the 'burkini ban,' see Iman Amrani, "France's Burkini Ban Exposes the Hypocrisy of the Secularist State," *The Guardian*, 24 August 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/24/france-burkini-ban-secularist-equality-muslim?CMP=fb_gu (accessed 13 September 2016).

22 Benoît Challand, "From Hammer and Sickle to Star and Crescent: The Question of Religion for European Identity and a Political Europe," *Religion, State and Society* 37/1 (2009), 65–80; Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2008); Lucian N. Leustean & John T. S. Madeley, "Religion, Politics and Law in the European Union: An Introduction," *Religion, State and Society* 37/1 (2009), 3–18; Francois Foret, "Religion: A Solution or a Problem for the Legitimisation of the European Union?" *Religion, State and Society* 37/1 (2009), 37–50, at 38.

23 José Casanova, "Religion, European Secular Identities and European Integration," in: Timothy A. Byrnes & Peter J. Katzenstein (eds.), *Religion in an Expanding Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 65–92, at 66.

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intimate relationship between Christianity and modern European identity.[24] Europe's secular nature is often emphasised over its Christian connections and the dominant narrative told about Europe's historical development is the successful separation of religion from politics and law to establish communities of peace and tolerance.[25] Alternatively, and a more recent development in the public discourse around Europe's relationship with religion, European 'Christian cultural heritage' is emphasised over and against a seemingly rising, hostile Islam, intersecting with the broader trend towards 'good religion/bad religion' narratives in global politics.[26]

As part of the renewed interest in religion in European public life, the concept of the 'post-secular' has emerged as an attempt to make sense of the seemingly renewed presence of religion in public life. Erin Wilson and Manfred Steger have argued that the post-secular has been utilised as both a description of and a response to the apparently new context of public religion in which we find ourselves.[27] Jürgen Habermas uses the term to explain the continuing and, in some cases, revived presence of religion in secular European societies.[28] Since the 1980s and especially with the end of the Cold War and post-9/11, it has become manifestly clear that 'religion'—variously understood, but usually in terms of personal belief systems, traditions, and institutions—is not dying out, contrary to the predictions of secularisation theory, but is taking on new significance and alternative forms.[29]

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24 José Casanova, "The Secular and Secularisms," *Social Research* 76/4 (2009), 1049–1066, at 1058–1059; Leustean & Madeley, "Religion, Politics and Law," 4.

25 Jean-Paul Willaime, "European Integration, *Laïcité* and Religion," *Religion, State and Society* 37/1 (2009), 23–35.

26 Beaman, "Battles over Symbols." For a detailed discussion of the 'good religion/bad religion' narrative, see Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2015).

27 Erin Wilson & Manfred Steger, "Religious Globalisms in a Post-secular Age," *Globalizations* 10/3 (2013), 481–495, at 485–487.

28 Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14/1 (2006), 1–25.

29 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994); Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism*; Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); Lucian Leustean & John Madeley, "Introduction: Religion, Politics and Law in the European Union," in: Lucian Leustean & John Madeley (eds.), *Religion, Politics and Law in the European Union* (London: Routledge, 2009), 1–16; Daniel Philpott, "The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations," *World Politics*, 55/1 (2002), 66–95.

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The concept of the post-secular has met significant critique, especially about the utility of the term as a description of the current European moment with regard to religion.[30] 'Post' suggests that at one time Europe was 'secular' and is now no longer.[31] Secondly, the emergence of the idea of 'secularism' and the 'secular' out of Christian theology raises additional problems about the neutrality and universality of secularism and whether Europe has ever been 'secular' in the sense of being areligious.[32] Indeed, understandings of the secular and secularisation have often rested on the assumption that secularisation is characterised by declining church attendance and profession of belief in God.[33] Yet, this assumes a highly Christian understanding of 'religion,' and indeed, in some cases, secularisation has been defined as the decline of 'traditional Christian religiosity,' not as the decline of 'religion' in general.[34] Furthermore, the very categories of the 'religious' and 'secular' have been demonstrated by numerous authors as problematic.[35] The rise of public non-Christian forms of religiosity, in particular Islam, in Europe in recent years, has to some extent highlighted that 'religion,' specifically 'Christianity,' is not as separate from identity and politics in Europe as it was previously assumed to be.

