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ANALYSIS

Chapter 32

The Village Church as Intangible Cultural Heritage: European Ritual Innovation Seen from a Japanese Perspective

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It is common practice in religious studies, as in other social science disciplines, to analyze non-European worship practices by using theories and concepts developed within European or North American contexts. Social scientists and historians often refer to non-Western cases to verify Western theories and claim their universal validity—or, alternatively, to challenge or falsify them. This is clearly visible, for instance, in the scholarly literature on secularism and secularization: while the main theories were developed in Western academia, drawing on European and American historical trajectories, scholars of Asia have applied, tested out, and adjusted those theories based on their knowledge of specific Asian societies (e.g., Bubandt and Van Beek 2012; Dean and Van der Veer 2019; Rots and Teeuwen 2017). The opposite is far less common: using Asian (or African, or Indigenous) ideas and practices not as *cases* that are useful for verifying or falsifying Eurocentric theories, but as *bases* for developing new theoretical and conceptual frameworks that can help us understand developments elsewhere, including Europe. This is certainly the case for heritage conservation: although the concept originated in Europe, in the last decades Asian societies have taken the lead in redefining and reshaping (notions of) heritage, and insights from Asia may help us understand contemporary European developments.

Michael Puett rightly pointed out that “many of our current theories are implicitly based at least in part upon Christian, or more specifically Protestant, assumptions. Bringing more indigenous theories into our discussions—in other words, taking non-Western traditions seriously from a theoretical perspective and not simply as objects of our analyses—will help us to overcome the potential biases in our current theoretical understandings” (2010: 365). Using Asian theoretical insights to analyze Western cases could shed new light on the significance of rituals in contemporary society (Seligman et al. 2008), the corporate nature of modern religious institutions (McLaughlin et al. 2020), or the transformation of lived religion into state-sanctioned “intangible cultural heritage” (Salemink 2018). Perhaps Europe is not the model of all things, and not the trendsetter it is often imagined to be—but rather, in some crucial respects, a provincial

backwater (Chakrabarty 2000; Mahbubani 2008). Following Puett's lead, this chapter raises the question if it would be possible to use East Asian theories or concepts to analyze ritual practices not only in Asia itself but also in Western Protestant contexts. What would happen if we defamiliarize the familiar by analyzing a Dutch cultural practice from a decidedly "non-Western" and "non-Abrahamic" theoretical perspective? Put differently: what would a non-Eurocentric ethnography of a European ritual innovation look like?

This chapter offers some tentative suggestions, zooming in on one particular case: a newly created, non-confessional community Christmas ritual in a historic village church in the Netherlands, which I will analyze from a Japanese theoretical perspective. In order to understand the significance of this ritual innovation, I argue, we need to sideline the issue of "belief," which has long been central to theological and sociological inquiry in the Protestant West, and instead look at the church Christmas service as a type of *intangible cultural heritage*: a temporally and spatially embedded collective ritual that is not contingent upon faith and that primarily serves to establish a sense of belonging among community members. The event in question is functionally similar to a Japanese ritual community festival (*matsuri*), which in Japan is commonly associated with Shinto shrines and their deities (see Foster and Porcu 2020). For the village discussed in this chapter, turning the Christmas gathering into a shared ritual event independent of faith or confessional identity—that is, turning it into intangible heritage—was central to a larger initiative, started in the late 1990s by a group of volunteers, to improve living conditions and social relations in the village. In postwar Japan, *matsuri* are seen as important vehicles for "community-making" (*komyuniti-zukuri*) and a means to counter the negative effects of urbanization, depopulation, and social isolation. The ritual innovation discussed in this chapter constitutes a type of non-confessional celebration akin to a Shinto *matsuri*, drawing actively upon the ritual and symbolic heritage of Protestant Christianity while bracketing questions of belief and soteriology, which ultimately serves to "make a community" in the Japanese sense.

