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Coming of Age in the Secular Republic of Fiction

Oskar Verkaaik

Peter van der Veer's most influential book, *Religious Nationalism*, was published three years before Lila Abu-Lughod advocated an anthropology of the particular in her article 'Writing Against Culture' (1991), intended as a direct response to the celebrated volume *Writing Culture* (1983), edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus. According to Clifford and Marcus, anthropologists craft written interpretations of the ways of life of other peoples, but since these interpretations are subsequently mistaken for the real, fuzzy, fluid and ever-changing 'thing', anthropologists can indeed be accused of writing culture. At the end of the introduction to the volume, the editors claimed that, although anthropological feminism was concerned with similar issues, feminists had as yet not written anything worth publishing and were therefore absent from the volume. Abu-Lughod reacted to this by accusing the editors of only partly realizing their ambitions. Although the subtitle of the book talked of 'the poetics and the politics of ethnography', according to

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Abu-Lughod the chapters were mainly concerned with poetics only, with how anthropologists create cultures, and much less with the politics of this phenomenon. Abu-Lughod argued that a much more radical political critique was needed to show how the notion of culture is itself a powerful political concept that places groups of people in boxes and is hence a form of symbolic violence. Therefore, just as anthropologists had contributed to the creation of culture, they should now write against it. This article came out when anthropologists were already questioning the concept of culture influenced by trends as diverse as Foucault's work on genealogy, Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction and the increasingly popular method of discourse analysis. However, Abu-Lughod proposed a different strategy, that of zooming in on the inconsistencies and discontinuities that are often left out of ethnographic analysis because they would disrupt the illusion of a coherent cultural system.

Throughout his work, van der Veer has been equally dismissive of the notion of a bounded coherent culture, but his methodology has been very different, indeed almost opposed to Abu-Lughod's. Rather than zooming in on the particular, van der Veer has mostly been interested in global connections. His work aims at the bigger picture rather than the nitty-gritty. He does so not by focusing on global inequalities in the political economy approach, such as those of Eric Wolf or Andre Gunder Frank. Rather, he has been influenced by Edward Said and Talal Asad and the ways in which these authors trace genealogies of global ideas. Akhil Gupta's work on the state, for instance, is akin to van de Veer's way of working. Gupta (1995) takes the modern state as an idea that is disseminated globally through notions of, for example, transparency and corruption. However, this global idea is translated locally in different ways; therefore, it also has a different impact on local histories. Cultural diversity, that field of study for anthropologists par excellence, is not the result of age-old and mutually exclusive traditions of thought, but of different histories of translating global processes and concepts locally. Cultural differences are always gradual and hence comparable.

This dual focus on the global and the local also explains why van der Veer's and Abu-Lughod's methodologies are not mutually exclusive in the former's work. As he himself indicates in his most recent book, *The Value of Comparison*, his work is often 'secondary' (van der Veer 2016: 8).[1] Most

of his books try 'to make sense of a wide variety of arguments by historians and anthropologists without going into the interpretation of primary sources and fieldwork data' (ibid.). In painting the bigger picture, then, van der Veer often builds upon the detailed ethnographic work of others. In *The Value of Comparison*, he makes the important point that 'the study of a fragment' (ibid.: 9) is more helpful 'to gain perspective on a larger whole' (ibid.) than the use of the large datasets or 'Big Data' that are increasingly popular in social scientific research, including even anthropology. He refers to Sidney Mintz's study of sugar as an excellent example of a 'fragmentary approach' (ibid.: 11). In choosing a fragment or the particular as the object of study, anthropological holism becomes possible. That is, it becomes possible to integrate various spheres of life, such as slavery, colonialism and capitalism, but also changing food habits, for instance. Mintz had shown that sugar as a global commodity had a different impact in different places. Obviously, the fragment as understood by van der Veer is not necessarily the same as Abu-Lughod's notion of the particular. The fragment as conceptualized by Partha Chatterjee (1995) is an aspect of something bigger that is often erroneously taken as a 'whole', like the nation, whereas the particular in Abu-Lughod's article is defined as something that disrupts the illusion of coherence, notably the vulgar and the absurd. But both have in common their scattering of ideas of wholeness and consistency. The nation, van der Veer would say, is never one, never accomplished.

Importantly, van der Veer's global and comparative ambition is also meant as a critique of any form of Eurocentrism. Although interested in the global dissemination of ideas, van der Veer has never been convinced by attempts to formulate a global theory of history. *Religious Nationalism* (1994a) in particular is based on the rejection of the evolutionary notion of a radical break between tradition and modernity. The book's main bone of contention is in fact Benedict Anderson's idea, formulated in *Imagined Communities* (1983), that in modern times the nation has taken over the form and function of religion. According to van der Veer, anthropology is among other things a 'critique of the universalisation of Western models' (2016: 9), such as the secularization thesis that undergirds Anderson's seminal work on nationalism. Yet, since the formation of religious nationalism in South Asia was obviously connected to other parts

of the world by colonialism, his work also took him back to Europe: to Britain, in his book *Imperial Encounters* (2001), and to Holland in his Dutch-language book *Modern Orientalisme* (1994b). The latter is obviously not very well known outside the Netherlands, since Dutch is not an academic language. Unlike Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system theory, which divides the world into centres, semi-peripheries and peripheries, van der Veer's return to Europe mainly had the effect of provincializing the West. Like Christopher Bayly in his book *The Birth of the Modern World* (2004) with its initial chapters on imperialism, industrialization, the state and so on from various places around the globe rather than solely from the so-called European centre, van der Veer shows how Britain and Holland, as much as South Asia, have been shaped by global ideas of the nation and religion.