b *Public Reflexivity in the Time of Post-secularity*

Whether the 'post-secular' is considered an apt concept or not, the term by all means points to the contested nature of both religion and secularity in Europe. What it means to be religious (Christian) and/or secular is part of ongoing discussions in media, politics, and personal spheres. In this light, the popularity of events such as *The Passion* should be no surprise, especially not if events

30 See, e.g., James A. Beckford, "Public Religions and the Postsecular: Critical Reflections," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51/1 (2012), 1–19.

31 Ahmet T. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies Towards Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

32 José Casanova, "The Secular, Secularity, Secularism," in: Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, & Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds.), *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54–74.

33 See, e.g., Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford & Malden: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ken R. Dark, "Large-scale Religious Change and World Politics," in: idem (ed.), *Religion and International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 50–82.

34 See, e.g., Dick Houtman, Stef Aupers, & Paul Heelas, "Christian Religiosity and New Age Spirituality: Cross-Cultural Comparison," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48/1 (2009), 169–179.

35 See, e.g., Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism*; William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

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like these thematise societal core topics of secularity and religiosity, such as the role of Christian heritage, the position of Islam in Europe, and the role of public morality.

4 The Case

a *Methodological Account*

This article is based on longstanding ethnographic fieldwork since 2011, but particularly focuses on data that were gathered by Anita Zijdemans, between January and May 2015. The research was done in a number of different ways, both with regards to methods and data. During the preparation of *The Passion* in 2015, we conducted four semi-structured interviews with relevant people of the broadcasting companies EO and RKK—among them the press spokesman and the chief editors—and three informal conversations with the photographer of the promotional photoshoots and two singers. The producer was not available for interviews in that period. Additionally, we had some fifteen to twenty informal conversations with managers from the broadcasting companies, creative and communications people, and other people from behind the scenes. We attended a number of meetings in which decisions regarding the event were made, as well as an evaluation meeting after the event. Our attendance at these meetings was in an observatory role only, which means the taking of field notes was the most important task. This role indicated the limits that were explicitly and implicitly set for the researcher: entering the field was not easy and a slight suspicion towards the researcher always remained in the production team.

Part of the preparation for *The Passion* was to practice the procession with the large illuminated cross that is part of the performance. We attended this practice procession in Enschede, together with the project manager, the chief editors from RKK and EO, and the executive producer. This enabled us to ask the people participating in the procession about their motivations, but also provided an opportunity to talk to the organisers in a more informal setting.

We combined interviews and observations at meetings with participant observation at the event itself in Enschede, where we also had some seventy short interviews about the event with people in the audience on the basis of a questionnaire. We also assembled an online dataset by collecting all tweets with the hashtag #tp15 and @thepassion that were posted before, during, and after the performance. These tweets gave insight into the online discourses that surrounded *The Passion*. Additionally, we followed relevant news media outlets in their reporting on *The Passion*.

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In our ethnographic fieldwork in 2015, three topics popped up that appeared to be 'hot' and/or controversial. Knowing Turner's theory of public reflexivity, we found them striking and decided to analyse interviews, photographs, and collected websites in which they were topics of interest: the general character, demeanour, and appearance of Jesus in *The Passion* (section 4b), the portrayal of Jesus as a prisoner, specifically the choice to have him appear in an orange jumpsuit (4c), and the character of the actors playing Barabbas and Jesus, in particular discussions about morality related to the (immoral) past of the actors (4d). Below, we consecutively discuss these topics on the basis of Turner's theory, relating them to current issues and (public) debates in Dutch society.

