Research seminar: Building trust – conducting research among and with Christian migrants

30 November 2022 | Radboud University, Nijmegen

Anyone who conducts research into immigrant life in the Netherlands may find that religion plays a role to a greater or lesser extent. It emerges in topics such as integration, cultural inclusiveness, religious heritage, immigrants and social work, reception of refugees, and intercultural marriages. However, most research on the intersection of migration and religion focuses on Muslim immigrants, whereas rough estimates tell us that there are about as many Christian as Muslim immigrants. With the expected increase in Christian migrants from the Middle East, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Eastern Europe (Ukraine), the lack of basic data and primary sources is a serious obstacle for researchers as well as for Christian migrants. In the absence of sound research, policies based on sketchy data may have undesired consequences for this overlooked group.

In this research seminar we will address what this current situation means for research practice, from the perspective of both researchers and Christian migrants. How can one put a case study among Christian immigrants in its national context if this is not known? How can researchers present a reliable historical background if sources are lacking? How can privacy be guaranteed? How to communicate on religion with researchers from a secularised society?
And above all: what role does mutual trust play in research practice? Does trust go hand in hand with common interests? How to address religion with Christians who have had to flee their country because of their faith? How to ensure that trust, once given, is not betrayed?

This seminar is organised by:
- Catholic Documentation Centre (Katholiek Documentatie Centrum, KDC): The KDC reserves primary resources and heritage on the social aspects of Roman Catholic life in The Netherlands.
- RUNOMI: the Radboud University Network on Migrant Inclusion: a RU-wide platform of more than 90 scholars

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Introduction by Anneloes van Kuijk, coordinator International Diversity, Catholic Documentation Centre/Katholiek Documentatie Centrum (KDC), Radboud University

Welcome to this seminar on conducting research among and with Christian migrants. Let me first introduce myself. I am coordinator International Diversity at the Catholic Documentation Centre (KDC). The KDC documents social aspects of catholic life in the Netherlands, and I work with catholic organisations that have their roots outside The European Netherlands[1]. These can be communities and organisations set up by or for migrants, refugees, expats, or international students, but also groups centred around a 'foreign' catholic rite.

Originally, this seminar was planned in April 2022, which was several weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine. For several years now, I have been a member of a choir that is closely related to the Orthodox Parish of St. Nicholas in Amsterdam. At that time, this parish became world news, as it was the first Russian Orthodox parish to openly distance itself from the Russian invasion. It even chose to

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[1] https://www.ru.nl/kdc/weten/katholieke-migrantengemeenschappen-nederland/

leave the Russian Orthodox Church – which had expressed support for Putin – and to connect with the Ecumenical Orthodox Church.[2]

My choir has members from Russia *and* Ukraine, as well as from Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Belarus; some are religious, belonging to different denominations, while others are not. Socially, we are a close-knit group with a lively app group. So, one might expect that the invasion and everything that happened in the parish would dominate our conversation. But instead, it got quiet. We have an implicit agreement not to talk about politics as this can easily divide us; we rather concentrate on what unites us.

A Dutch daily, the NRC, spoke to several Amsterdam Russians about their situation and noted: "It is this sensitivity that many Europeans do not seem to understand sufficiently". One of the interviewees said: "Do you really think that when a Russian is on the phone to a polling agency about this, he is telling the truth? He will consider such a phone call as life threatening". And our choir conductor, who was also interviewed, said that "ignorance" is what she fears most: "because then people will start looking at each other suspiciously".

When registrations for this event opened, someone wrote to me with great concern about the atrocities towards Christians in his home country. At the same time, the international Catholic organisation Aid to the Church in Need published its annual report on the persecution of Christians worldwide. It found that in 75 per cent of the 24 countries surveyed, oppression and persecution has increased.[3] Some of the animosities and hostilities between population groups in former home countries are being continued here in the Netherlands. Sometimes, as with the Amsterdam parish, surveillance comes from abroad as well. Our country is not always as safe as we think it is.