In the last few years, numerous scholars have identified the "heritagization of religion"—the discursive, physical, and legal reconfiguration of worship sites and ritual practices as "heritage"—as an important global trend in need of academic inquiry (e.g., Johannsen and Ohrvik 2020; Rots and Teeuwen 2020; Salemink 2016; Van den Hemel and Stengs 2019; Wang, Rowlands, and Zhu 2021). This trend did not originate in Europe. Although European notions of heritage were highly influential during the formative years of the UNESCO World Heritage List and associated knowledge regimes—characterized, among other things, by a strong focus on the historical authenticity of building materials and remnants—the 1990s and 2000s have seen a dramatic paradigm shift in global heritage preservation and conceptualization. In particular, the influential criticism of Eurocentric notions of heritage that was expressed in the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) and the establishment of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) led to significant changes in UNESCO practices and priorities and, consequently, in heritage conservation and legislation worldwide. Japanese diplomats and heritage experts played a large part in these developments (Akagawa 2015; Hølleland 2020; Teeuwen and Rots 2020).

Throughout East and Southeast Asia, the category "heritage" today serves as a useful device for state and religious actors to deprivatize religion, gain new sponsors and audiences, and overcome the limitations of modern legal and political secularism (Rots 2019; Salemink 2016, 2018). But Asian countries and institutions have not merely implemented and adapted European notions of

heritage; they have also shaped and transformed understandings of heritage globally. In particular, East and Southeast Asian models of reconfiguring ritual practices and sacred sites as *intangible* cultural heritage have gained paradigmatic status worldwide, with significant consequences for religious institutions. If “cultural heritage” no longer denotes material remnants of the past but also lived practices—including ritual ceremonies and celebrations—it is no longer only the church or temple buildings and sacred objects that constitute heritage but also *what people are doing* with those objects inside those buildings. Clearly, this is a paradigm shift with potentially far-reaching implications for (the study of) religion. Prayers, storytelling, and ritual offerings are no longer merely expressions of individual or collective faith; they have become intangible heritage. And, crucially, identification with this heritage is not necessarily dependent upon religious belief or institutional membership. When these Asian models of ritual-as-intangible-heritage gain traction in Europe—which, I believe, is the case today—we can expect far-reaching implications for European religious institutions that were previously faith-centric and membership-based. On the one hand, the heritage model can provide opportunities for institutional reinvention and survival. On the other, however, such survival is only possible if people are willing to accept that *faith is optional* and no longer a condition for participation. The heritagization of religion in northern and western Europe thus goes hand in hand with its deconfessionalization, which may be deplored by some religious actors, but perceived as liberating by others. This deconfessionalization does not necessarily imply institutional decline; it can shape new opportunities for collective belonging and ritual participation.

A key feature of the heritagization of religion, then, is the focus on *practices* instead of *faith* as a marker of belonging. Simply put, one can take part in the heritage of a local religious tradition (e.g., a Reformed church service, a Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox procession, a Shinto ceremony, or a Hindu festival) without adhering to a particular creed or belonging to a faith community. When ritual events are redefined as non-confessional “intangible heritage,” and belonging and participation are no longer contingent on the profession of faith in a particular creed, scholars of religion are forced to reconsider some of their discipline’s central theoretical biases, including those associated with the centrality of “belief.” Perhaps we are moving away from a society where people were “believing without belonging” (Davie 1994) to a society where people can once again *belong* to a ritual community without necessarily *believing* in the deity to whom the rituals are addressed—just like in Japan, China, or Vietnam. Ritual, then, is no longer primarily an expression of faith, but has become local intangible heritage, and belonging without believing is no longer problematic.

An “Ordinary” Village Church in Groningen

Midwerd is a small village in the countryside of Groningen, surrounded by dairy farms. It has a population of several hundred inhabitants. A sizeable proportion of the villagers work in agriculture; most of the others work in the city of Groningen, which is located within commuting distance. The last bus stop, grocery store, and primary school disappeared many years ago. The village has no places of interest other than a community house with a small bar that opens once a week and is run by volunteers, a new playground with some basic sports facilities (subsidized by the municipality and some nonprofit organizations after active lobbying by a village committee, a decade or so ago), and a small church dating from the mid-nineteenth century. The village has

no restaurants or tourist accommodations and sees few visitors, other than some recreational cyclists and walkers.¹

