

Universiteit Leiden  
Faculteit der Godsdienstwetenschappen

**CONGRESS PROGRAMME**

**“RELIGION: PUBLIC OR PRIVATE?”**

Fourth International Congress  
of the  
Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions  
(LISOR)

27-28 March 2008

**CONTENTS**

CONGRESS PROGRAMME.....	3
PARALLEL SESSIONS.....	5
ABSTRACTS .....	7

The congress “Religion: Public or Private?” is organized with the financial support of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and the Leids Universiteitsfonds (LUF).

**Colofon**

Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions  
P.O. Box 9515  
2300 RA Leiden  
The Netherlands  
Tel. +31 (071) 527-2572  
Fax +31 (071) 527-2571

## CONGRESS PROGRAMME

*Thursday, 27 March*

- 08.45-09.45 Reception and Registration  
(Lipsius Hall)
- 09.45-10.00 Opening by Prof. Willem B. Drees (Leiden University):  
Dean of the Faculty of Religious Studies  
Chair: Prof. Arie van der Kooij (Leiden University)  
(Room 028)
- 10.00-11.00 Prof. David Novak (University of Toronto):  
*Religious Views in Public Affairs: Theology, Philosophy,  
and Politics*  
Chair: Prof. Arie van der Kooij (Leiden University)  
(Room 028)
- 11.00-11.15 Break
- 11.15-12.45 Parallel Sessions
- 12.45-14.15 Lunch
- 14.30-15.30 Prof. Meerten B. ter Borg (Leiden University):  
*Non-Institutional Religion: Private and Public*  
Chair: Dr. W. Hofstee (Leiden University)  
(Room 003)
- 15.30-16.00 Break
- 16.00-17.30 Parallel Sessions
- 18.00-20.00 Dinner
- 20.15-21.15 Prof. Linda Woodhead (Lancaster University):  
*Spirituality, Public or Private?*  
Chair: Prof. Ernestine G. E. van der Wall (Leiden University)  
(Room 028)
- 21.15 Drinks

Friday, 28 March

- 9.30-10.30 Prof. Armando Salvatore (University l'Orientale, Naples, and Humboldt University, Berlin):  
*Unsettling the Institutional Balance of State, Public, and Private?*  
*Islam's Movement into Europe*  
Chair: Prof. Maurits S. Berger (Leiden University)  
(Room 005)
- 10.30-11.00 Break
- 11.00-12.30 Parallel Sessions
- 12.45-14.15 Lunch
- 14.30-15.30 Dr. Bart Labuschagne (Leiden University):  
*Beyond Public and Private. Are we living in a post-secular society?*  
Chair: Prof. Meerten B. ter Borg (Leiden University)  
(Room 003)
- 15.30-16.00 Break
- 16.00-17.30 Parallel Sessions
- 18.00-21.00 Dinner

==

## PARALLEL SESSIONS

Thursday, 27 March

- 11.15-12.15 Session A - Chair: Dr. Heleen Murre-Van den Berg (Leiden University)
- Prof. Alexandros Sakellariou (Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens):  
*Religion in Greek Society: State, Public, or Private?*  
*The Church – State Relations and the Question of their Separation*
- Dr. Kees de Groot (University of Tilburg):  
*Religion in Liquid Modernity*  
(Room 003/Van Eyckhof 1167)
- 11.15-12.45 Session B: Seminar convened by Prof. Jürgen Zangenberg (Leiden University): *Aspects of Public and Private Religion in Antiquity*
- Dr. L. J. Lietaert Peerbolte (Protestant Theological University, Leiden):  
*Public and Private Religion in Acts*
- Dr. Gabriele Fassbeck (University of California, Riverside):  
*Domestic Religion in Ancient Judaism: The Contribution of Archaeology*  
(Room 208)
- 16.00-17.00 Session A - Chair: Dr. Ab F. de Jong (Leiden University)
- Dr. Janis Priede (University of Latvia, Lettonie):  
*The 'Private' Symbols of 'Non-Institutional' Religious Groups in the Public Sphere*
- Prof. Anita Stasulane (Daugavpils University, Daugavpils):  
*Interaction between Religion and Culture in case of 'Non'-Institutional' Religion*  
(Room 147)
- 16.00-17.30 Session B: Seminar convened by Prof. Ernestine G. E. van der Wall (Leiden University): *Conversion to Modernity. Private Beliefs, Public Attitudes*
- Prof. Ernestine G. E. van der Wall (Leiden University):  
*The Cult of Sincerity: Protestants, Catholics, and Modernism*
- Prof. Judith Frishman (Tilburg University, Utrecht Campus):  
*Judaism between Universalism and Particularism:*  
*Samuel Holdheim on True Mosaism and Mixed Marriage*
- Dr. Heleen Murre-van den Berg (Leiden University):  
*Conversion to Modernity: Christians in Iraq between 1920 and 1958*  
(Room 005)