But fear of surveillance and fear of violence are not the only reasons for keeping quiet. For a long time, I was a member of a catholic Byzantine community. Although we would have loved to welcome new members and we needed publicity, we often kept a low profile. We did not want to attract too much attention, because what is customary in our rite is not always compatible with common practice in the Dutch Catholic Church. Additionally, we also wanted to maintain a secure place for the refugees we sometimes helped out.

… I started this introduction with some personal experiences to show that religion is very much at the core of one's personal life. It affects one's personal choices and actions, and also one's social behaviour, whether or not as a member of a religious community. Religion is part of one's 'being', or – with a tricky modern phrasing: one's 'identity'.

In much the same way, religion is at the core of society. That is, if we take a broader understanding of religion than as a set of beliefs about God and Life that people share on a Sunday morning in church. Being part of a church community - by the values, norms, attitudes and specifically the behaviours and actions that go with it - often constitutes the very fabric of social life, certainly not confined to one's own community.

To name but one of the studies to illustrate this: research institute Verwey-Jonker examined close to 200 faith-based organisations in Rotterdam – many of which have a migration background – and calculated the economic value of their voluntary social work (that is: apart from organising church

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[2] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/13/russian-orthodox-church-in-amsterdam-announces-split-with-moscow

[3] https://acnuk.org/news/international-uk-report-shows-persecution-of-christians-is-getting-worse/

meetings). It accumulated to an amount of 350 million euros – annually.[4] This contradicts the general opinion that a modern metropolis is automatically a secularised and individualised society. It also follows that the religious factor may come up in any research, whether the focus is explicitly on religion or not.

There is a lot to say about Christian migrants in The Netherlands, but there is even more to ask. There is a lack of data on a national scale, there is no adequate overview of communities and organisations, and information is fragmented into denominations; there is also a lack of primary resources and of representation in collections of heritage institutes. This research seminar, however, is not meant to share data or research topics, but rather to learn about *how* to acquire more – and better - data and how to gain a better understanding.

After all, researchers that want to learn more about migrants with a Christian background are faced with several obstacles. How to find respondents or informants when contact details are difficult to obtain? Which means of communication works best: e-mail, telephone, interviews…? How to deal with various languages? And with the law on privacy? Are there differing rules of conduct to take into account, for instance in relation to church hierarchies or generations? How to avoid biases in concepts, specifically concerning religion?

If all researchers make the same choices in the practical organisation of their research, they will jointly create biases and blind spots. For instance: if all researchers would use outdated lists of contact details and send questionnaires to post-boxes that no longer exist, the results could be wrongly marked as 'nonresponse'. Alternatively, communities that are well visible and accessible may receive an overload of requests to participate in research project. Unable to participate in all, their rejection will be marked as a true nonresponse. Such - false and true - nonresponses may consequently create the incorrect impression that migrant groups like to distance themselves from Dutch society.

… A note in-between: by 'researchers' we mean anyone who wants to learn, study, and investigate, whether as a starting student, for a PhD, to prepare a communal policy paper or to design an exhibition etc. Also: 'researchers' and 'Christian migrants' are not mutually exclusive groups. In fact, I know that many of us here belong to both categories.

Now, all the advice and tips we will hear today, are applicable to most research projects that aim to include overlooked groups. However, not all overlooked groups *want* to be in the limelight, and religious affiliation combined with a migrant background calls for extra care. There is a tension, a dilemma, between the desire to be visible, represented, understood, to do away with ignorance on the one hand – a desire shared by researchers and by overlooked groups – and the desire for safety and freedom of movement for these groups on the other hand.

At the centre of all this, is trust. Trust: the counterpart of fear, concerns, and distrust.

In essence, every research project needs to be based on trust. If we look at the personal level, trust needs to feature the relationship between the researcher and the respondents, informants, participants. Respect is key. Too often, researchers approach their respondents as a means to their project end, instead of as equal participants. While, after all, it is to the benefit of everyone if research is valid, reliable, adequately representing reality.

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[4] https://www.verwey-jonker.nl/publicatie/maatschappelijke-activiteiten-van-levensbeschouwelijke-organisaties-in-rotterdam/

So, the main question for today is: how can we – as researchers and/or Christian migrants - ensure that research projects make a positive and genuine contribution to the multicultural society we are all part of?