Despite its nondistinctive appearance and lack of facilities, however, the village has a long religious heritage. The first church was built in the fourteenth century, a few hundred meters from the present-day church. It was not only associated with a nearby monastery but also constituted a minor pilgrimage destination in its own right, housing a relic of an ancient saint. The relic disappeared during the Reformation; the church building was replaced much later, in the nineteenth century. Today, only an old graveyard remains at the location of the medieval church. Once a year, members of the Russian Orthodox Church in the city of Groningen organize a procession to this graveyard to pay their respects to the saint. The village community is not actively involved in this event, but local volunteers do invite members of the Russian Orthodox Church for coffee and cake after their procession. In return, several years ago, they received a Russian icon, which is now on permanent display next to the pulpit—an unusual sight in a Reformed church.

The current church building functioned as the main center of worship for Dutch Reformed villagers until the early 1980s. At the time, the village community was still relatively “pillarized” (Bryant 1981): the Dutch Reformed (Nederlands Hervormd), the more orthodox and conservative Liberated Reformed (Vrijgemaakt Gereformeerd), and the non-confessional villagers each had their separate subcultures and sent their children to different schools.² However, the Dutch Reformed community was constantly shrinking, and weekly services were discontinued in the 1980s. In subsequent decades, the church was used only sporadically, for instance for funerals; it was mostly closed, except for the annual “Open Monumentendag” (European Heritage Day). By the turn of the century, not only had the congregation ceased to exist but the church building itself was also in bad condition. The church authorities, however, did not have the financial means to cover the considerable costs of the repairs, and the building was in danger of being demolished. A group of concerned villagers—some members of the Dutch Reformed Church³ and some non-members—came together to discuss fund-raising possibilities. With the help of municipal politicians (from the Labour Party as well as the Christian Democrats and a smaller conservative Protestant party) and the Groningen Historic Churches Foundation (Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken; SOGK),⁴ they eventually managed to secure enough provincial and European subsidies to pay for the repairs, which took place in 2010. Subsequently, in 2011, management of the church was formally transferred to SOGK.

The villagers were not merely concerned about the state of the building, however. They wanted something more: a church that could function as a community center, where people could meet, exchange ideas, and learn. In other words, they wanted their church to be everything a church should be—not only a meeting place providing people with a sense of community cohesion, but also a place where they could be inspired—but without clergy, confession, or communion. They started organizing art exhibitions, classical music concerts, and second-hand book markets, most of which attracted large numbers of visitors from within the village and beyond. In 2019, they were included in the “50 Churches Open” (50 Kerken Open) project (see Figure 32.1)—an initiative by SOGK to celebrate its anniversary and attract more visitors to rural churches—and in one of the newly invented “pilgrimages in Groningen.”⁵ Thus, in the 2000s and especially 2010s, the church was successfully revitalized; not as a Protestant congregation but as a local community center with significant social and cultural value.⁶ In other words, the church was no



FIGURE 32.1 “Church open” sign at the entrance to the anonymized church in Midwerd.

Source: Aike P. Rots.

longer merely *material* heritage; it also became *lived* heritage. This is nowhere as visible as in the annual Christmas gatherings.

Reinventing the Christmas Service

It is the end of 2019, the last Saturday before Christmas. More than a hundred Midwerders come together in the church. It is full, and those who arrive late have a hard time finding a place to sit. The atmosphere is festive; people greet each other heartily and speak loudly. They are a diverse bunch, ranging from farmers and construction workers to artists and teachers, as well as many children and pensioners. The majority of them are not religiously affiliated. Some are atheists, while others are agnostics. Some have a Reformed or Roman Catholic background; they may still believe in the Christian God, or “something” derived from it, but they no longer attend church services or mass regularly. Quite a few have embraced New Age and related “spiritual” practices and beliefs. Not all attendees are institutionally unaffiliated, however. Some are active members of a Reformed congregation and attend weekly church services in one of the neighboring villages. Even some of the more orthodox Protestant villagers have made it to this Christmas gathering; there are members of the Liberated Reformed Church as well as some Seventh-day Adventists. Most long-term residents know, more or less, who belongs to which denomination. They know who is a professing Christian, a self-declared shaman, or a staunch atheist. But on this day, nobody talks about matters of belief. Nobody mentions God.