*Friday, 28 March*

11.00-12.00 Session A - Chair: Prof. Bas ter Haar Romeny (Leiden University)

Prof. Dick Douwes (Erasmus University, Rotterdam):  
*Going Public: Non-Sunni Muslims and Public Space in the Middle East*

Drs. William Arfman (Leiden):  
*Relocating the public or reforming the private? The survival of an ancestor cult in the Mexican town of Mitla, Oaxaca*  
(Room 005)

11.00-12.30 Session B: Seminar convened by Prof. Reinier Munk (Leiden University):  
*Traditional Judaism in the Public Sphere. A discussion of David Novak's, The Jewish Social Contract* (Princeton, 2005)

Papers by Prof. David Novak (University of Toronto), Prof. Gerrit de Kruijf (Protestant Theological University, Leiden), and Dr. Bruno Verbeek (Leiden University)  
(Room 208)

16.00-17.00 Session A - Chair: Dr. Johannes Tromp (Leiden University)

Rev. Matthew Tennant (Oxford):  
*Early Christian Eschatology as a Model for the Modern Practice of Interfaith Dialogue in a Pluralistic World*

Drs. Niek Brunsveld (University of Leuven):  
*A Religion's Particularity and Contextuality. The Significance of the 'Theology of Interruption' for the Public/Private Debate*  
(Room 227)

16.00-17.30 Session B: Seminar convened by Dr. Wim Hofstee (Leiden University):  
*Public and Private Dimensions of Modern Paganism*

Drs. Jeroen Boekhoven (Groningen University):  
*Public Individualism in contemporary Dutch shamanism*

Dr. Marco Pasi (University of Amsterdam):  
*Roman traditionalism and the specific features of Italian neo-paganism*  
Dr. Stef Aupers (Erasmus University, Rotterdam):  
*Paganism Inc. On computer technology, magic, and animism*  
(Room 228)

=

## ABSTRACTS

**Arfman**, William (Leiden University), *Relocating the Public or Reforming the Private? The Survival of an Ancestor Cult in the Mexican Town of Mitla, Oaxaca*

From the viewpoint of modernity religion is often relegated to the private sphere, but does this mean public religion is always seen as less modern? Two rituals for the souls in the Mexican town of Mitla provide an interesting case-study. With its ruins being conceived as the entrance to the underworld Mitla always received much outside attention, consequentially today its indigenous background is an issue of both commerce and concern. This ambiguity differently affects the rituals mentioned: on the one hand the yearly Days of the Dead household rituals are ushered into the public/tourist sphere with competitions and processions while on the other public offerings made by pilgrims are seen as ignorant and bad for business and redirected out of the centre through regulations and police actions. Thus while public rituals are used to promote Mitla as a traditional but modern tourist town not everything is supposed to be shown.