In the rest of this contribution, I take this idea of global comparison without a centre as my point of departure. My aim is to compare two cases of political mobilization—one in Pakistan, the other in the Netherlands—that can be called 'populist' (compare Ahmad 2019). Both have in common a form of identity politics that is based on culturalist notions of difference between religious-ethnic groups. Both are also explicitly anti-elitist. The point, however, is not to simply point to similarities. Both cases are obviously dissimilar in many respects. I see them rather as 'fragments' of the global phenomenon of contemporary right-wing populism. What I want to explore is how in both cases populist forms of political mobilization and transformation are connected to long-term notions of religion and the nation and how they are redefined in the contemporary context. My approach, therefore, is mainly focused on ideas and will leave out other factors such as the impact of free-market media or the growing social-economic inequalities as a result of economic liberalization that are obviously important in understanding contemporary right-wing populism. In developing this approach I have been influenced by Peter van der Veer.

I will start by returning to my ethnographic work in Pakistan, conducted in the 1990s. I will keep this part brief, however, because it is mostly a repetition of what I have already argued in previous publications (e.g. Verkaaik 2004). The larger part of this chapter concerns the discursive roots of the rise of right-wing populism in the Netherlands. My

methodology in this part is literary-anthropological; that is, it consists of readings of some important novels, as anthropologists do. In doing so, I find inspiration in two sources. First is the so-called *romantropologie*[2] of Dutch anthropologists like Verrips et al. (1984), as well as Anton Blok (1974), all of whom used it to analyse novels as ethnographic sources. The other, internationally more famous example is Talal Asad's discussion of the post-Enlightenment literary scene in his comments on what in the late 1980s came to be known as 'the Salman Rushdie affair'. Asad sees the literary world as 'neither a continuity with premodern Christianity nor a complete break from it' (Ahmad 2017: 69).[3] It is rather 'a resignification in which "literature can fill the role previously performed by religious textuality" to become a "substitute religiosity", a "source of spirituality", and even "the truth of life"' (ibid.). Rushdie interpreted this as the quasi-sacralization of secular ideas (Rushdie 1990). I am particularly interested in how Dutch secularism as it came to be defined in the post-war period gives contemporary populism a certain pervasiveness that rings true to much larger segments of the Dutch population than right-wing populist voters only. The literary imagination of Dutch secularism, therefore, seems to me a useful starting point for an exploration of the collective ideas that undergird right-wing populist definitions of the nation. The comparison with Pakistan serves as a counterpoint that indicates, somewhat differently, continuity and transgression in the transformation of nationalist discourses.

Karachi Revisited

The retirement of one's PhD supervisor may be a moment to reflect on one's own career as well. In doing so, I was surprised to discover in my own professional biography a number of similarities with Peter's. It will come as no surprise that, as his student, I was influenced by *Religious Nationalism* when in 1996 I returned to Pakistan to do research on ethnic and religious conflict in urban Sindh. I was mainly interested in Muhajirs or migrants from India who had come to Pakistan in the early years of independence in and after 1947. Since independence, when most of the Hindu residents of the city of Karachi left for India, Karachi had been a

city of migrants, with Muhajirs forming the largest segment of the population. In a political context shaped by the conflicting ideologies of religious nationalism and the politics of ethnic identity, Muhajirs were generally considered the champions and defenders of a Muslim national identity that left little room for regional, linguistic or ethnic political identities. As such, they stood opposed mainly to the Sindhis, the original inhabitants of the southern province of Sindh of which Karachi is the capital city. After the Bengalis had successfully launched a separatist movement leading to the founding of Bangladesh in 1971, the Sindhis took over the role of the most prominent ethnic group striving for regional autonomy. However, when in the 1980s young Muhajirs founded an ethnic political party of their own called the Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), they crossed this discursive line separating them from the Sindhis. They adopted several of the tropes of Sindhi nationalism in their own reformulation of Muhajir ethnic identity, including several notable references to Sufi traditions of martyrdom and mysticism. This blurring of discourses led to a new notion of Muhajirness, to a rapprochement between former enemies and to a sense of liberation among the young Muhajir population.

I became interested in this form of discursive renewal through the transgression of categorical boundaries. Ethnic identity politics had shaped political discourse from the very first days of Pakistan's existence. The notion of Muslim unity, which has been the *raison d'être* for the new nation in 1947, lost much of its appeal once it had been liberated from the Hindu Other. The call for Pakistan had always been most prominent in those parts of India where Muslims constituted a minority. In the Muslim majority areas that became Pakistan, linguistic and regional alliances had shaped local politics for decades, and they continued to do so after Independence. What was new, however, was the attempt to 'Islamize' ethnicity, that is, to stress the unique Islamic history of regions and ethnic groups. In this way, one could proclaim an ethnic identity without denying the importance of Islam. This trend, however, seriously questioned the unifying power of Islam. Sindhi politicians and intellectuals in particular embraced the tradition of Sufism as a distinct aspect of Sindhi history and identity. For their part, their Muhajir counterparts, particularly the leaders of religious parties that gained considerable support from

the Muhajir population, had dismissed the notion of Sindhi Sufism as a rural, backward tradition, and thus as damaging to the nation and not in conformity with the proper message of Islam. When the young leaders of the MQM crossed the boundary separating the purist Muhajir from the mystical Sindhi, it shocked older generations of Muhajirs as much as it felt like cultural liberation to the young generation.

