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Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 June 2019

Spatial Contestations and Conversions



Podcast with **Daan Beekers** (10 June 2019).

Interviewed by **Christopher Cotter**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/spatial-contestations-and-conversions/>

Christopher Cotter (CC): *Listeners to the Religious Studies Project, particularly in a European context, might be quite familiar with the sight of a former church building that has now turned derelict, or is being used for purpose that perhaps it wasn't intended for, or is being rejuvenated by another religious community – another Christian community – and so on. That's certainly the case here in Edinburgh, where I did my doctoral work. And I'm joined today by [Daan Beekers](#) to discuss spatial contestations and conversions, particularly looking at former or different church buildings in the Dutch context. So first-off, Daan – welcome to the Religious Studies Project!*

Daan Beekers (DB): Thank you. Thanks for having me.

CC: *No problem, Daan. Daan is currently a post-doctoral research fellow here at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh. And before coming here he was a post doc researcher at the Department of Religious Studies in Utrecht, where he was researching the abandonment and repurposing of church buildings, first with the HERA project, [Iconic Religion](#), and then with [Birgit Meyer's](#) research programme [Religious Matters in an Entangled World](#). And we'll hear about both of these, presently. His doctoral dissertation was defended in 2015 at VU Amsterdam. It involved doing a comparative ethnographic study of religious commitment among young Dutch Muslims and Christians. And he's currently completing a book manuscript based on this work. And his publications include the volume, [Straying from the Straight Path: How senses of failure invigorate lived religion](#), published with Berghahn. And he co-edited that with [David Kloos](#). So, Daan, first-off, let's, maybe . . . Before we hear about the Dutch context in general, it might help if you could maybe situate your work, and the trajectory of it, within those two big research projects. I know I certainly know a lot about Iconic Religion, through its UK team – which involved [Kim Knott](#) who was my doctoral supervisor. Tell us a little bit about those projects.*

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DB: Sure, yes. So the Iconic Religion project started in 2014. And I joined that just after completing my PhD thesis – I was actually still completing it when I joined that project. And that was a project on the visible presence of religion in urban space, specifically in Amsterdam, Berlin and London. The project was a co-operation between researchers of Lancaster University, which is where Kim Knott is still based, and then Utrecht University with Birgit Meyer and Bochum University with [Volkhard Krech](#). And so yes it really focused on how people in their everyday lives encounter religion in a very tangible, visible way. And I was coming from doing my PhD thesis on religious youth – so, young Muslims and Christians in a Dutch secular society – which, actually, very much focused on religious commitment and, in a sense, religious vitality. And I always kind-of knew that there was another side to the story of religion in the Netherlands, which is of course rapid secularisation, and the drop in numbers of Church attendance. And then I was starting to notice all these buildings in the Netherlands which are being closed down and converted for other purposes. So I kind-of got more and more interested in this other side of the story. So, what happens to Christian culture, Christian material culture, when church buildings are no longer being attended by people? And so, when I applied to this project called Iconic Religion, I argued in my research proposal, “Well, this project is on the visible presence of religion in the city, and I would actually argue that the transformation of Church buildings is actually one of the most important changes in how religion is present or absent in the city.” So that got me on to the project. And I started that in Amsterdam.

CC: *And then we'll hear now, I suppose, about the specific work that you did. But, again, we've hinted at it there. (5:00) But for the sake of our Listeners who may not know anything about the Dutch context, maybe just a two-minute “Religion in the Netherlands”. . . ? Particularly, perhaps, Amsterdam, where*

DB: Yes. So, the Netherlands has sometimes been characterised as one of the most religious nations of Europe, or one of the most Christianised nations of Europe. So religion was very important in Dutch history, and for the political emancipation of, or independence of, the Netherlands, *vis-à-vis* its former ruler, Spain, which was Catholic. So the Dutch, in their own perception, liberated themselves from Spain and became a Protestant nation. So Protestant identity was very important in the Netherlands for quite some time. Catholicism, and also what were seen as dissenting Protestant groups, were given very little space to observe their religion. And then, you've got the process of what is known in the Netherlands as [pillarisation](#) – so the coming about of different pillars. After the French revolution, when Catholics were again given the room to practise their religion and to manifest themselves in public space, you got this very strong mobilisation of religious sub-cultures, or pillars, that were really