**Brunsveld**, Niek (University of Leuven), *Religion: Public or Private?*

This paper investigates the epistemological insights into the public/private debate of Lieven Boeve's concept of 'interruption'<sup>1</sup>. His 'theology of interruption' wards off many difficulties that other (Modern) theologies cannot deal with and thus proves significant to a present-day (post-Modern) reflection on the public/private debate. At a philosophical-hermeneutic level, Boeve rejects presumptions of both continuity and discontinuity between different worldviews. Instead, worldviews are said to be particular. They need recontextualisation in changing contexts. According to Boeve, however, theologically speaking, particular worldviews are intrinsically linked with this changing context. I argue, correspondingly, that religion, although irreducibly particular, cannot be a private affair alone. But how should we think this (theologically motivated) intrinsic link if religions and worldviews are (philosophical-hermeneutically) irreducibly particular? I argue that we need to presume a link both on the theological level *and* on the hermeneutic-philosophical level if we want to retain the public aspect of particular worldviews and religions.

**Douwes**, Dick (Erasmus University Rotterdam), *Going Public: non-Sunni Muslims and Public Space in the Middle East*

Secularism implies that the various religious traditions existent in a country are/should be treated as equal by the state. Moreover, citizens are considered to be autonomous in religious affairs. Yet, some religions are having a greater visibility and are incorporated in the national institutional framework, also when the state is defined as

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. L. Boeve, *God Interrupts History. Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (transl. B. Doyle), New York, Continuum, 2007.

being secular (public holidays, queen's speech prayer, family law etc.). This paper deals with the religious dynamics in the secular states of the Middle East, such as Syria, where the traditionally dominant religious tradition, Sunni Islam, is in fact 'public religion' allowing limited space to other traditions in the public domain and restricting religious autonomy of the individual. Over the last two decades, there is a growing tendency among non-Sunni Muslims, such as Druzes and Alawites, to claim a greater visibility in public space. This constitutes a clear breach with their tradition of dissimulation and, subsequently, is subject to debate in their own communities.

**Groot**, Kees de (Tilburg University), *Religion in Liquid Modernity*

It seems that in advanced, or: liquid, modernity religion is bound to give way to spirituality. This paper, on the other hand, argues that religion is partly becoming liquid, that is: network-based, focussed on identity issues, and with a central role for experience. I will distinguish three categories of relevant phenomena. Firstly, liquid forms of religion within the religious sphere: religious events, small communities and virtual communities. Secondly, activities on the boundaries of the religious sphere, such as religious services in a hospital or a prison. Thirdly, meetings and collective activities outside the religious sphere, such as the cultural and educational sphere, that ignore, cross or play with the boundaries with the religious sphere. This typology is used to defend a correction to the Woodhead/Heelas-thesis.

**Labuschagne**, Bart (Leiden University), *Beyond Public and Private: Are we living in a Post-Secular Society?*

In my lecture, I will enter into a discussion with – amongst others – Jürgen Habermas' and Charles Taylor's recent work on religion in the public sphere and secularism, in order to develop a perspective on religion's place in society in relation to the state. I will try to demonstrate that the pre-political preconditions of modern, liberal democracies that cannot be guaranteed by these states themselves, have necessarily a religious nature and that what people actually believe is relevant for democracy's proper functioning. In order to do this, I will put the notion of post-secularity under scrutiny, not so much in an empirical, but more in a normative sense: can democracy afford it to relegate religious convictions to the confinement of the private sphere only? Does that imply the obsolescence of the philosophical-liberal distinction between public and private? How can society integrate itself, and provides itself with legitimate political and legal institutions, under growing religious plurality and antagonism?

**Novak**, David (University of Toronto), *Religious Views in Public Affairs: Theology, Philosophy, and Politics*

This paper will argue that religious citizens can only come to discussions of public policy matters with a position that has been formulated in terms of their singular theology, universal philosophy, and the political situation of their particular society. Thus religious citizens begin with theology, the systematic reworking of their tradition, founded in divine revelation, by which their religious community governs itself. But religious citizens only take from their theology arguments based on the practical wisdom of that

tradition. It is important for both the religious proponents of public policy and their secular interlocutors (as well as persons from other religious traditions) to know the historical sources *from which* these persons learned this wisdom, but whose content is by no means the unique property of their tradition. Finally, even when a position has been worked out with theological and philosophical integrity, it must judge whether the political climate of the particular society in which religious and secular citizens live is ready or not ready for what is being proposed.