b *Character of Jesus*

It was the rejection of the first promotional photos portraying the Jesus figure that drew our attention to the topic of the image and character of Jesus. When asked what image of Jesus they wished to convey through the event, the remarkable first response of several members of the production team of *The Passion* was always that they did not have one image of Jesus in mind, that the image depended on the actor portraying Jesus, and that the event is meant to leave room for audience interpretation. Yet, given that they themselves select the actor to play Jesus, there seems to be some prior conception of the image of Jesus influencing decision-making processes. Further questioning and looking into the rehearsal of the procession made clear that they actually created a very particular and distinct image of Jesus: a man with physical aspects that determine the 'classical Jesus-look' (i.e., tall, slim, with a beard and longer curly hair), a man who is, above all, honest and open. After the first shoot of promotional photos, taken of each member of the cast for the purpose of marketing the 2015 edition, the pictures portraying Jim de Groot in the role of Jesus were rejected—an incident most revealing. De Groot's body language was not open enough, and thus considered unfitting, particularly the photos that portray him standing with his arms crossed. "Jesus should instead have an open attitude. [...] I would like to have more pictures where he stands with his arms open, with an open attitude, stretching out to people, looking up (to heaven), etcetera."[36] New photos had to be taken, and during the second photoshoot (at which we were present), we observed that "openness" and also "integrity" were keywords. It was important to the organisation that Jesus looked welcoming to all people. Aside from this, it was deemed important that Jesus showed compassion and love. During the photoshoot, de Groot was told several times

36 Quotation from an anonymous email.

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to make his expression softer in order to accomplish this. At the same time, several people in the production team, in conversations that we had, added that openness and kindness were not enough: Jesus also needed to be strong, to be a leader, and not, as one of them put it, "a flunky."[37] Several also remarked that de Groot looked like Jesus. They quickly added that this was of course only intuitive, since 'we do not and cannot know what Jesus really looked like.' Especially de Groot's longer, curly hair and his beard were aspects that were strongly associated with Jesus' appearance. This confirms that the organisers did have a specific image of Jesus in mind, which they took with them in the production of *The Passion*.

Comparing the photographs of the first and second photoshoot and analysing our field notes and some interviews, wondering exactly what in our society was publicly reflected upon in *The Passion*, we realised that this specific image of Jesus appeared to be perpendicular to the negative images of political and religious leaders that had covered the news in the first years of the 2010s.[38] Corrupt, hypocritical political leaders, scandalised because of questionable and unethical behaviour, and religious leaders (mostly, but not only, in the Roman Catholic church) who turned out to have hidden many cases of sexual abuse (often of children) by clergy for decades in the twentieth century, dominating the news, may have influenced the emphasis on openness and integrity, as well as a need to reclaim the authority and integrity of Christianity. Although the production team may not have consciously created this image of Jesus as a counterpoint, his image still is a response to alleged societal developments. The open and honest image of Jesus became the presentation of a counterpoint to opaqueness and insincerity in Dutch society.

37 Interview 13 April 2015 (1) conducted by Anita Zijdemans.

38 In 2016, *Vrij Nederland*—a weekly magazine that was founded as a resistance-paper in World War II—published its "'political integrity index'" that gives an overview of Dutch politicians that were compromised in the preceding year. See Bart de Koning, "Politieke Integriteitsindex 2015," *Vrij Nederland*, 27 January 2016. https://www.vn.nl/de-politieke-integriteitsindex-2015/ (accessed 14 July 2016). In 2010, it became clear that, like in other countries, the sexual abuse of children had taken place in the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands. As more cases of sexual abuse became known, this issue came to dominate the news in the following years. This was reinforced by the publication of newsletters and press releases by the committee that the RC church set up to investigate sexual abuse (i.e., the 'Commissie Deetman'). See, e.g., Wim Deetman et al., "Onderzoek naar seksueel misbruik van minderjarigen in de Rooms-Katholieke Kerk," 16 December 2011. http://www.onderzoekrk.nl/eerste-onderzoek/pers-en-nieuwsberichten.html (accessed 14 July 2016).