The team of speakers we have today covers various Christian denominations: protestant, catholic and orthodox, while we also have a speaker to make a comparison with research on Muslim migrants. And including the participants of this meeting, we also cover various sectors such as research institutes, civil societies, heritage institutes, and church organisations.

The next presentation will be by **drs**. **Madelon Grant**, coordinator of Samen Kerk in Nederland, the national umbrella organisation for international and migrant churches in The Netherlands. She will present practical guidelines on conducting research in collaboration with Christian migrants.

Our panel members will then highlight different aspects of today's theme:

First, we need to think not only about how to achieve good research results (output, outcome), but also about what the *impact* of the research project will be. Let's not only consider research methods and techniques, but also for example interests, stakeholders, and financing partners.

If you look at the list of reports of some research institutes on multicultural issues and integration, you will find that most of them are about Muslims. Just by scrolling through these lists of reports, you get the impression that apparently 'they' are problematic to 'our' society. Doesn't putting Muslims in the limelight like this in fact *increase* polarisation? Make people *loose* trust? Stimulate that people 'will look at each other suspiciously'?

Dr. Martijn de Koning conducts anthropological research with Muslims in Europe and is associate professor Islam studies at Radboud University (RU). He also represents the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies of the RU in the board of RUNOMI. He can tell us first-hand what happens when you put the spotlights on certain religious groups.

Dr. Leen Sterckx can add to this discussion from the perspective of a social research institute. She is advisor qualitative research at the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau). She has researched migration and integration for twenty years and is currently specialised in inclusive research.

Second, although the term 'Christian migrants' suggests commonality, there are in fact many differences among them. Researchers need to keep in mind, for instance, that most of the information that is available about Christian migrants, is about protestant groups. A contributing factor might be that the operationalisation of 'religious affiliation' is often from a protestant perspective.

Dr. Michael Bakker will tell us more about Orthodox migrants in The Netherlands. He is rector of the St Irenaeus Orthodox Theological Institute at the RU and priest of the Orthodox Parish of St. Nicholas in Amsterdam. Besides his academic work and ecclesial duties, he is involved in the emancipation process of the approximately quarter of a million people in The Netherlands with an Orthodox background. He is also advisor of the official Orthodox representative body.

A third aspect is the lack of primary resources and of representation of migrants in the collections of heritage institutes.

Dr. Ron Blom has been working at the City Archives Amsterdam (Stadsarchief) since 2000 and specialises in the acquisition of private archives in general and of migrant archives specifically. He knows the many challenges involved in acquiring these resources.

The opening line of an article by his hand is: "About a decade ago, the alarm was raised about the lagging share of migrant heritage in our museum and archive institutions. Many institutions resolved to catch up…".[5] It could have been written this year, but it was actually written a decade ago, in 2012.

This adds another dimension to the discussion. Why is it that attention for issues such as these comes and goes as the tides? Why is it that every decade these issues are 'rediscovered' as urgent social issues? Which leads to another question for today: how can we better build on research results that are already available? And how can we make sure that the results of our studies will last and will be used by others to build on?

The last speaker of today is **Prof. dr. Frans Wijsen.** He is professor of practical religious studies and mission studies at the RU, and head of the Nijmegen Institute of Missions Studies (NIM). He has been an expert on religious diversity for decades and has witnessed several of these 'tidal waves' of attention for Christian migrants come and go.

Presentation notes Madelon Grant, coordinator Samen Kerk in Nederland

SKIN is the national umbrella organization of international and migrant churches.

My presentation today is based on 12 years of working experience with international and migrant churches, and what they have shared with me in preparation for today. My presentation is also based on commitment to the Christian migrant communities, passion for research, and a sense of urgency. Therefore, I am happy that this seminar is being organised today – and thanks to the organizers for the honour of kicking our meeting off. I hope we will learn from each other's experiences and will share dreams on how to improve our cooperation - how we can work together more systematically and sustainably as church communities and researchers.