The MQM, however, was not only a movement of cultural liberation. After its founding in 1984, it quickly built up a reputation for violence and ethnic prejudice. In fact, although the MQM adopted some of the traditions of rebellion associated with the Sindhi Sufi heroes who had martyred themselves in their fight against tyranny, this did not prevent the MQM from attacking Sindhi neighbourhoods in the worst instances of ethnic violence in the 1980s and 1990s. Most of these clashes found their origin in the fear that Muhajirs were losing their dominance in Karachi. After taking over the city in the first few years after Independence, Muhajirs had begun to see Karachi as their city, despite it gradually being taken over by migrants who arrived later. The MQM also gave voice to the large underprivileged segments of the Muhajir population, attacking the Muhajir and Pakistani elites, and accusing them of betraying the promise of social justice and equality that the founders of Pakistan had spoken of. In mobilizing voters in a combination of identity politics and anti-elitist rhetoric, the MQM resembled the Hindu-nationalist movement that was on the rise in India at the same time. In today's terms, the MQM would easily qualify as a populist party.

What I found most remarkable, however, was the element of categorical transgression in the MQM's politics. In the religious-ethnic categorization of groups and their religiosity, Muhajirs had always been associated with a puritanical Islam that left little room for idiosyncrasies that it largely dismissed as 'rural', 'backward', 'uneducated', and therefore as unbefitting the modern nation of Pakistan. In their private lives many Muhajirs continued to visit Sufi shrines and partake in Sufi rituals, but in their public lives *as Muhajirs* such behaviour seemed odd and inappropriate. It is questionable to what extent the MQM was able to gain immediate political power for its Muhajir constituency. The Pakistani military rapidly put an end to MQM rule in Karachi in the early 1990s. However, the cultural transformation of Muhajir public religiosity had a deeper

impact. For instance, it loosened the grip that religious parties formerly had on the Muhajir population.[4] More importantly, the MQM's categorical transgression was to some extent a form of emancipation. Muhajirs could now take part in so-called popular forms of religiosity *as Muhajirs*. It was this fascination for cultural liberation in relation to political mobilization that I took with me when I returned to Amsterdam at the end of the 1990s.

Dutch Norms and Values

In what may be called the 'enigma of return', to reverse-paraphrase the title of V. S. Naipaul's famous novel *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), anthropologists and others who have spent a prolonged period of time in another place on the planet trying to understand another society find themselves in a situation in which their native country appears strange and unfamiliar to them. To a large extent this is a matter of perspective. De-familiarizing the familiar has always been an important side effect of anthropological fieldwork elsewhere. However, when I returned to the Netherlands around the year 2000, others who had never left the country for longer than a few weeks also felt the place was changing rapidly. For one thing, unnoticed by my fellow countrymen who had stayed in the Netherlands, the country appeared to me as incredibly rich, well organized, almost ridiculously green, with city centres that nearly looked deserted compared to South Asian cities, and all in all extremely lucky. At the same time, political discourse was changing rapidly, from the largely optimistic years of liberal triumph after 1989 to a dystopian notion that the place was falling apart without anyone in a position of responsibility taking action. It started with alarmist newspaper articles that put the neglect of ethnically mixed urban neighbourhoods on the agenda. Then came 9/11, and the focus shifted to the alleged threat of Islam, including the threat Muslim citizens in the Netherlands were said to pose to Dutch culture. All this was not completely new, however, as the Salman Rushdie affair had already brought Orientalist understandings of Islam into political and media debates. A political party called *De Centrum Partij* (The Centre Party), formed in 1980, had managed to get one extreme right-wing

white supremacist MP elected after the national elections of 1982. However, this man was successfully silenced by a collective refusal to cooperate with him on the part of all the other 149 members of parliament. In 2000 a new party emerged with a new leader, Pim Fortuyn, who was constantly in the media describing Islam as a 'backward culture' and who accused the influential Labour Party, of which he had once been a member, of pampering 'allochthones' (in Dutch *allochtonen*), a term that refers to citizens from 'foreign descent'.[5] After he was murdered, his party won twenty-six seats in parliament in the 2002 elections.[6]

To me, this transition in the Netherlands seemed not that dissimilar from the rise of the MQM some fifteen years earlier in Pakistan. I learnt that this was a suggestion that could easily be misunderstood when I said something similar in a public debate that included some well-known Pim Fortuyn supporters. Assuming that I meant that the Netherlands were rapidly being taken over by Muslims, they laughed and concluded that I was one of them. My point, however, was that Fortuyn was not only anti-elitist and anti-minority, but that he had also introduced a new political discourse based on the blurring of discursive boundaries. The way he combined progressive values, particularly, on gay sexuality, with disparaging remarks about religious minorities was in many ways novel. His innovation was that he made it possible to be a cultural chauvinist in a progressive way. Fortuyn opened the door for liberal-minded people to openly express their aversion from religious Others in the guise of Muslim citizens. Moreover, there was something contradictory and charismatic about the way he simultaneously flaunted an aristocratic, homosexual, dandy-like posture and presented himself as the white leader of football hooligans and—to use Paul Willis' term for a subculture of young racist and sexist members of the working class—other 'lads'. As we know today, this quasi upper-class style would later be adopted by other European right-wing populists like Nigel Farage in the UK and the new Dutch Fortuyn epigone Thierry Baudet.