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important in people's everyday lives. They really organised much of social life in terms of schools housing, work and so on. So, in that time, religion was very important in the Netherlands. And this was actually up until, like, the 1950s. And then, as elsewhere, a rapid process of secularisation was setting in, or "un-churching", as we say in Dutch. I think this isn't a very common word in English. But I like the term un-churching, because it's more specific than secularisation. There are, of course, a lot of debates about whether . . . what secularisation is, and to what extent it has taken place. So the Netherlands changed from being one of the most Christianised nations of Europe, to becoming one of the most de-Christianised ones. With, as I said, a very quick process of secularisation to the extent that, today, only about one fourth of the population considers themselves Christian – or religious, I should say – and only about half of them would actually attend religious spaces on a regular basis. So it has become, in that sense, a very secular country today.

CC: And am I right in saying . . . is this an Amsterdam stat or a Dutch stat, that two churches are closing per week?

DB: Yes, so this is a Dutch . . . a national . . . it's been estimated. . . . So, hundreds of churches have closed down in the last few decades. And the state's agency of cultural heritage estimated that the rate of church closures will continue at around two churches a week. But I've also been told by others, by another agency organisation in the Netherlands, that this should actually be four churches a week. It would be a more realistic estimate. So it's really an astonishing speed by which these buildings are being closed down.

CC: Absolutely. So before we get into some of your specific case studies, I think when we first met to discuss this interview, one of the first things I wrote down is, like, "We'll have no 'essence' questions" (Laughs) Which is my critical RS, wanting to emphasise that even by having this conversation we're not saying that a building in itself is religious, or that it is sacred or holy. What we're doing is we're looking at the ways in which buildings are interacted with, and discursively constructed, and the way they occupy space in the heritage discourse, and the individual, and community memories, and so on. So we want to make sure that we get that in there. But it's not inherently holy, in that sense. But then also, in one of the arguments that you sent that I read through, you spoke about the difference between "theories in heritage" and "theories of heritage". And that might be a useful thing to mention, just before we go into the case study. (10:00)

DB: Yes these are terms, I think, coined in an article by Waterton and Watson – "[Framing Theory](#)", I think the article is called – and so they distinguish between different kinds of theories about heritage.
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And one distinction that they make that I find helpful is that between theories in heritage, and theories of heritage. What you see when you look at literature on Christian material culture, a lot of that work . . . not all of it, obviously, but quite a bit of that work kind-of asks, “How can we preserve this heritage for future generations? So, “What are the best practices in preserving this?” “What threatens it?” And so on. So all these are questions which I think are very important, but they are questions that are located within the heritage discourse. So it's already taken for granted that these are important cases of heritage. And a theory *of* heritage, as Waterton and Watson put it, would actually ask, “What makes these things heritage?” “Why are they defined as heritage, and by whom?” So there is the whole question of representation, and discourse, and power relations, and so on. For what purposes are they heritage-ised? A terrible word! A tongue twister. And also, what kind of new fault-lines emerge in this process? So who's being left out? So that's quite interesting work being done now in Christian heritage, which also talks about the way populist politicians, for example, are now very apt at mobilising Judaeo-Christian heritage in their political discourses. But, in important ways, it's also a discursive tool to exclude Muslims and migrants, and so on. So it's also a way of defining who's “out”. So that would be more kind-of a theory *of* heritage approach.