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FIGURE 1 *Pictures from the second photo shoot with Jesus, ©Hans-Peter van Veldhoven, printed with permission*

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c Jesus as (Christian) Prisoner

At the point in the performance of *The Passion* when Jesus was arrested, he was dressed in an orange jumpsuit, and, after the conviction, a black bag was placed over his head before he was escorted off the stage. The orange jumpsuit and the black bag have been part of this scene and the subject of discussion, mostly on Twitter and Facebook, since the first edition of *The Passion* in Gouda in 2011. Yet, in 2015, the scene prompted strong(er) reactions from many viewers via social media. After previous editions of *The Passion*, Guantanamo Bay was mentioned in connection to the orange jumpsuits, but in 2015 many people on social media saw a strong connection between these orange jumpsuits and videos that had circulated depicting the execution of prisoners and particularly Christian dissidents by the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria.

The orange jumpsuit was seen by viewers as a symbol of religious persecution, particularly persecution of Christians, and the Easter story was interpreted by some as a message about religious persecution and the importance of the right to freedom of religion or belief, though this was not an explicit intention of the organisers of the event. This interpretation is clearly articulated in a strand of discussion concerning terrorist attacks that had taken place in Kenya on the day of the 2015 Passion, where Al-Shabab militants killed 147 Christians.[39] The official Twitter account of *The Passion* linked the orange

FIGURE 2 *Jesus with two soldiers after his conviction in* The Passion, *©EO/Arianne Ramaker, printed with permission*

39 See BBC, "Kenya Attack: 147 Dead in Garissa University Assault," 3 April 2015. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32169080 (accessed 27 June 2016).

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FIGURE 3 *Victims of IS led to their execution, still from a YouTube-video*

jumpsuit to the persecution of belief, thus connecting it with the situation in Kenya: "Orange jumpsuit represents persecution of belief. Just like in the Easter story, today as well people are being persecuted and killed because of their belief."[40] The responses to this tweet were varied. Where some people accepted this explanation, others considered this a far-fetched excuse from the organisation of *The Passion* for a misplaced choice of portrayal. Some people simply contradicted the statement, saying the orange jumpsuits were a reference to Guantanamo Bay or IS. Several people on Twitter already pointed out that these orange jumpsuits had been used in *The Passion* prior to their use by IS. In fact, the orange jumpsuits were already used in the Manchester Passion, before the event took place in the Netherlands for the first time in 2011.[41] Still, the negative association caused people to tweet comments like: "An orange jumpsuit… I fear that not a crucifixion, but a beheading will follow."[42]

40 For this tweet, including the responses to it, see The Passion (@thepassion), Twitter post, 2 April 2015. https://twitter.com/thepassion/status/583724457321181184 (accessed 27 June 2016).

41 The Manchester Passion is the event that inspired the Dutch producer of *The Passion* to stage the passion narrative in a similar way in the Netherlands. The Manchester Passion took place on Good Friday, 14 April 2006, and was aired live on BBC Three. For more information, see, e.g., BBC, "The Manchester Passion," 13 April 2006. http://www.bbc.co.uk/manchester/content/articles/2006/04/10/140406_manchester_passion_event_feature.shtml (accessed 8 February 2016).

42 For this tweet, see Niels Roelen (@nielsroelen), Twitter post, 2 April 2015, https://twitter.com/nielsroelen/status/583716212431028225 (accessed 27 June 2016).

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The orange jumpsuit did not only become an important topic on Twitter, it was also discussed on prime time on RTL *Late Night*, a popular talk show on RTL4, one of the largest commercial broadcasting channels in the Netherlands. Producer Jacco Doornbos, director David Grifhorst, and actor Jeroen van Koningsbrugge who portrayed Judas in *The Passion*, were guests the day after the 2015 performance of *The Passion*.[43] Doornbos gave an explanation about the controversy surrounding the orange jumpsuits, saying that the story was controversial in nature, just as it was two thousand years ago. He explained that when *The Passion* was first performed in the Netherlands in 2011, the orange jumpsuits referenced Guantanamo Bay. Now, Doornbos said, they are linked to awful videos of IS.[44] Remarkably, he did not link the orange colour to the persecution of belief in the way that it was done on the official Twitter account, as mentioned above.