Just like the MQM and its transgressive rhetoric had revealed the unresolved dilemma of religion and ethnicity in Pakistani politics, Fortuyn's success brought out a discursive tension in the Netherlands. On the one hand the nation prided itself on its tolerance: openly racist or culturally chauvinist politics were taboo. However, this tolerance was

based on a particularly Dutch form of secularism that considered religion as the root of intolerance, stagnation and cultural oppression. To be tolerant of 'backward' religious groups like Muslims, then, seemed a contradiction. In those early days of the twenty-first century, there was a lot of moral panic about Muslims allegedly not accepting 'Dutch norms and values'. But the real problem with Dutch norms and values was that the dominant secularists felt that they had to choose between being tolerant and being liberated from religion. For them, it was not clear anymore what the true Dutch norms and values were. At least for a while, Fortuyn offered a solution to that conundrum.[7]

One thing that became clear from Fortuyn's successful attempt to rework progressive sexual values into an anti-Muslim weapon was that his style and language were at least to some extent rooted in the cultural and sexual revolutions of the 1960s and the 1970s. Underlying anti-Muslim rhetoric was a deeper unease with orthodox religion in general. When challenged, opponents of Islam referred to novels from the post-war period that ridiculed Catholicism and Protestantism, saying that such forms of 'religious critique' had liberated the nation and that something similar was needed today to prevent religion from assuming an important social and cultural role again. As elsewhere in Europe, anti-Islam politics led to the definition of a particular kind of secularism as the dominant governmentality.[8] Interestingly, Peter van der Veer had already remarked on this trend in an interview with the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* published in December 1995, that is, a few years before Fortuyn's rise. 'My generation', he said, 'largely those who were born after the Second World War, have experienced a [cultural] landslide'. Explaining that the Netherlands had been a highly pillarized society in which various religious denominations had heavily influenced all spheres of life, he continued, 'for many [of us] depillarization meant something like a personal liberation, and now religion is a painful topic nobody talks about anymore'. When the interviewer suggested that this was far from being adult reaction, van der Veer replied, 'Because of a kind of youth trauma, it is apparently impossible to look at religion in a balanced and objective manner. Religion, whether Christianity or any other religion, is a tricky topic, both intellectually and scientifically, an issue that only invites scorn. Luckily, the younger generation is not bothered with that past, and

the fascination for the important role religion plays in many societies is growing again.' The headline to the article read, 'Anthropologist van der Veer considers the [Dutch] academic milieu highly conservative' (*De* Volkskrant 1995).

Although I probably belong to 'the younger generation' that van der Veer thought was less prejudiced against religion, I am old enough to have some personal experience of the dying days of Dutch pillarization. Being sent to a Catholic school, for instance, on my way from there to a Catholic football club I had to bike really quickly through a Protestant neighbourhood in the town of my birth, Gouda, to avoid a beating. Petty fights between Protestant and Catholic youth gangs were not uncommon in those days. It hardly defined my emerging identity, however. Once in high school I was soon introduced to the secular and sexual freedoms of the time by a teacher of Dutch literature flaunting a wild beard and wearing a dirty sweater. In fact, what is perhaps most remarkable about van der Veer's generation was not so much the fact that its members liberated themselves from religion as that they managed to change educational curricula to such an extent that the generation that followed grew up thinking the 'sexular' society was a 'natural' thing.[9] The protagonists of the books we were made to read struggled to free themselves from their highly oppressive Calvinist upbringings. To me they all seemed somewhat outdated, as irrelevant to my own life as boring nineteenth-century novels about hysterical, sexually frustrated women in The Hague. The only difference was that some of the more recent novels offered much more explicit descriptions of sex.

Nonetheless, the conviction with which secularism was pitted against religion in the post-Fortuyn years was palpable. Inspired by giant books like Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), which used novels as a method to analyse a dominant way of thinking and feeling, I later began rereading the very novels from my time in high school. I was curious not so much about how the post-war generation had left religion behind—Peter van Rooden had written an excellent article about this (2004)—but rather about the more emotive and visceral experience of this cultural landslide. If Erik Erikson (1968) defines identity as intrinsically connected to crisis, I wanted to know how that crisis of collectively losing one's religion had

felt. I took secularism to be the identity of the generation that dominated the public sphere.

Five Novels

The first of these novels I reread was *Ik, Jan Cremer* (‘*I, Jan Cremer*’), published in 1964. The novelist, Cremer, was then 24 years old. It was not the first controversial novel ever to be published in Dutch, but it was the first one to be marketed in a modern fashion. It was also one of the first that was explicitly autobiographical. Earlier books had shocked too, but they had always been presented as fiction or as fantasy. *Ik Jan Cremer*, a picaresque novel full of sex, violence and vandalism, claimed to be authentic, which made it all the more difficult to digest for conservative readers. Written in a style and genre that reminds one of Jack Kerouac, the American novelist of the beatnik generation, the book describes the troublesome youth of the author, who grows up in the city of Enschede near the German border, where he gets involved in sex and petty crime at an early age. He rebels against the authorities—police, the boarding school he is sent to—and leaves his hometown to travel. He becomes a sailor, a marine, and joins the French foreign legion, then moves to Paris to become an artist, developing a style of painting he calls *peinture barbariste*. Meanwhile he has many short love affairs.