CC: *Yes. So analysing all these discourses that are invoking heritage – who's included and excluded; why certain things are thought to be worthy of preservationAnd indeed, for example, in my own work in Edinburgh, yes – there's plenty of the idea that all these churches are part of the urban heritage that should be preserved, etc. But first of all, what should they be preserved for? And we'll get onto that in your examples. There are certain uses that are seen as more or less appropriate. But also there's a certain image of what a church is. And here in the Southside of Edinburgh we've got the Salvation Army, over on St Leonards, and we've got the True Jesus Church, down in Gifford Park, which have both been there for decades and decades. But they don't look like churches, in the popular imagination. So they don't feature in anyone's idea of something that should be preserved. Because there's a very specific thing that looks like a church, that should be preserved.*

DB: Exactly, yeah.

CC: *OK. That's contextualised it a bit here, I think. I think we're probably going to use two examples, particularly. There's the [Fatih Mosque](#) – and I don't know if I'm going to pronounce it right – it's the Chassé . . .*

DB: [Chassé Church](#), that's it.

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CC: *And, possibly, starting with the Fatih Mosque: I guess, the example of the various discursive entanglements that are going on. Tell us about it, and why it's interesting?*

DB: Yes, sure. I was just thinking of the Fatih Mosque, actually, when you were making that point about church buildings being recognisable, or not, as churches. Because the Fatih Mosque is one of the biggest, largest mosques in Amsterdam, that has been around for a few decades already. It opened in 1982. But it's located in a former Catholic church on the Rozengracht, in the centre of Amsterdam – actually very near to the Anne Frank House, which many people would know, and the [Western Church](#).

CC: *I presume I've seen it, actually, when I was in Amsterdam. But I didn't notice it.*

DB: Exactly! And that's the . . . and people, actually, even don't notice the church even though it's quite a big, monumental church. But I think many people are very much focussed on the Western Church which is like the main Protestant church right next to the Anne Frank house. And it kind-of . . . the Rozengracht, the street, is a street that people quickly pass through. So somehow, when I talk to my friends and family in Amsterdam they often don't even know this church (15:00). Sometimes they do. But they . . . almost none of them would know that there is a mosque in that church at the moment. And that's, actually, also an issue that the mosque community is facing at the moment. So I've written an [article](#) – together with my Utrecht-based colleague [Pooyan Tamimi Arab](#) – for a special issue on iconic religion in the journal *Material Religion*. And there we also showed how the mosque community, especially its younger members, are struggling with this image of being a kind-of a “hidden mosque”. And it's actually this very term, hidden mosque, that is often used by people – by visitors to the mosque, for example, and also by non-Muslim visitors who are local politicians, and so on. And that's actually one of the points we make in that article: that it's interesting that this term is used, the notion of a hidden house of worship. Because it's actually a historical discursive genre in Dutch religious history, which was used in that time that I referred to earlier, when Catholics were not allowed to publicly worship. So they had to resort to clandestine churches, often in attics, and these were called hidden churches.

CC: *But why is it so hidden, then? You're right about . . . It's something to do with the entrance, in particular, and there's no signage. So, you know, why is it so hidden? How does that make . . . I guess you've mentioned the young people sort-of constructing it in that way. How do the users of the mosque feel and how are they . . . Are they trying to combat that image now?*