This example demonstrates that the orange jumpsuits can refer to several things, but surely tied the Passion narrative to current public debates on religious terrorism and violence—issues looming large in Dutch society (and in Europe, for that matter). A Christian play staged in the public sphere is not a harmless ritual, but an event that makes clear to Dutch society that 'religion' is not as separate from identity and politics as it was previously assumed to be. The rising visibility of particularly Islamic religion, as well as radical Islamic groups whose oppression and use of violence have led to a refugee influx in Europe, signals major changes for European societies. The pitfall of the portrayal of prisoners in orange suits in *The Passion* is that Islam could easily come to be considered a 'bad religion,' in contrast to Christianity that, in the case of this play, is allocated the role of 'good religion.' *The Passion* portrays a confusion of ordinary everyday categories: in the secular society where religion is often considered to remain a private issue, the public sphere through the performance of *The Passion* becomes a 'sacred' space (sacred in Turner's understanding as distinct from profane, secular, mundane). In and around the performance of *The Passion*, Dutch society reflects and comments on itself and is enabled to realise just how far it has fallen short of its own 'ideal secular standard,' in the face of (the fear of) Islamisation and the European refugee crisis that is becoming part of daily life.

43 Only a fragment of the TV-broadcast is available online. See RTL *Late Night*, "Jeroen herhaalt huzarenstukje The Passion." https://www.rtl.nl/video/034bef19-ef26-b2e8–974f-f320a39fb927 (accessed 10 December 2017).

44 It is remarkable that Doornbos used the word "*vreselijk*" (awful) to refer to IS but did not use it when he talked about Guantanamo Bay.

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d *The Morality of the Actors*

We will discuss one last issue that caused controversy and therefore drew our attention in the analysis of our collected ethnographic data: the moral character of the actors. This is most clearly shown in the participation of Dave Roelvink playing the role of Barabbas in the 2015 edition of *The Passion*. Roelvink, the then twenty-year-old son of a Dutch celebrity folk singer, became famous in the Netherlands in 2014 when a sex video appeared on YouTube of an orgy in which he participated. A woman figuring in the video brought a lawsuit against him and also accused him of theft.[45] On social media, some users, especially young women, expressed that they found him very attractive. This also became clear on the square in Enschede, where we observed a small group of mothers with their young daughters: the moment Roelvink appeared on stage, the mothers lifted their daughters so they could see him, resulting in a jubilant state of all daughters.

The other type of comments focused on Dave's immoral background, which in the eyes of many people made him unsuited to participate in such an event. A poll on the website of the largest national newspaper in the Netherlands, *De Telegraaf*, asked people whether they thought it was acceptable that someone of disrepute (Roelvink was not convicted yet) would participate in *The Passion*. Remarkably, 72% of the people who responded to the poll were against the participation of Roelvink.[46] Exactly because of his background, his participation also caused some major discussions all over social media. Yet the character that Roelvink played was that of Barabbas, the criminal who gets released instead of Jesus. Because of his background, Roelvink was in fact typecast in this role, a point emphasised by the producer of *The Passion*, Doornbos, in the episode of RTL *Late Night* that aired on the day after *The Passion*. He explained that each year someone who has been recently discredited in the media is chosen to portray Barabbas.[47] For this reason, Roelvink, according to the organisers, made an excellent candidate.

Similar dynamics emerged in discussions about the choice to let de Groot portray Jesus. De Groot was brought up in an atheist family and had a history

45 NU, "Dave Roelvink Vervolgd Voor Diefstal En Heling," 25 March 2015. http://www.nu.nl/achterklap/4018720/dave-roelvink-vervolgd-diefstal-en-heling.html (accessed 25 March 2015).