Apart from its bohemian anarchism, the book came as a shock because of its rough, unpolished language. The author continued this lack of respect for good taste in interviews, in which he said things like: ‘Who is Rembrandt? I am not interested in sport.’ Or: ‘I don’t read. I am being read.’ For the first time, scandal was self-consciously used to sell the book, and with unprecedented success. When a police officer confiscated a copy of the book because he felt it was a threat to law and order, the author under a different name wrote a letter to the editor of a well-known newspaper, praising the police officer for his civil courage. Reviewers called the book ‘fascist’, *Jancremerisme* became another word for vandalism and football hooliganism, and questions were raised about it in Parliament. As a result, more than a hundred thousand copies of the book were sold

in no time. 'All these readers enjoy the book enormously, telling themselves at every page they turn how bad it is', the author said.

In a way, the book marked the end of the 1950s, when only small groups of so-called *nozems* (bikers) were provoking the authorities. It signalled the beginning of the proverbial 1960s, when anti-authoritarianism became much more widespread, political, commercial and mainstream. The book is nonetheless atypical because of its unproblematic and exuberant tone. The author joyfully embraces a self-chosen bohemian romanticism without God or authority. His childhood in poverty, without a father, hardly seems to trouble the author; rather, he fondly remembers the freedom and lack of upbringing in his early years. His art, too, is unproblematic: although he has been to art schools, his paintings are marketed as pure expressions of spontaneity, unspoilt by civilization.

Of the five books I reread, *Ik Jan Cremer* (1964) appeared to me as the least problematic, the least painful. There is hardly a development. The author, who is also the protagonist, stays the wild, unspoilt, natural child he has always been. He has never lost his freedom. Even his exile, prompted by the conventional character of the Dutch nation and its artists, becomes a great adventure. That cheerful tone, together with the unusual marketing strategy, makes the book rather unique. Soon after *Ik, Jan Cremer* the literary scene would begin to describe freedom as a painful rather than an adventurous state of mind.

A year later, in 1965, another book written by a young writer-cum-artist came out: *Terug naar Oegstgeest* (*Oegstgeest Revisited*) by Jan Wolkers (1965). Wolkers was forty years old when the book was published, and he had already published a few novels about his childhood in the village of Oegstgeest, near Leiden. This book too is written as a memoir, told by a protagonist who is an artist residing in Amsterdam for whom artistic genius and sexual promiscuity are two of a kind. His present life in the capital city, however, soon makes room for memories about his parents, his brother, the neighbourhood, his schoolteachers and the schoolgirls.

More conventional in style and language than *Ik Jan Cremer*, Wolkers' novel appeared to me as not very original. It reminded me of another famous novel in Dutch, *De Avonden (The Evenings)*, published in the late 1940s by Gerard Reve, an author to whom I return below. We would now say that it is a book written by a man suffering from a midlife crisis,

trying to come to terms with the environment of his upbringing that he thoroughly detests. The melancholia already starts with his arrival: it rains, everything is grey, the monotonous rhythm of the petty bourgeois life makes him sick. His return does not offer a solution: the book ends with the death of his brother, or rather with his dead brother's coat, the only thing he has inherited from him, which is torn to pieces by a heron, a large bird.

Terug naar Oegstgeest was less scandalous and less successful than *Ik Jan Cremer*,[10] but in its own way it was also controversial, primarily because of its dual themes of religion and violence. Religion was everywhere in the Netherlands of the 1930s, the decade of the author's youth. It is primarily embodied in his father, a churchgoing shopkeeper. Talking to his father as an adult, Wolkers suddenly asks himself: 'If he dies, what will become of God?' That happens in one of the first chapters of the book. Later on, the schoolboy develops an interest in animals, and more particularly in torturing and killing them, the suggestion being that this youthful violence is a reaction to the invisible violence of the religious order. This makes *Terug naar Oegstgeest* a much more passionate book than *Ik Jan Cremer*. Whereas in the latter the violence is located in the wild barbarous child, in Wolkers' novel the violence of the child reflects the social repression of the conventional lower middle-class milieu.

Whereas Jan Cremer is now a somewhat marginal figure, Jan Wolkers would gradually become a national darling. When he died in 2007, some called him the national teddy bear. If *Terug naar Oegstgeest* did not free him from the violent God of his parents, his turn to nature in his later years did. He went to live on the island of Texel, near the sea, his fascination for plants and animals increasing and no longer feeling the urge to destroy them. In the biblical language of his Dutch reformist upbringing he would now praise the beauty of insects, shellfish and women. Unlike Cremer, he cultivated a fragility and a sense of humour that spoke of a lifelong fascination with nature that he had developed in his youth, as well as, perhaps, a sense of melancholic pity for the God of his parents and His language.

If sex was a rather unproblematic alternative for a God who was dead (Cremer) or dying (Wolkers), for Gerard Reve, already mentioned, the relationship between sexuality and religion was much more complicated.

In 1963 and 1966 he published two books that were one of a kind: *Op Weg naar het Einde* (*Toward the End*) (1963) and *Nader tot U* (*Closer to Thee*) (1966). Like Cremer's and Wolkers' books, this one pretended to be purely autobiographical. There was not the slightest attempt to develop a plot. Both books by Reve were selections of letters, *monologues intérieur*, or rather litanies, written in a melancholic style that was exalted and banal at the same time. He also had an absurd sense of humour. Both books were full of decadence and mysticism, expressed in the double bind of irony, which he defined as 'doing as if you do as if'.