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DB: Yes, so it's quite interesting. So this has to do with the material legacy of the church building. So the very fact that there are located in a church means that they are not very recognisable as a mosque. There's a mosque nearby that's also in a church building that also few people would realise or recognise as such. Another important point is that it has to do with a kind-of mismatch between Muslim sacred space and the way in which this particular building was organised. So when this Muslim community constructed their mosque within this building it turned out quite quickly that the direction of prayer in Islam, the *qibla*, was precisely the opposite direction to the direction which the Catholics had prayed. So normally you would come into the church through the entrance and you would face the altar and pray in the direction of the altar. And in this case this was facing the west. So what the Muslim community did, or had to do, was to construct . . . to close down the entrance, basically, to construct a wall there, which would become their prayer wall, as it were, the site of the prayer niche. And they constructed a very small entrance on the side. And what was the former entrance of the church became a space for shops. So, at the moment, there's actually a bike shop there. So, when you pass this building, the first thing you see is a bike shop. And it is quite difficult to actually realise that there is a mosque here. So what this community is doing is they're currently in the process of building a new entrance, in order to become more visible as a Mosque. Another interesting thing in this respect, perhaps, is that also in a way it's also a story about history repeating itself. Because on this very site, there once was – before the Catholics built their church there – there was a headquarters of an important socialist movement in the Netherlands. And so that site was first converted into a chapel by Jesuits, Catholic Jesuits. But they were facing similar problems that the Muslims are facing now. They kind-of felt, in that time – the early twentieth century – as one catholic author said, “This place remains a theatre of socialists.” We have our altar but we know this was once the stage from which the socialist leaders would give their . . . not sermons, but lectures (20:00). And their political rallies. And you know one of the only things that would mark out the place as Catholic was that they placed a big cross on the top. And similarly for the mosque now, one of the only things that marks it out as a mosque is that they placed a crescent on top of the church. So these small things that mark out the space. But it's also a struggle, with people, that conversion is never really complete, right? So people always struggle, very often struggle, in a converted space with what I've elsewhere called [sacred residue](#), or some kind of leftover of its previous use. Which might enable, might make certain things possible, but it also constrains particular usage or representations of the space.

CC: *And some of that might be material presence, material evidence, in a sense, or some of it might be discursive and remembered. If I were to go in there, I may not know anything about its socialist*

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history, but I would probably be able to detect the mosque and the Catholic church, but again that shows the importance of historical context and the lived memory of the space as well. So sticking with former Catholic churches, then, the Chassé Church gives some really good illustrations of how this notion of heritage is mobilised or contested by a variety of different constituencies. Perhaps again, you could just introduce that specific case study, but then also all the different groups who have a stake in it?

DB: Yes. Sure. OK. So this Chassé Church was also a Catholic church, from around the same time as the one I've just talked about. So they were both built in the 1920s. And they both, actually, had a relatively short life. So the Chassé Church closed down in 1997, because of dwindling attendance. And then it was actually desolate for many years. It was dilapidated, the building wasn't doing very well. And there was a lot of conflict around what should happen to it – the building. And what's very fascinating, in this case, is that when it closed down in the late 90s, both the municipality and the Catholic church – the diocese and the local parish – actually decided to demolish the building. They said “It's going to be very difficult to re-use the space in a productive or efficient way. It also doesn't really have any kind-of special heritage qualities. And also . . .” not unimportantly, “it will get us more money if we demolish it and sell the land.” And the Catholic church very much needed this money because they had to renovate another church in that neighbourhood that was going to be their main Catholic church, parish church. But then local residents, who were themselves not church-going, started to mobilise themselves and to very much advocate for the preservation of this church building. So you have this really interesting debate basically between the local Catholic organisation that says “We can get rid of this building. We don't need it anymore and it's not going to be helpful to leave it there.” And local people, who are not part of that community, who actually stand up for it to “save” – quote-unquote – that space.

CC: *People who probably didn't particularly care about it when it wasn't being threatened. It was just a part of their familiar urban environment.*

DB: Exactly, yeah.

CC: *And, I guess, when this moment happened where it was potentially going to be threatened, then . . .*

DB: Yeah. That's a very interesting point. It's interesting to see how people suddenly become aware of these kind-of iconic sites when they're threatened to . . . disappear, really. So in this case you see