46 See *De Telegraaf*, "EO de mist in met Dave Roelvink," video, 1 April 2015. http://www.telegraaf.nl/prive/23874956/__EO_de_mist_in_met_Dave_Roelvink__.html (accessed 9 June 2016). See also Klomp & van der Meulen, "The Passion as Ludic Practice."

47 See RTL *Late Night*, "Jeroen herhaalt huzarenstukje."

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that included drug abuse. Before *The Passion* was staged, some people in the production team doubted whether he was suitable to play Jesus due to his background. According to the chief editors of both EO and RKK, a complicating factor in this situation was that the media focused very much on his past, instead of focusing on his upcoming performance.[48] The media emphasised the conflict between de Groot's unreligious past and his participation in a religious event. Through our interviews with the organisers, it became clear that this was especially problematic for the evangelical broadcasting company EO and their supporters, as it was not only an internal debate between Christians, but a debate that was held publicly, primarily in the media.

The examples of the actors playing Jesus and Barabbas and the debates surrounding these characterisations can be seen as a public thematisation of a moral topic, i.e., whether someone of disrepute can have positive public recognition on a TV show. This is directly related to the status reversal mentioned by Turner: those whom one would not expect to be asked to play a role in this event, because of their way of life or their ethical behaviour, do get two important roles. Yet, that is not the whole story: just as important as this ritual reversal are the ways a society finds to comment on and critique itself (e.g., social media).[49] Interestingly, these comments show that, in the eyes of the public, the atheism and drug abuse of de Groot seemed less of a barrier to play a role in *The Passion* than the sexual infractions of Roelvink. The discussion does not occur in one place, but across different, converging media. This shows the continuing possibility of religion engendering and funnelling public debate.[50]

5 Conclusion and Discussion

Our examination of a particular public meta-social ritual showed several topicalities in Dutch society: opaqueness and hypocrisy of religious and political leaders, the rising visibility of Islam (particularly in religious fundamentalist shapes) in a society that was thought to be secular, and the moral indignation that comes with the status reversal that occurs in public ritual. Returning to our research question regarding how a public religious event engenders public reflexivity about contemporary religious and moral debates we thus conclude that *The Passion*—a story of old in a contemporary form—mirrors contemporary social issues, both in the representation and in the discussions surrounding

48 Interviews 6 February 2015 and 13 April 2015 (2) conducted by Anita Zijdemans.

49 See Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection," 467.

50 For further discussion, see Klomp & van der Meulen, "The Passion as Ludic Practice."

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it. Yet, it does not only reflect contemporary issues: by its performative mode the play also shapes the reflection, steering it in certain directions. With the use of digital media this public reflexivity also acquires virtual dimensions and is performed across different media, which engender both interactive participation of the public in the ritual and comments by the public on the ritual. The reflective practice adds to current discourses on (in this case) politics, religion, and morality. This gives reason to assume that religious and moral debates that are engendered and funnelled by *The Passion* may, in the long run, influence the secular self-understanding of the Dutch.

Additionally, we will discuss three questions here: (1) What does *The Passion* tell us about the (post-)secular character of Dutch society?; (2) Could a non-Christian, secular, or other-religious event have a similar role as meta-social ritual for public reflexivity?; and (3) How dangerous is the opposition between good and bad religion?

Connecting the post-secular debate with Turner's theory, one could say that, especially in these times of contestation, one can *expect* society to respond to meta-social rituals such as *The Passion*.[51] It shapes and evokes debates of important public topics. Rather than seeing this as a reversal of a trend of secularisation, we understand it as an affirmation of the post-secular condition. Without retracting our critical comments on post-secular theory (see above), we do think that *The Passion* points to the essential contested nature of what being 'religious' or 'secular' means nowadays. The event derives its salience and popularity from addressing and thematising this contestation.