The books also announced the author's triple coming out: as an alcoholic, a homosexual and a convert to Catholicism. Each constituted a stigma in predominantly sober, heterosexual, Protestant Dutch society—although the writer himself was from a communist family. To make matters worse, alcohol, homosexuality and Catholicism were all intrinsically connected in Reve's work. The images, smell and sheer atmosphere of a Catholic church provoked his lust. Sodomy with kneeling altar boys in front of a statue of Mother Mary was his ultimate desire, and in what came to be known as 'the Donkey Trial' he was accused of blasphemy because in *Nader tot U* he depicted God as a donkey he had made love to three times. He was, however, acquitted.[11]

Since publishing *De Avonden* in 1947, Reve was known as a post-war nihilist. The books he published in the 1960s were also about an author who believed that nothing was real, except perhaps death, and even that only after the fact. What saved one from complete darkness was not sexuality per se: on the contrary, for him sexuality was little more than lust, pain and violence. He constantly wanted to punish his lovers for their scandalous beauty. But sex—again, after the fact—did lead to a moment of compassion with the victim of his own lust. During these short post-coitus moments, Mary, Mother of God, appeared with her naked, tortured son in her arms. It was only during these brief moments of compassion and guilt that the veil of irony was removed, but never for long. The desire for pain and punishment was soon revitalized.

For Reve, neither religion nor sexuality offered any form of redemption whatsoever. Nor did alcohol, for that matter. None of them revealed a deeper truth, be it the oceanic feeling provoked by intimate contact with nature or the barbarism of an unspoilt childhood. Religion and sexuality

were both, in fact, highly ritualistic: both desires were triggered by a surplus of alcohol, after which the body simply and automatically followed the ritual pattern. There was nothing authentic about it; there was only, perhaps, redemption in death. Meanwhile, the best one could do was to try to make life bearable by letting the body perform the rituals it had been taught. Catholicism was kitsch and, in Reve's own words, a 'puppet theatre', but for that very reason preferable to iconoclastic Protestantism or secular communism, both of which left humanity all to its naked, miserable self.

Another book with a profound nihilist message was also published in 1966: *Nooit Meer Slapen* (*Never to Sleep Again*) by Willem Frederik Hermans. But his was a very different kind of nihilism, in a way a quite romantic kind of nihilism. There was no sex in this book, apart from a fantasy about a naked black woman, and, at the very end, a seductive American tourist on the verge of betraying her drunken husband. Unlike the other three, this book does pretend to be fiction, and the protagonist's name is different from the author's name, even though both share an interest in physical geography. In fact, the book tells the story of a PhD student sent to northern Scandinavia in order to prove that the landscape there has been formed by meteor showers. The journey becomes a hellish one. The protagonist fails to get the aerial photographs that are essential to the project. He has difficulty following his Norwegian fellow students on the long marches through rough terrain, pestered by swarms of mosquitoes. He cannot sleep because the sun never sets. When he sets out to explore the region alone, he loses his compass; when he is finally back on track, he finds that his closest companion has died after falling from a mountain. He returns to the Netherlands with no evidence to prove his thesis.

A considerable part of the book is devoted to the discussions the students have while camping in the wilderness. Many of them are about the silliness of believing in the existence of God, which suggests that the journey should be read metaphorically as a Nietzschean novel, the non-existing meteorites being a metaphor for the empty universe. Life on earth is as barren and cold as the Nordic landscape. The northern lights deprive one of the possibilities to sleep and dream and escape the harsh reality that humanity is alone in a hostile cosmos. The message is already

made clear in the famous opening scene of the novel, featuring a blind receptionist who has to show the protagonist the way to the Norwegian professor whom he has asked for aerial photographs. The universe is blind, there is no one out there to see and recognize our existence and we only exist in the eyes of ourselves. This place is not kind to a student born in the swamp of religion that is called the Netherlands; to survive here you need to be like your Norwegian fellow students who, like hyperboreans, disappear beyond the polar winds.[12]

The book, then, is about loneliness, even despair. Implicitly, it is also about a certain heroism. Apart from *Ik Jan Cremer*, this book is undoubtedly the most masculine of the five. That is, Hermans' novel not only has a Nietzschean undertone, it also resonates with the frontier romanticism of the Western movie. Hermans' heroes are not unlike the lonesome cowboy, a Clint Eastwood if you like, leaving the comfort of human society not because he wants to, but because he has a wisdom that no longer allows him to share in the lies and illusions of his fellow human beings. Those who survive in the Nordic landscape are a doomed but superior tribe. To face the truth of God's non-existence, in other words, is a passion and a fate. The atheist's suffering is superior to the suffering of the believer because he lacks the anaesthesia of the God delusion.

So far the novelists have been only men. The fifth book I reread was a feminist one. In 1976, ten years after the novels by Hermans and Reve came out, Anja Meulenbelt published her book entitled *De Schaamte Voorbij* (*Beyond Shame*) (1976). To some extent this is the feminist answer to *Ik Jan Cremer*. It is also pure autobiography and is mostly about sex. The style of writing is as unpolished and straightforward as Cremer's book, although less explicitly provocative. It is written in a hurry by an author with a mission. There are also, however, a number of important differences from Cremer.