The annual Christmas gathering has become a popular village tradition. It is organized by a small group of dedicated volunteers from within the village, this year for the twentieth time. All attendees receive a printed program that looks very similar to the paper liturgies handed out at mainstream Protestant church services. The structure of the event is strikingly similar, too: we all sing Christmas carols together (Christian carols like “Silent Night,” “O Come All Ye Faithful,” and “Midden in de winternacht” are combined with secular songs such as “Jingle Bells” and “We Wish You a Merry Christmas”); there is a village choir performing some more musically challenging, lesser-known songs (a rather eclectic mix of gospel, pop, and classic); and local children perform a nativity play. The highlight of it all is a moving, somewhat moralistic Christmas story, written and read aloud by one of the villagers, which is reminiscent of a church sermon. The only aspects that are missing, ecclesiastically speaking, are an ordained priest, reading from the scriptures, the Lord’s Prayer, and a ritual blessing. Instead, there are music performances, poetry, and even a drone demonstration. It is all wonderfully diverse and inclusive—and yet, despite the eclectic and non-confessional character, it is undeniably a Christmas event, containing nativity references, Christian songs, spiritual guidance, and a sense of fellowship that extends beyond the everyday. At the end of the gathering, the choir and attendees sing “Hallelujah” by Leonard Cohen, before walking to the community house where they eat soup and bread together, and drink conspicuous amounts of mulled wine. It may not be Holy Communion, but it most certainly is a communal meal, and the Christian references are hard to miss even if they are not explicit.

What is so special about this? Certainly, Midwerd is not the only village in the Netherlands where a church building that no longer serves a congregation acquires new meaning as a community space, used for art exhibitions, concerts, or second-hand book markets. According to research by the national newspaper *Trouw*, in 2019 approximately 1,400 out of 6,900 churches in the Netherlands were no longer in use as a place of worship but had been given a new function

(Van der Breggen and De Fijter 2019). Thus, the innovative character of the initiative in Midwerd lies not so much in the use of space, but in the creation of a new community ritual—in other words, in the making of intangible rather than material heritage. Of course, there is nothing unique about secularizing Christmas: children at non-confessional public schools throughout Europe join in the heritage of Christmas by learning carols with Christian lyrics and performing nativity plays, without taking part in prayers or learning about Christian theology. What is special about the Christmas gatherings in Midwerd, however, is that they take place within the decidedly Christian space of a church; that they are fully secular events, institutionally speaking, yet do not deny or negate confessional understandings of the holiday; that they are not merely cultural *events* like school plays or concerts, but have all the characteristics of a *ritual*, including a collective affective and morally significant experience; and, last but not least, that they successfully bring together devout Christians, atheists, and New Age aficionados, who can all share in the cultural and spiritual heritage of Christmas without having to agree on its soteriological significance.

In other words, unlike a football match, a rock festival, or an Evangelical family day, all of which attract like-minded people with similar interests, the Christmas gathering in Midwerd is a *community ritual* that brings together people with profoundly *different* worldviews, ideologies, and interests, strengthening the social bonds between them. It draws upon the rich heritage of Christianity both symbolically and ritually, but successfully brackets the question of “belief”—no mean feat in the context of Reformed Protestantism, where Luther’s *sola fide* has long been a guiding principle. Thus, although the church gathering resembles mainstream Protestant church services in both shape and contents, there is one crucial difference: contrary to church congregations, belonging is here contingent upon *ritual participation*, not upon a shared faith. In other words, the Christmas gathering has become a type of intangible community heritage. Ritual is central; belief is optional, and mostly evaded. It is almost like a Japanese Shinto festival.