**Priede**, Janis (University of Latvia), *The “Private” Symbols of “Non-Institutional” Religious Groups in the Public Sphere*

There are many factors which constitute a ‘non-institutional’ religious group, but symbols are by far the most important. The theosophical groups have their own identifying visual codes and symbols, many of them ‘private’, i.e., exclusive and unrecognized in the public sphere. The following presentation is based on examination of the symbols used by 35 contemporary theosophical groups in the Eastern Europe. The proposed paper presents and analyzes: (1) the source of the theosophical symbols, (2) the characteristics of various kinds of symbols used by the theosophical groups in the public sphere. What becomes clear from this analysis is that correlation between symbols used by various theosophical groups in the Eastern Europe clearly demonstrates the importance of the symbols for the construction of the theosophical group identity. By finding commonalities in symbols of the theosophical groups, it is possible to understand the main axis around which their public and ‘private’ identity is formed.

**Sakellariou**, Alexandros (Panteion University), *Religion in Greek Society: State, Public or Private? The Church-State Relations and the Question of their Separation*

In this paper we study the Orthodox religion in the context of the Greek society as an important social factor. We argue that between public and private sphere exist a dialectical relationship which means that nothing is totally private or totally public. We analyze the relations between the Greek state and the Greek Orthodox Church and we argue that their separation is not necessary something negative about Greek society and Orthodoxy itself. Our hypothesis is that the Greek Orthodox Church is a state church which acts in public sphere and that her separation from the state is not going to remove her from public sphere. Finally we suggest that the separation or more correctly the differentiation between Church and state is something indispensable for Greek society because the Orthodox Church is a state Church which puts obstacles in the religious freedom of the other religious communities.

**Salvatore**, Armando (University l'Orientale, Naples, and Humboldt University, Berlin), *Unsettling the Institutional Balance of State, Public, and Private? Islam's Movement into Europe*

This lecture takes as its starting point the thesis according to which the kernel of secular formations in Europe lies in a distinctive relation between state forms and life forms. This is particularly evident in the articulation of the private and public spheres, based on the assumption that secular formations require that religious norms do not

infiltrate public arenas. The Habermasian public sphere appears then as a prototypically secular arena.

On a second move, the study looks at how the notion of the public sphere can be made more open to understand how the religious and political cultures of Muslims in Europe put in question and relocate the sharp polarization of secular and religious, public and private spheres found in Europe.

In conclusion, the study shows how secular formations pivoting on the public sphere are continually reconstituted as fields of tension rather than order. The current struggles surrounding the role of Islam in Europe are strategically situated at the confluence of several historic and present tensions.

**Stasulane, Anita** (Daugavpils University), *Interaction between Religion and Culture in Case of "Non-Institutional" Religion*

This presentation examines the interaction between religion and culture with reference to new religious groups of the Eastern Europe. The paper is based on the analysis of fieldwork that has been done in the EU Sixth Framework Programme research project "Society and Lifestyles: Towards Enhancing Social Harmonisation through Knowledge of Sub-cultural Communities." The findings indicate that the interaction between culture and religion is stronger in the case of theosophical groups than other "non-institutional" religious groups. This may be explained, firstly, by a particular re-definition of culture elaborated by the Russian artist Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947): culture as sacred, eternal, infinite phenomenon. Secondly, by the cultural activities of various theosophical groups in the Eastern Europe. We seek to explore how religious forces propel group members toward certain cultural activities and, conversely, how cultural forces induce certain religious and practice.

**Tennant, Matthew** (Oxford University), *Early Christian Eschatology as a Model for the Modern Practice of Interfaith Dialogue in a Pluralistic World*

In this paper, I will construct a model that can be fruitfully used in interfaith dialogue as people publicly practice and adhere to different religions. The model is based on the early Christian eschatological expectation of an end of time. The model is based on the Christian eschatological expectation found in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, 'God will come again to judge the living and the dead,' and the model reflects the ethical teachings of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7). While the model generally conforms to Christian orthodoxy, the theoretical application has heterodox and interfaith implications. The proposition in the model connects present behavior with an anticipated future, with the emphasis placed on present behavior, not on the *eschaton*. In the second part of the paper, I will present several examples of how the model can be applied. The application is in inter-faith dialogue, human rights, and eco-theology.