Meulenbelt, who later became a senator for the Socialist Party and a part-time preacher in the progressive Amsterdam church known as the Student Ecclesia, was a journalist and an activist. It had taken her some time to come to that. She becomes pregnant and marries early to escape the middle-class home in which she grew up. Her equally young husband is from Austria, whom she follows on several jobs throughout Germany and France before finally divorcing him after returning to Amsterdam.

This is the beginning of long years of poverty, petty jobs and an endless series of relationships with men, many of them married, others visiting Amsterdam from abroad, none of them staying for good. When Meulenbelt's book came out, many male novelists had already written explicitly about their love affairs, gay or straight, but this was the first time a female novelist had done so. But there was a difference: while for the male novelist every new lover was a triumph, for Meulenbelt each affair added to a gradually increasing sense of self-hate and shame in the protagonist.

The turn comes halfway the book, when, already active in left-wing, counter-culture activism of various kinds, she is introduced to a group of women who are discussing sexual politics. She feels uneasy at first, not least because her male comrades in the activist world, some of whom are lovers, frown upon feminism as a petty bourgeois phenomenon. But soon she starts to feel at home, becomes a feminist activist, breaks with the married man she is having an affair with and instead starts a relationship with his wife. For the first time in her life, she feels fully loved and accepted. Men, at least some of them, were able to give her excitement. She thought of herself as someone who could get along pretty well with men, particularly if naked, but in loving another woman she experienced a sense of tenderness she had always missed.

However, the book does not have a happy ending. Her lover leaves her to return to her husband. Meulenbelt starts a relationship with a man, a kind and understanding man this time, who nonetheless envies her newly developed independence, her sense of direction and her grief caused by the love she has lost. The two of them, together with her thirteen-year old son, go on holiday to the south of France, where she starts to write the novel in an attempt to come to terms with her broken relationship. Instead, it becomes a book in which she gets to the bottom of her shame and returns sadder, wiser and more independent.

The book caused quite a stir when it was first published, partly because Meulenbelt was already a well-known journalist and was acquainted with other public figures, some of whom featured in the book in promiscuous situations under their own names. But others who were not in the book were not overly happy with it either. Some feminists, for instance, regarded the fact that the author had gone back to a male lover after her

unhappy relationship with his wife as a defeat. In the long run, however, Meulenbelt received much praise for her courage and honesty. The book was a milestone in the feminist movement that significantly changed the world of left-wing, progressive, counter-cultural politics and activism.

Meulenbelt's message was that the sexual revolution of the late 1960s had liberated the sexuality of men but had dubious consequences for women. The alternative she offered, despite the straightforward language of the book, was more complex than it appeared at first sight. First, there was a need to rescue sexuality from pure lust and lustful ritual, and to recognize, beyond shame, one's desire for an intimate and tender kind of sexuality. But that desire for affection could also become the political basis for personal independence. At a time when free sex, partner-swapping and pornography were becoming the norm, here was a call to start seeing sexuality in terms of both independence and intimacy. If the first half of the book was about free sex, the second half was about free love—or, at least, the desire for, and political agenda of, free love. Given the complexity of that concept and the paradoxical expectations that were attached to it, it is no wonder that the book could not end like a fairy tale.

Secular Passion

What exactly can we make of this limited discussion of five novels? Obviously, a more thorough study would have to include more information on the readership and how generations of readers have read these books in different ways. That would go beyond the scope of this chapter. Still, if we accept that novels to some extent reflect the times in which they were written, then we can safely conclude that the collective loss of religion came in different shapes and forms, from Cremer's godless adventures to Hermans' heroic atheism and Reve's ironic conversion to Catholicism. These five books belong to a literary canon that most educated people from the post-war generation have read. The literary scene in the 1960s and 1970s was much less fragmented than it is today, and novels like these five were part of a shared national literary imaginary. It is also true that books like these did not just reflect, but to some extent

also helped shape secular culture. In their wake a whole literary genre emerged of coming-of-age novels in which the protagonist struggles to free him- or herself from a religious upbringing. Novelists like Maarten 't Hart, A.F.Th. van der Heyden and Jan Siebelink have published bestselling novels in this genre. Even today, young and promising novelists like Franca Treur and Marieke Lucas Rijneveld[13] write their first novels in this tradition. What is more, young novelists from a migrant background like Naema Tahir and Özcan Akyol have become celebrated media stars with their personal stories of liberation from an oppressive Muslim youth. The success of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's autobiography was placed in this genre by readers from an older generation. In a time of right-wing hostility towards Muslims, such books allowed progressive liberals to dream of Dutch Muslims eventually assimilating to Dutch secular culture and, with some delay, freeing themselves from religion just like the post-war generation had done a few decades earlier. This hope, of course, neglects the new forms of urban religion that have recently emerged in the Netherlands (e.g. Beekers 2015).

Interestingly, this genre linking religion and liberation defines freedom in a highly complicated manner. With the exception of Cremer, freedom is hardly ever simply a carefree matter. The road to freedom is a rather painful one, a trial of sorts, that includes agony and loss. For Hermans, the notion of an empty and meaningless universe is symbolized by a cold and barren landscape in which people die. For Meulenbelt, liberation from shame was a long and therapeutic process. In almost all of these books, secular freedom is a struggle that includes the death of something that is dear to the protagonist, whether a social world, a self-image, one's youth or all sorts of illusions. In the secular literary imaginary, the struggle is a prerequisite to becoming a full person. The protagonist does not simply leave adolescence behind to become a mature person. In a deeper sense, liberation from religion, which always involves the death of the former self, also renders the protagonists more mature in a moral and intellectual sense: they not only grow older, but also wiser.