The *Matsuri* and the *Kyōdōtai*: or, Ritual as Intangible Community Heritage

In this section, I argue that the transformation of the Christmas church service in Midwerd into an inclusive community ritual—containing many of the traditional elements of a confessional Protestant church service, combined with some innovations—constitutes a type of *intangible heritage-making* that corresponds to a common pattern in Shinto.⁷ More specifically, the Christmas church service has become a type of *matsuri*: a festival, where belief is private, while ritual participation and belonging are communal and, hence, of primary importance. The god(s) may still be present—in symbols and storytelling if not in the flesh—but they are peripheral. What matters is the performance of tradition as a means to create a sense of community belonging.

The term “Shinto” refers to religious institutions named *jinja* or *jingū* (translated as “shrines” in English) and the rituals that take place there, mostly in Japan. Importantly, one does not have to be affiliated with a shrine in order to worship there. Shrine communities (*ujiko*) are not membership-based; the income of shrines and their priests comes from corporate sponsorship, ritual fees, and private donations, not from membership fees. Shrine rituals are performed for deities named *kami*. It is not necessary to know the name of a *kami*, or their characteristics, in order to worship them, and faith is no condition for ritual participation. Some worshippers are devout and have a personal relationship to the *kami* they worship; others are atheistic, and simply

perform the ritual as a “social custom”; many others are agnostic and perform the ritual because “you never know.” Shrine authorities prescribe proper ritual behavior (e.g., washing hands before entering; clapping and bowing in front of the main hall), but they do not usually tell visitors what to believe.

According to postwar and contemporary Shinto scholars and leaders, the shrine and its sacred grove historically constitute the social, spiritual, and economic center of a village community (Sonoda 1998; Tanaka 2011; Ueda 2004).⁸ They use the English loan word *community* as well as the Japanese term *kyōdōtai*, which literally means “collective body.” In the minds of these scholars, a well-functioning community operates as a single body. Accordingly, shrines have a *public* function: they must preserve the social body (McLaughlin et al. 2020; Rots 2017a). In other words, they are simultaneously *sacred*, in the Durkheimian sense—that is, set apart from the ordinary and perceived as nonnegotiable—and *secular*—that is, not religious. Postwar Japan has constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion, but “religion” and “belief” are *private* and optional. Shinto, by contrast, is communal; it is concerned with the public good and with the establishment and preservation of social cohesion.⁹

This community-centrism shapes Shinto theories of ritual, which arguably have relevance beyond Japan as well (e.g., Sonoda 1998; Tanaka 2011). Shinto scholars like Sonoda Minoru and Tanaka Tsunekiyo stress that making a collective body is not a one-time occurrence, but a continuous enterprise. After all, social bodies are vulnerable and must be preserved in order not to fall apart. How does this happen in practice? How is the community created, cultivated, and, if necessary, revitalized? The answer they give is: *through ritual*. Seasonal rituals connected to the New Year or the rice harvest all play a part in establishing a sense of community, as do coming-of-age rituals. Most important, however, is the *matsuri*, the annual village festival. The festival has a solemn, spiritual element, involving the ritual veneration of the deity by a shrine priest; but the efficacy of the ritual is not contingent upon the presence, let alone faith, of the community members. For them, it is the ludic and liminal character of the festival that matters: participation in processions, ritual dances, and collective feasts, which are not merely entertainment but also serve to relieve tensions and resolve conflicts between community members (Sonoda 1998; see also Schnell 1999). Belief is optional and private, but participation is expected.

If a community is created and recreated through *ritual action*, it follows that its collective identity is not primarily dependent upon material heritage—although material heritage and physical location certainly matter—or upon a shared set of beliefs—there is no such thing as a village in which all members share the same worldview!—but in its *intangible traditions*: crafts, performing arts, festivals, and shared worship practices. This, precisely, is the rationale behind the establishment of the UNESCO intangible heritage lists, and the growing appreciation of intangible heritage by national governments worldwide: preserving these lived traditions as a means to protect cultural diversity and corresponding social identities. Shinto rituals lend themselves perfectly for this type of “intangible heritagization”—indeed, they were among the first ritual traditions in the world to be reclassified as such (Foster 2013; Kikuchi 2020). Such a reconfiguration fits neatly with contemporary Shinto ideology, as it places shrine rituals in the center of public space, turning them into a type of “secular sacred” that is no longer bounded by the modern legal category “religion” (Rots 2019). In other words, when ritual becomes intangible heritage, it becomes public property. You may believe whatever you want, but faith in divine agency is no condition for participation and for community belonging.