**Ter Borg, M. B.** (Leiden University), *Non-Institutional Religion: Public or Private?*

It seems that in the modern discourse on religion, the secularization thesis is giving way to a de-institutionalization thesis. Religion more or less appears to be surviving, but outside the institutions that used to make it visible. Non-institutional used

to mean *private* before all else. People were supposed to construct their own religions, their ‘bricolages.’ Recently, theories of re-institutionalization have come to the fore: religion is supposed to be giving way to spirituality. Spirituality is a halfway house the best of two worlds: it is individual and public at the same time, and without imposing the obligations institutionalized religion was notorious for. Yet, according to surveys, substitution is out of the question here. Does this mean that we have to go back to the secularization thesis? Perhaps. But there is another possibility: a re-interpretation of de-institutionalization. For this, we should go back to Durkheim’s concept of public religion. This is what I try to do in my lecture: adapting Durkheim to liquid modernity.

**Woodhead**, Linda (Lancaster University), *Spirituality: Public or Private?*

By examining the example of spirituality in some detail, it is possible to see why the distinction between 'public' and 'private' is not very helpful for thinking about religion in relation to the state and society. Having argued this point, I go on to suggest alternative ways of thinking about the location of religion in modern societies. I suggest that this location is multiple, varied for different types of religion (like spirituality), and in flux. Nevertheless, I suggest that it is possible to develop a model which can help make sense of this complexity.

## Seminars

SEMINAR Convened by Prof. Jürgen Zangenberg, *Aspects of Public and Private Religion in Antiquity*

**Lietaert** Peerbolte, L. J. (Protestant Theological University, Leiden), *Public and Private Religion in Acts*

One of the elements that is usually seen as fundamental to the growth of the Christ-movement is the fact that its members gathered in household, and therefore: private settings. The letters of Paul seem to attest to this, and the evidence in the Book of Acts apparently supports this view (see e.g. Acts 8:3; 10:2, 22, 30; 11:12-13; 16:15). Nevertheless, there is another side to the story. The same Book of Acts pictures Paul as preaching his gospel in the public domain rather than in private household: he preaches in synagogues, market squares, and even on the Areopagus. This paper intends to clarify this apparent discrepancy by focusing on the social function of private and public space in the first century, and subsequently asking for the reliability of the picture in Acts. After discussing these points, it moves on to ask for the rhetorical intentions of Acts. How does the author defend his ‘Christians’ over against a suspicious pagan audience? Which social dynamics may lie behind the portrayal of the early Christ movement in Acts? And how do these social dynamics explain the position of the author in depicting his subject? The intention of this paper is to enhance our understanding of the rhetorical purpose of Acts, understood as an attempt to depict the early Christ movement as an innocent group that did not pose a threat to the public order. Finally, the question will be addressed whether that group was as indeed as innocent to the Roman system as the author of Acts wanted it to be.

**Fassbeck, G.** (University of California), “*Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door*” (Mt 6:6) - *Archaeological Evidence for Domestic Religion in Ancient Palestinian Judaism*

Ancient Jewish religious practice in the Temple and the synagogues has been the object of many specialized studies. As a result, we are fairly well informed about the public side of ancient Jewish religiosity. Less well explored is the private or domestic side. How did the individual and the family practice religion within the confines of the house? Literary sources yield some answers to this question, but can archaeology help to elucidate the picture further? This paper will explore the potentials of household archaeology for a better understanding of Jewish religious practice in Roman–Byzantine Palestinian households. Two newly published excavation reports, on Early Roman Gamla and Late Roman–Byzantine En Gedi, provide interesting archaeological data to better understand the interdependence of religion and politics, of religious activity in the private domicile and in the public square.