In writing on pain and secularism, Talal Asad has initiated a scholarly debate about secular passion. For Asad, secularism means the end of enduring pain as a religious virtue. Secularism changes sufferers into subjects with the ability to act. But the secular subject cannot do without

pain either. Pain is no longer something to endure, a condition to submit to, but a possibility to develop a conscience, a decision to act morally and intellectually (Asad 2003: 67–99). In this sense, secular literary passion helps explain the notion of moral and intellectual superiority to religious communities. Perhaps this is part of what Asad had in mind when he compared the modern literary scene to a 'substitute religiosity'.[14]

Just as the MQM appropriated the Sindhi political tradition for its own purposes, so the new right-wing populists of the Netherlands have given a new twist to the progressive post-religion tendency from half a century ago. When Pim Fortuyn called Islam 'a backward civilization', this was not just an echo of nineteenth-century evolutionism, it also evoked the familiar notion of religious immaturity. Many other critics of Islam since Fortuyn have stated that they do not want to repeat the struggle for progressive liberties all over again. The notion of beleaguered secular freedoms recalls the collective memory of religious orthodoxy. But it is also the case that this populist passion lacks the ambiguity and creativity of the 1960s and 1970s. If freedom was a mixed blessing and a source of literary inspiration for the post-war generation, the notion of freedom has become flat and one-dimensional in the hands of today's populists. Also, its aesthetic is stunningly mediocre. Whereas in France Michel Houellebecq has given literary expression to the right-wing critique of Islam and progressive liberalism, the literary imaginary of Dutch right-wing secularism is as yet non-existent. Compared to the MQM, which emancipated the Muhajirs from puritanical Islam, today's Dutch populism remains dull and clichéd.

Notes

1. He called it 'a synthesis' in his *Religious Nationalism* (1994a: xv).
2. The term *romantropologie* is an amalgam of the terms *roman* (novel) and *antropologie* (anthropology). The idea behind it is that novels can be analysed as fragments of popular collective ideas. The idea is akin to the concept of the *lieux de mémoire* or 'places of memory' coined by the French historian Pierre Nora (1998) that sees places and objects as vested with historical memory.

3. Due to the coronavirus pandemic I currently have no access to my office, where I keep my copy of Talal Asad's *Genealogy of Religion*. I am therefore forced to rely on the discussion on Asad's work by Irfan Ahmad in his *Religion as Critique*, which I have at home.
4. These parties, like the Jamiat-i-Islami and others, consequently tried to build up a constituency among the Pakhtun population of the Northwest Frontier Province, where the impact of the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan was deeply felt. Towards the end of the 1990s, new proselytizing movements like the Dawat-i-Islami returned to Muhajir-dominated cities to recruit a younger generation of Muhajirs.
5. See Geschiere (2009) for a discussion of the terms 'authochtonous' and 'allochthonous' in Dutch political debates.
6. Peter van der Veer commented on the rise of Fortuyn in a 2006 article in *Public Culture* (Van der Veer 2006). See also Thijl Sunier and Rob van Ginkel (2006) for an analysis of Fortuyn's success in the context of 'neo-nationalism' in Europe.
7. I have analysed this confusion over Dutch norms and values elsewhere, see Verkaaik (2017).
8. The body of literature on various forms of secularism and how the secular has been defined in the context of contemporary multiculturalism is long and varied. It includes, among much more, the work by John Bowen on France, of Tariq Modood on the UK, and of theorists like Talal Asad, Charles Taylor and Jose Casanova. In addition, there is an abundant literature on secularism beyond Europe. For an overview I refer to the review article on the anthropology of secularism by Fanella Connell (2010).
9. Joan Scott, a French historian, coined the term 'sexularism' during a lecture on 'Secularism and Gender Equality' at the European University Institute, Florence, on 23 April 2009.
10. However, Jan Wolkers would return with another novel, *Turks Fruit* ('*Turkish Delight*'), a love story in the Rabelaisian tradition, full of sex and body fluids, and extremely male-centred (Wolkers 1969).
11. The Dutch blasphemy laws that forbade 'scornful' (*smalende*) descriptions of the divine were repealed in 2013.
12. The nihilist sentiment with Nordic landscapes and flirtations with Nietzschean philosophy got a new, political twist in 2019 when the extreme right-wing politician Thierry Baudet, after the electoral success during the provincial elections, spoke about the perceived threats to the Western civilization of the 'boreal' world' (*boreale wereld*), a dog whistle

to racist extremists. Baudet has close links to global Alt-right and has confessed to holding antisemitic views.

13. In 2020 Rijneveld won the prestigious Man Booker International Prize with her debut novel *The Discomfort of Evening* (*De avond is ongemak*). The international audience may not be aware how much this novel is part of a dominant genre in contemporary Dutch literary scene. The title itself seems to refer to Reve's *De Avonden*, published in 1947, and one of the founding novels of this genre.
14. I have developed this argument in a book in Dutch called *Ritueel Burgerschap* (Verkaaik 2009).

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