When extending this idea, the question comes up whether a non-Christian, other religious, or secular event could have the same function for public reflexivity. Of course, this is a topic that requires further research, which we hope will be done in the future. Provisionally, we think along two diverging lines. On the one hand, one should not underestimate the importance of the Christian heritage element in *The Passion*. Europeans are subconsciously shaped by their Christian past, even if they assume themselves to be secular.[52] The story of the suffering Christ is so well known and taken for granted that it can form

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51 This does not necessarily mean that the *whole* of society is in accord with what is being reflected on or agrees on the outcomes of this reflection. According to Lynch, public media represent "the sacred in ways that generate fragmented, overlapping and often transient forms of collective identification that may perpetuate social conflicts as much as integration." We agree with his criticism, but want to stress the collective character of the event. See Lynch, *The Sacred*, 88.

52 See, e.g., Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

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a common *tableau* to thematise and discuss important public topics in a way that a story of the life of Mohammed, to give but one example, cannot. The narrative of the Passion and its role in European life offer the possibility for public reflexivity, so the Christian character is central. However, on the other hand, we should also be aware that there is a variety of other sacred forms, many without religious or Christian content, which offer possibilities for society to think about itself. We here pick up the line of thought of Lynch, who distinguished between the sacred and the religious. Non-religious events can also be experienced as sacred events and can trigger a similar type of public reflexivity as *The Passion* does. So, to sum up, while the Christian character of *The Passion* is an important feature in our understanding of its public-reflexive role, its Christian character is by no means a necessary condition for this role.

The Passion is not a neutral event. By portraying the central characters in a particular way, the producers not only influence how the public will think about the story but also about the moral and religious topics which are explored in the show. In this regard, we found it particularly unfavourable how Jesus and Barabbas were portrayed as prisoners in orange suits, as this may reinforce the images of 'good religion/bad religion.' In recent years, the orange suits have called radical Islam to mind, which is not—and, in the eyes of many, should not become—part of Dutch contemporary national identity, and is not considered harmless, but seen as a threat to European/Dutch society. The comments and criticism evoked by the orange suits of the prisoners Jesus and Barabbas lay bare a fear of/antipathy against radical Islam, which is seen as being 'not our religion' and something to keep at a great distance from society.

In this respect, it is particularly the combination of the image of Jesus Christ who is *positively* characterised by openness and integrity, on the one hand (4b), and the negative feelings caused by associations with religious (Islamic) fundamentalism, on the other hand (4c), that makes the portrayal dangerous, because it may contribute to portrayals of Islam and Christianity that see Islam as intolerant and oppressive, while Christianity is an inspiration for secular values of equality, democracy, and human rights.[53] We need to be clear here that this good-bad portrayal is not the intention of the producer and

53 This is, e.g., stated by rulings in the European Court of Human Rights, but also the anti-Islamic ideology of populist politicians, like Geert Wilders in the Netherlands. Beaman, "Battles over Symbols." On the Dahlab case, see Carolyn Evans, "The 'Islamic Scarf' in the European Court of Human Rights," *Melbourne Journal of International Law* 7/1 (2006), n.p. http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/MelbJIL/2006/4.html (accessed 26 September 2016). On the Lautsi case, see European Court of Human Rights Grand Chamber. *Case*

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the broadcasting companies: they have repeatedly indicated that they try to be inclusive, often mentioning the fact that several Muslims over the years have walked along in the procession with the cross. Yet, by maintaining the orange suits in a lurking anti-Islamic societal climate on the one hand, and the rather liberal, open, and positive way in which *The Passion*, and especially the Jesus character, are portrayed, on the other hand, they are jeopardising their own efforts to be inclusive.

We offer the interpretation of *The Passion* as a meta-social ritual for public reflexivity as a contribution to the academic understanding of modern religion and secularity. Future research should be sensitive to the variety of sacred forms—whether they are called 'religious' or 'secular'—that people use to reflect on themselves, individually and collectively. Also, its multimedia character should be taken into account. Reflection and participation in ritual does not take place in one place, in one square, in one building, but across media in an ever-ongoing conversation. And lastly, the role of the individual and the collective in this process is important. *The Passion* is an event that is both highly individualised and collectively experienced. The paradoxes, ironies, and reversals in contemporary religion should alert us to the fact that something interesting is happening in contemporary religion.

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