SEMINAR Convened by Prof. Ernestine G. E. van der Wall, *Conversion to Modernity: Private Beliefs, Public Attitudes*

*General introduction to the seminar*

The contributions in the seminar *Conversion to Modernity: Private Beliefs, Public Attitudes* will focus on questions concerning the impact of modernity on the public and private aspects of the Christian and Jewish religions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As the modern history of both Christianity and Judaism abundantly shows, the ‘conversion’ of religious believers to modernity can have various significant effects on both the individual and institutional level. The three papers aim at highlighting the impact of the turn to modernity in Europe and the Middle East, approaching the topic from different angles.

**Van der Wall, E. G. E.** (Leiden University), *The Cult of Sincerity: Protestants, Catholics and Modernism*

This paper will deal with the topic of the seminar on the individual level, discussing the impact of the liberalization of theology on the individual believer within Western Christianity. What does it mean to come out as a modernist? What does the turn from traditionalist faith to religious modernism imply for one’s relations with one’s family (especially with one’s parents), one’s social and ecclesiastical relations? Are there any differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics in this respect? As we shall see, the boundaries between private utterances and public statements are often felt to be rather strict, in particular in the world of science and scholarship where the struggle for academic freedom is being fought by modernists in the face of the strong traditionalist opposition. The antimodernist reaction results in a series of heresy trials, excommunications, censorship of modernist publications etcetera.

No wonder that the modernist tends to be rather careful in the wording of theological matters in the public domain. In the complex relationship between private sentiments and

public statements one of the fundamental issues proves to be the question how to retain one's intellectual and moral integrity. Accordingly the modernist discourse abounds in such terms as honesty and sincerity – terms with which the modernists very much like to associate themselves with.

**Frishman, Judith** (Tilburg University), *Judaism between Universalism and Particularism: Samuel Holdheim on True Mosaism and Mixed Marriage*

The reform of Judaism in 19<sup>th</sup> c. Germany was never a private, i.e. internal Jewish affair but part of the public debates on Jewish emancipation taking place in various forums in society at large. Governments, often at the behest of the Jewish communities themselves, intervened in efforts to enact ritual changes. Politicians, philosophers and theologians invoked Judaism as a foil when discussing the relationship between church and state. The boldest of the religious reformers, Rabbi Samuel Holdheim, separated the religious from the political elements in Judaism in an effort to prove that Jews were worthy of citizenship. Denying that Jews formed a nation within a nation, he identified universal morality as the essence of the Mosaic religion and relegated all else, including ritual, to the political (and thereby necessarily historical and changing) realm. Holdheim's contemporary, Abraham Geiger, maintained two different approaches to reform, that of the writer or theoretician and that of the rabbi, the latter necessarily invoking ceremonial change in a manner other than the former. Holdheim was in principle against such differentiation and defended positions on ceremonial laws including circumcision, Sabbath and (mixed) marriage, considered by most to be extreme if not heretical. Yet the discrepancies between his "public" pronouncements and "private" congregational addresses, the subject of this paper, attest that even he was not always consistent in his standpoints.

**Murre-van den Berg, H. L.** (Leiden University), *Conversion to Modernity: Christians in Iraq between 1920 and 1958*

This paper searches for the outlines of a study into the role of Christianity in the Middle East, in the first half of the twentieth-century, in its institutional, ritual, and theological aspects. The goal of such a study is to understand in what ways religion was part of the 'conversion to modernity' that characterized changes within considerable segments of the population. In this contribution, I take the developments in the Christian communities of Iraq during the British Mandate and the Monarchy (1920-1958) as my starting point, especially those within the Assyrian Church of the East and the Chaldean Church. Christians were very much part of Iraq's emerging middle class that strove to modernize society, advocating a secularisation of politics, meanwhile fostering a lively educational and cultural scene. However, the wide acceptance of forms of modernization and secularization did not diminish the public importance of Christianity, although the function and forms of Christianity differed greatly from one group to another. In this paper, the trajectories that were taken by the larger Christian communities with regard to the role of religion will be explored and analyzed against the background of their various political and socio-economic positions in the emerging Iraqi state.