The title of today's seminar is "Building trust". Trust is all about relationship; so we need to discuss *how* we relate to each other, for *whom* we are actually doing research, and *why* are we doing research?

Researchers regularly knock on the door of SKIN - from master or doctoral students to university lecturers and professors, as well as applied research agencies. We try to advise them as best we can and sometimes collaborate on research, e.g. recently on the topics of poverty and housing issues.

SKIN also often receives questions on issues that have not officially academically been researched yet. We answer these questions the best we can based on our own observations, but with the realisation that a lot remains underresearched and unknown.

This lack of knowledge about the Christian migrant communities, even of our existence, has the consequence that the majority of people in NL do not realise that there are 1 million chr with migr background and 1,000+ churches. I still regularly receive the response: migrant churches, you mean

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[5] https://www.kvan.nl/archievendag/archievenblad-4-mei-2012/

mosques? This has major consequences: for example, the assumption that churches are in decline causes policies that are counterproductive to *growing* communities. For example in zoning plans - in some municipalities there is now insufficient space left with destination 'religion'. Where should we meet then?

For this reason, SKIN finds it very important that more research is done and more knowledge is gained. Policy makers listen better when something is scientifically researched and proven - that's reality. Of course, research has to be independent, but for people to be willing to participate in research, it helps tremendously if the researched issues are of importance to the researched group themself.

Currently, we have good examples, and we also have suggestions for improvement. I will now first highlight two real-life examples, and then I'll offer a few suggestions on the topic of collaboration.

First, I would like to make a point on the use of surveys. Very often I see research being done using digital surveys via email. Very often this method produces very limited response. If you do research among Christians in the Netherlands based on a supposedly representative sample, but there are no migr chr in your results, it may not be so representative after all. These people are here, I meet them every day. This is no rocket science, there are logical explanations: language barrier, a limited network ('bubble'), different priorities, digital vs. personal contact - email is getting out of date, for young people too.

When a group does not surface in these results, it appears like they don't exist, and then people don't undertake any further research. The group is then completely overlooked - I have actually seen this happen. Such blind spots are difficult to see for yourself; it is a kind of ignorance that can be self-sustaining.

If you want to get good research results, you will have to adapt your methods to what works for the researched group.

I had a conversation with a researcher who does a lot of research on Muslim communities, I asked how he collects his data. He answered: 12 student researchers from communities themselves, who know language and culture, who approach people in person with printed surveys and pen. That works! It just takes more effort.

Second. In a 2006 article, researchers researching teenagers in an international church with African/Caribbean roots in Amsterdam Southeast describe their attempts to get these teens to fill out a survey. This turns out not to be easy, even though these youth have no language barrier and know how to use digital means. The researchers then decide to have them fill out the survey live together in church as part of a youth meeting. Even then, the researchers succeed only with difficulty in getting these youth to fill out the survey. And they find out, that the terminology and concepts they are using are inadequate. For example, the categorization of schools into white, black or mixed schools. Some "black" schools house young people of dozens of different nationalities and are therefore "mixed" in the eyes of these youth. And in the eyes of these youth, "white" schools have already become a "mixed" school by their own presence. And I think: those youth have a good point. For this reason, at SKIN I always prefer to check surveys from researchers, because confusion of concepts and terminology arises very easily.

Of course, I don't know everything either, which leads to my suggestions for collaboration. I see three options:
1. You can conduct research by bringing in researchers from the communities themself.

2. You can conduct research in collaboration with social partners with a specific expertise and network, like SKIN.
3. As a researcher who is new to the world of chr migr communities, you can build this knowledge yourself, overcome language and cultural barriers, and build a relationship of trust with the communities.

1. bringing in researchers from the communities themselves.
Bringing in researchers from the communities themselves, means bringing in knowledge about the language and culture. It means bringing in someone who has more developed sensitivity to possible opportunities and pitfalls, and someone who can usually connect more easily to the community.