None of this is unique to Shinto or to Japan. Of course, the idea that ritual plays a central role in the creation of a community is hardly original; it is a core Durkheimian tenet, and by no means limited to Shinto. But for Durkheim, as for other social anthropologists, ritual functions within the context of a shared belief system and shared symbolic language (see Morris 1987: 106–22). By contrast, Shinto theory reminds us that, for a ritual to be effective, it is not necessary that all participants have a shared understanding of its meanings, or even believe in the existence of the deity. As long as the ritual specialists know what they are doing, and other participants fulfill their practical tasks, it does not matter what everyone believes. Ritual is collective, but belief is individual—or, at least, it is something that is only discussed in circles with like-minded believers. The village is not a congregation or other faith community, but a social unit, and the *matsuri* can serve its role by virtue of the participants *not* discussing divine matters.

Conclusion: *Matsuri* in Midwerd

Needless to say, the church in Midwerd is not a Shinto shrine, and the villagers are not Japanese. Shinto rituals differ significantly from Reformed Protestant ones, in shape, appearance, and theological justification. Moreover, there are some noteworthy differences between modern Dutch and Japanese configurations of the category “religion” and its relationship to the state. Despite those differences, however, I argue that the ritual innovation in Midwerd is in complete accordance with Japanese patterns: worship becomes heritage, belief is optional, and communal belonging is created through shared participation in a ritual that carries profoundly different meanings to different participants—and that difference is accepted, tacitly if not explicitly. Although the villagers are not aware of it, by creating a new collective ritual for the entire village community *regardless of personal belief or religious affiliation*, they have done the exact same thing as Japanese community leaders: they have created a *matsuri*. While institutionally secular—that is, no church authorities or clergy are involved in this process—this Christmas *matsuri* is by no means a mundane, disenchanting affair. Quite the opposite: by creatively recombining elements from confessional Christmas services, the villagers have created a Christmas gathering that is part of Protestant Christian heritage yet significantly more inclusive than regular church services. Creating a ritual that is palatable for orthodox Protestants as well as outspoken atheists is no easy task, but they appear to have succeeded in this remarkably well.

It is precisely because of the focus on ritual *participation*—in storytelling, singing, and of course the communal meal—and because of the shared, unspoken consensus that matters of belief are not to be discussed during this event that it has acquired such an inclusive character. Bluntly put, by bracketing God, the villagers could ensure the continuation of local Christian heritage, albeit in a somewhat altered form. And by creating their own inclusive ritual, drawing on this tradition, they have achieved something that is quite rare in the “secularized” Netherlands: every year, they manage to get their church full of people, and all of them sing Christian songs. In sum, the villagers have created something akin to a Shinto *matsuri*, centered on shared communal rituals, which draw on tradition but are simultaneously subject to continuous adaptation. Religious belief is optional, and some villagers may take it very seriously, but it is not a condition for participation, and it is not discussed explicitly during the event. As a space for *matsuri*, the church has become a symbolic and literal center for the creation of a local community (a *kyōdōtai* or collective body), similar to a Shinto village shrine.

Much of the research on the “heritagization” of religion in Europe to date has focused on material heritage, such as church buildings, synagogues, and religious art. Sociologically speaking, however, the transformation of ritual celebrations into intangible heritage is at least as important a topic of inquiry. This applies not only to large-scale, newly invented “post-Christian” events such as *The Passion in the Netherlands* or *Trondheim Internasjonale Olavsfest* in Norway, which likewise create a sense of “belonging without necessarily believing,” if only temporarily. It also applies to small, bounded village communities such as Midwerd. The potential implications of this type of “community-making through a non-confessional Christian gathering” for Protestant Christianity are far-reaching, as it suggests that Christian institutional decline is not inevitable. Churches can survive and even be revitalized, if its members are willing to bracket faith, celebrate heritage, and accept ideological diversity within the community. This also means that sociologists of religion should stop trying to quantify and assess the “level of religiosity” of societies by looking at data on “belief in God” and “religious membership,” because these data tell us increasingly little about actual ritual participation and belonging. We should acknowledge that people can take part in the heritage of Christianity, willingly and self-reflexively, without believing in God or being affiliated with a particular denomination.