SEMINAR Convened by Dr. Wim Hofstee, *Public and Private Dimensions of Modern Paganism*

**Boekhoven**, Jeroen (Groningen University), *Public Individualism in Contemporary Dutch Shamanism*

It is tempting to interpret Dutch shamanic practices as self-religion and as private and individual exercises aimed at self-development and personal growth. However, notwithstanding the *emic* emphasis on self-development and self-authority, shamanic practices are not private issues. They are developed in a field of shamanism in which a variety of individuals and organizations struggle to authorize their own form of shamanism. In this field, individualism, primitivism, and perennialism are valued highly. They are part of the habitus and of the strategies of the individuals that take action in the field. Furthermore, they have public significance.

**Pasi**, Marco (University of Amsterdam), *Roman Traditionalism and the Specific Features of Italian Neo-Paganism*

Scholarly research on neo-paganism has been developing steadily in the latest years, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries. But it is interesting to note that the rise of neo-paganism in the Western world during the last century and a half has not been often considered in all its geographical and cultural scope. Research has developed mostly in the English-speaking countries, and has focused on the currents most present there. Yet, a comparison between neo-pagan currents originating from different countries and inspired by different traditions could give a valid help in understanding better neo-paganism as a multiform religious phenomenon that crosses many boundaries and cultures. In Italy neo-pagan movements have been interested mostly in the rediscovery of the religion, or more precisely the religions, of ancient Rome. Some groups and authors have focused mostly on a supposedly 'pure' form of Roman religion, as it was practised during the times of the Roman Republic, others prefer on the contrary the later period of the Empire, when Roman religion became heavily influenced by other, mostly Eastern, traditions, such as Mythraism or the Graeco-Egyptian mysteries.

A prominent aspect that has to be considered are the political issues raised by some of the authors and groups of Italian neo-paganism. If in the English-speaking countries it is more likely to see, with a few exceptions, neo-paganism associated with left-wing tendencies, in Italy the trend seems to be quite the opposite. Arturo Reghini and Julius Evola had sympathies for Mussolini's fascism, and in Italy, to our days, neo-paganism seems to develop and spread more in right-wing milieus. A comparison with some of the most important Anglo-American neo-pagan currents will perhaps help us to understand the reasons for this interesting difference.

**Aupers**, Stef (Erasmus University), *Virtual Worlds, Real enchantments: Neo-Paganism in Contemporary Online Computer Games*

The pagan worldview, once countercultural and marginal, has become more and more mainstream through the popularity of Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter and online games, such as Everquest, Dark Age of Camelot or World of Warcraft. These and other

online games are imaginary medieval worlds brimming with mystery, animated things, wizzards, totems and the opportunity to perform magic. From a typically modern stance, however, these neo-pagan virtual worlds can never instigate real spirituality or 're-enchantment' since they are 'unreal' and commodified, digital environments and as such rather confirm than contest the 'disenchantment of the world' (Max Weber).

On the basis of my research on online gaming I aim to problematize this assumption by demonstrating the substantial affinities between paganism in the 'real' world and paganism in the 'virtual' world. First of all, gamers are - like neo-pagans - in many cases motivated to enter this 'otherworldly world' by a dissatisfaction with science, technology and relentless consumerism in the modern world. Ironically, they seek for a more 'authentic' and 'natural' environment in the commodified, technologically induced virtual world. Secondly, and more specific, gamers display - like neo-pagans - a strong interest in performing magic in the (virtual) world since it motivates feelings of 'omnipotency' and 'superhuman power' (Cf. Sigmund Freud). Thirdly, gamers are - like neo-pagans - no true believers: both are involved in 'serious play' (Luhmann, 1989) and seek for playful 'experience' rather than belief (Cf. Heelas, 1996). These epistemological strategies, it will be argued, are typical for modern sceptics who 'want to believe' but are too 'rational' to do so. Moreover – and most important for the analysis: these strategies – whether applied by neo-pagans or gamers - defy the distinctions between the real and the virtual, truth and fantasy. On the basis of this, it is concluded that online fantasy games provide the opportunity to experience 'real' enchantment in 'virtual' environments.