One reason for today's seminar, is the limited knowledge of and research on Christian migrant communities. At the same time however, there is a lot of knowledge available. Within these communities, you can find people with an academic background and many years of relevant experience. However, our worlds don't know each other well enough. I would like to encourage research institute to put conscious effort into head hunting for people with talents within these communities. They are valuable human resources and it is worthwhile to invest in them, especially in the younger generations, and set them free to translate their practical knowledge into officially recognized academic knowledge. You could call this a kind of 'reverse valorization'. This can only be done by giving them a paid position, otherwise they will inevitably have to set other priorities to support their families.

2.   Collaboration with social partner organisations, for example SKIN.
SKIN is a platform of international churches; We already have relationships of trust with community leaders. And those leaders also want to build bridges for their own communities, because that is their reason to connect with SKIN. SKIN has experience in collaboration with research partners. For example we have a structural collaboration with the Center for Theology of Migration at the Free University of Amsterdam, where research has been done on mental health. Last year, we collaborated on project base with KASKI on a research on housing issues. There are various formats of collaboration, but the principle is the same: by collaborating with partners like SKIN, you can bring in expertise and networks of trust into your research coalition. SKIN can 'translate' between the world of research & the world of the international churches.

3.   Then finally, as a researcher new to the world of chr migr communities, you can acquire this knowledge yourself, overcome language and cultural barriers, and build relationships of trust with the communities.
This is also an option, but one that takes time, because the researcher often still needs to learn to deal with language and cultural differences and does not yet have a personal network among the communities. Building such a relationship can be a good and sustainable way to bring worlds together. However, it requires a humble, sensitive and respectful attitude. There are invisible barriers you will have to take into account, such as unconscious assumptions and intercultural skills.

Researchers often make a good show of their research. The researched party can sometimes experience this as colonial, when such research produces little or no change for the group being researched. Ideally, the possibilities for practical application of the outcomes of the research, should be included from the beginning of the process of planning a research project. The project does not end when the research report is finished, but when it has been put into a form of practical valorisation.

I would also like to advocate for a more structural embedding of such research relationships. Currently, many research projects are an occasional sidestep, and that means that after SKIN or people from our communities have invested in someone, giving explanation, building their networks

and trust, after the project finishes, all is gone. We would like to see that our investments build a more sustainable fundament of basic knowledge. If researchers come and go, but nothing noticeably changes for churches, the risk is that at some point they get tired and they no longer see the point of cooperating.

It is necessary to understand the context of church leaders. The past decades, the social climate in the Netherlands toward immigrants and religion has not been favorable, and social inequality is growing. Majority of pastors have secular jobs for a living, lead the church in their spare time, and hopefully have some time with their families. Every hour church leaders spend on research, they cannot spend on a) securing their own income b) their family c) their community.

The effect of this is that community leaders have to set strict priorities and are impact-driven. For research, this means that they want it to be helpful. Another risk is that well-qualified people get overloaded in their workload, meaning research cannot be undertaken as well as you would wish. Which means new people have to reinvent the wheel every time.

Again, the solution is not rocket science. If you want to do something with the Christian migrant communities, you need to invest time, and time is usually a question of budgets.

Even at SKIN, I recognize this risk of work overload. While SKIN finds research really important, we have to spend our staff hours on projects that do receive funding, because we don't have any structural source of funding. But do we say no, when researchers want to collaborate with us, we also want to collaborate with them, and all agree that it is necessary, but there is no budget? There is a limit to the amount of overtime that our staff members can make.

Thankfully, some institutions have become more responsive to this situation. An example could also maybe be taken from the Fair Practice Code, a code of conduct for doing business and collaborating in the cultural sector.

To conclude
There is good news: we don't have to start from scratch or invent everything; there are already good examples and suitable people.

There *is* still much work to do, and if we want to maintain sustainable access to chr migrant communities, we will have to invest in that relationship and consider the needs of these communities.

The key question is, *who* are we actually doing research for, and *why*? Is it for theoretical understanding, for the lived experiences of church life, or for society as a whole? As far as SKIN is concerned, the main issue at hand is valorization and reverse valorization. Perhaps we should try to set a common research agenda for the future, in order for the research to have more impact on all parties involved.