In sum, the transformation of religion into intangible community heritage in Europe may have a significant impact on the institutions and actors involved, as well as on the academic study of religion. As I have shown in this chapter, it is not novel, but follows a common Japanese (and, indeed, East Asian) pattern: the continuity of ritual traditions and religious institutions is ensured by their reconfiguration as (intangible) heritage, and this plays an important role in creating or preserving a sense of community belonging. These developments are not an indication of “believing without belonging,” as Grace Davie described European religiosity in the 1990s, but its exact opposite: belonging without (necessarily) believing. The category “heritage” is central for maintaining and recreating this sense of belonging, as it allows community members to sideline the question of “belief” and come together for celebrations. In times of uncertainty, crisis, economic inequality, and political fragmentation, such collective ritual celebrations are essential for preserving community cohesion, and perhaps more important than ever.

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Notes

- 1 The name Midwerd is a pseudonym. Although I do not present any sensitive material or personal data in this chapter, I have decided to be cautious and anonymize the village in order not to cause any unwanted attention. There are many such villages in the province of Groningen, and many attractive village churches—some

significantly older and more aesthetically pleasing than the one in Midwerd. The ritual innovation discussed in this chapter, however, is rather unique, not least because of its explicit non-denominational and non-confessional character. I have grown up in this village and known many of its inhabitants since I was a child, and I have returned repeatedly as an adult, witnessing the transformations and attending several of the Christmas gatherings discussed in this chapter.

- 2 Since the seventeenth century, the village was long home to a Mennonite (Doopsgezind) community as well. They had their own church on the other side of the village, which was converted into a carpentry workplace in the 1970s and serves as a regular house today.
- 3 In 2004, most congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church merged with the Reformed Churches (Gereformeerd) and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church, becoming the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (Protestantse Kerk in Nederland; PKN).
- 4 This foundation currently manages ninety-one churches. It was established in 1969 in order “to preserve historic churches in the province of Groningen and to promote an appreciation of them.” For an overview, see <https://www.groningerkerken.nl/en/home> (accessed January 31, 2021).
- 5 In recent years, the Pilgrimage Foundation in Groningen (Stichting Pelgrimeren in Groningen; SPiG) has created approximately 250 short- and medium-distance walking routes (“pilgrimages”) throughout the province. This corresponds to a wider northern European trend: in various majority Protestant countries without pilgrimage traditions (at least not in post-Reformation times), church and secular authorities are now reinventing and creating “ancient” pilgrimage routes as a means to attract visitors, apparently meeting a demand on the part of recreational walkers. Examples include the St. Olav Ways in Norway (Johannsen and Ohrvik 2020) and the Scottish Pilgrim Routes Forum (Bowman 2020). For the pilgrimages in Groningen, see <https://www.spig.nl/> (accessed January 31, 2021).
- 6 Not surprisingly, the years 2020 and 2021 saw fewer events and visitors than previous years because of the Covid-19 pandemic. I believe that this is a temporary dip, and that the post-pandemic period will bring an increase in the number of activities and even more community participation. The future will tell.
- 7 The Japanese worship tradition Shinto is notoriously difficult to define, and I do not have the space to discuss it in much detail here. For academic discussions of different conceptions of Shinto, see Breen and Teeuwen (2010); Rots (2017b). For a historical overview, see Hardacre (2017).
- 8 For a more elaborate analysis of these ideas and their implications for state-religion boundaries, see Rots (2017a).
- 9 This is a normative ideal rather than an accurate description of reality. Legally speaking, shrines are religious institutions, just like temples or churches. Moreover, Japanese Christians, members of popular Buddhist lay movements, and communists are likely to disagree that they belong to a community centered around a Shinto shrine and its festival. But the focus on community is a core aspect of priestly discourse and it does function as a self-fulfilling prophecy, at least to a certain extent.

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