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different, quite different positions. So I'm trying to make sense of this paradox, if you will, between local people who you might describe as non-religious and want to safeguard this building, and Catholics who want to demolish it. Trying to make sense of that, I've conducted fieldwork there and talked to many different groups involved (25:00). And what I've found is that people ascribe quite different values to a site like a church building. So, for many people, they would say, "OK this is more than a building." So this is kind-of mantra that you hear very often, in these discussions. But what they mean by this mantra, "This is more than a building" is very different for different parties involved. So, for kind-of the parish leadership and the officials of the diocese, the religious leaders there, they would say, "The church is the house of God." You know? So it is a very important religious meaning. It's a sacred place. It's consecrated. And sure, you know, when it's closed down it gets deconsecrated. But in the memories of people it always remains associated with something sacred. So it's very difficult to remove this aura of sacredness from a Catholic church. So that's a strong . . . so they kind-of see the church as a house of God, really. And then if you talk with the local parishioners, so the members of the community, they would often share this view. They would say, "Yes. It's an important religious space, sacred, a place of God." But what struck me is that for them it's also, very importantly, about community, you know. So a place of a local community coming together. A very familiar place that's imbued with local histories, but also personal memories, and so on. So it's a really communal place in that sense. People have all kinds of very intimate, personal memories of church buildings. And they went through very important personal life events there, baptisms, weddings and so on. And I talked to these local parishioners. It may be also good to say that the ones . . . I mean, this is quite a long time ago. But I managed to find a few of them who were still around. And they said, "You know, at the time we were quite OK with the idea of demolishing the church because for us . . ." Like, one of them said, "When I go back to the church now, and it has been . . ." I don't know if we mentioned this, but it has been converted to a dance studios. So it's now a dance studio. And she said, "If I'm back there now it really feels uncanny. You know? It feels . . . it's no longer a church. It's no longer what it was in my memories." And it is still connected to many of the memories, so it's still a very important place for her, but it is no longer what it once was. So it's kind-of a disorienting experience for her. And then you have . . . But then the local residents who were very unhappy about the idea of demolishing the church, for them it's very much a place of local belonging: a place that makes them feel at home in their neighbourhoods – especially after it was converted. You see that many of these local residents are very happy about the way in which the converted church building, as a dance studio, brings back life to the neighbourhood, a sense of community and belonging, and so on. So what I found very interesting here is that whereas for many parishioners the closing down of the church represents a loss

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of their home, for these people it actually indicates a return of a home – or something that helps them to feel at home in their neighbourhood.

CC: *Exactly. I found, again, non-church attending individuals in the Southside here, talking about, for instance, the Southside Community Centre, which was the former Nicholson Street Church. And it was a carpet storage place for a while. And now it's a community centre. So I heard time and again the idea of "I didn't like it being a carpet showroom. Now it's a useful place", or someone else said, "I really like that it's sort-of being used for what it was built for – for the community." And again, these are people who weren't participating in it when it was a religious place or – quote-unquote – "religious". But now that's being used, it's fulfilling some sort of model of the ideal: "This is what religion, or Christianity, is meant to be."*

DB: Right. Yeah. And it's interesting that you say that. Because it's the very same point that the owner of the dance studios makes time and time again: that by giving it its new purpose, he's actually bringing back the building to its original purpose, which is bringing people together (30:00). But of course it was bringing people together before God, for a very particular purpose of worship, right? You know, and that part is, in that sense, left out. Even though that guy, the owner, I should say, is quite spiritually inclined and interested in religion. But then you have – and it's maybe an important point to make – other local residents who – and in a sense that's like a fourth group giving a particular meaning to the building – who very much emphasise the way in which the church building is a very important part of Dutch religious history, and symbolises Dutch history. And, actually, the spokesperson of the local committee advocating the preservation of the church very often made this point. And said, you know, "If you demolish these buildings, you actually demolish your history." And so, what I found interesting in that case is that these people actually said – the spokesperson and like-minded people – they didn't really care that much about what happened to the building, right? They said, "As long as it's not getting too much of a nuisance" in terms of, like, parking space problems and that debate. But they didn't really care whether it would be repurposed for religious use, or secular use, or whatever else, as long as the building is preserved. "Because that building is important for who we are, for our identity." So there you get more of Christianity as cultural heritage discourse, which is often kind-of propagated by people – like the ones in this case – who quite explicitly distance themselves from Christian beliefs, and doctrines, and so on. They're often quite self-consciously secularised people who are none-the-less very passionate about the importance of Christianity as culture, or as history, as art, as identity, and so on.

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CC: *Yes. So there we have those four constituencies: the institutional church; the parishioners, or former parishioners; the local residents, non-participating residents; and this whole sort-of heritage, industry, story and that kind of thing. And you can see how these different discourses they could maybe even use the same language but they could be mobilised for quite different purposes – positive or negative, depending how you wanted to inflect it. We're already pretty much out of time here, and I know that we could talk on a lot more. But we'll certainly direct Listeners to . . . You have an excellent [blog post](#) which summarises a lot of this. And your Material Religion article. And hopefully some more will be coming out. But I just wanted to finish with a final couple of questions that we've been talking around this. We've been talking about former churches . . . and we should also say that sometimes there'll be a church that's then used by another Christian group. That hasn't really come up . . .*

DB: Very often, yes.

CC: *But is there anything. . . Would we find these same sort of processes happening if we were looking at buildings that weren't churches . . . that were just sort-of other prominent local buildings? Or does that question even make any sense? Is there something to do with these being churches that has meant that they are given their sort-of iconic status? Is there anything inherently religious here? I know the answers before I get there . . . (Laughs).*

DB: In part. Partly yes, partly no. So I think you see similar things happening with non-religious sites: old post offices, water towers and these kinds of sites which are often very important local landmarks, and often inspire the same kinds of local concerns about maintenance and preservation. These places belong to who we are, and to our identity as a neighbourhood. But at the same time I do think there is something . . . It's always kind-of a bit risky when you talk about this, because you get to this “There's something extra to these buildings.” But in the way that people talk about it – so if you look at people's narratives, and the ways in which they relate to these buildings – people often have this kind-of idea of sacredness associated with these church buildings (35:00). Or, as one local resident said to me in relation to the Chassé Church a few years ago . . . The clock was restored to the tower. It had been silent for a few years. And it had been restored now. And he said to me, “Now I feel that the soul of the neighbourhood is back.” So there seems to be this sense a kind-of spiritual or religious side to these buildings that is important for the way in which people relate to them. But also, I think, especially when you look at today's debates about heritage, this religious aspect is also really important. And this really marks these places out, or sets them apart from, for example, old post offices. The fact that such buildings really lend themselves to this kind-of idea that these sites are a

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part of our religious heritage, they are very important to our identity and to who we are as Dutch people, as European people, as British or Scottish people. And I think that's an interesting shift, also, that's happening now in our kind-of post-secular age, if you want. This move from people complaining a lot about churches, and taking a lot of distance from religion, to re-appraising religion – but in very particular ways. In ways that emphasise history, art, culture and heritage.

CC: Yes, so there's a sort of lingering insider discourse, I suppose, of their sacrality, and the import of the buildings. But then also in these urban spaces, in Western Europe, it is going to be churches that were given prominent spaces. They were intentionally built to be eye-catching, and dominating the skyline, and the centres of communities. So is it any wonder, when we do look for sites where there are lots of discursive contestations happening . . . ? It probably is going to end up being these places, regardless of any sui generis argument about them having some inherent qualities. Historically, they've been prominent, due to these specificities. So what's next? For you? You're writing up your book?

DB: I'm actually . . . at the moment I'm very much working on my older project, in a way, which is still also my current project on comparison of Muslims and Christians in the Netherlands. I'm trying to finish my book manuscript now. I'm also working on a special issue on this topic. And I'm hoping, in the future, perhaps here in Scotland, to kind-of converge these two projects together. That's kind-of my hope and my aspiration. So, to really connect this study of what happens to Christian material culture to questions about religious pluralism and relationships between Muslims and Christians, religious co-existence, and so on. So in a way that's also already what I was doing in the case of the Fatih Mosque in Amsterdam. But I'm expanding a bit on that. And, yeah, to kind-of see if we could, or if I could, use questions of heritage as a lens to look into religious diversity and co-existence.

CC: Well, Daan Beekers, we look forward to the fruits of that research as it emerges. And thank you for your time.

DB: Thank you very much. Thanks so much.

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