**Introductie**  
*Eline:* Hallo en welkom bij de eerste aflevering van de korte podcast reeks Alleen/samen gezond. Deze podcast biedt een verassende blik op pandemieën en gezondheid, namelijk die van religie. De huidige corona pandemie heeft ons duidelijk gemaakt dat gezondheid niet alleen een medische aangelegenheid is, gezond zijn heeft niet enkel te maken met de afwezigheid van ziekten, maar ook met maatschappelijke en geestelijke welzijn. De faculteit geesteswetenschappen van de Universiteit Leiden, en de Leiden Delft Erasmus alliantie hebben het afgelopen jaar onderzoek gedaan naar de rol van religie in tijden van ziekte en pandemieën, zowel vroeger als nu.

Mijn naam is Eline Pollaert en als religiewetenschapper en publiekshistorica breng ik in deze korte podcast reeks wetenschappers, beleidsmakers en maatschappelijk betrokken personen met elkaar in gesprek. We bespreken gezondheid en pandemieën vanuit het perspectief van religie met als resultaat vaak onverwachte inzichten. In deze eerste aflevering zijn Lorenza Cirillo en Thijs Scherjon te gast. Zij maakten als research trainees onderdeel uit van het onderzoeksproject en vertellen u graag meer over het onderzoek en hun bevindingen. het grootste deel van deze aflevering is in het Engels opgenomen. De andere afleveringen van de podcast reeks zijn Nederlandstalig. Een uitgeschreven versie van het gesprek is online beschikbaar.

Welcome Thijs and Lorenza, I'm happy that you'll be telling me and the listeners more about the research project you conducted. Your research projects were quite different in terms of scope and approach. But some of your conclusions were strikingly similar, it's very interesting. But before we dive into the research project itself, would you like to introduce yourselves? Lorenza please start.

*Lorenza:* Hello, everyone. My name is Lorenza . I'm 24 and I'm Italian and English. I've been living in the Netherlands for four years now, but I'm momentarily back home in Rome, where I grew up after completing my master's in July. I did both my bachelor's and my master's at Leiden University. I did first international studies and then I did Middle Eastern studies. I'd previously considered choosing religious studies as a master, which is why I quickly signed up for some classes from that course, which is where I met Tom-Eric, who is a supervisor for this project. When I heard about the opening for this traineeship, I was immediately interested because it kind of allowed me to continue with my Middle Eastern studies field while also pursuing the religious studies aspect that I'd always been interested in. It's kind of the perfect opportunity for university because it allows you to try your hand at everything and to see what fits best. And I really didn't want to do Middle Eastern studies and religious studies at the same time, so I'm happy this opportunity came up.

*Eline:* Wonderful. Thank you Lorenza. Thijs go ahead.

*Thijs:* Absolutely. First of all, thank you very much for the wonderful opportunity to present our research in this interesting podcast. As stated, my name is Thijs Scherjon and I study the bachelor history, as well as the Bachelor religious studies at Ladder University. I'm currently finishing up on my master history at Leiden as well. And currently I'm following the research master religious studies at Utrecht University, and during the winter of 2021, I came across an application for a research project which was perfectly aligned with my academic interest, namely the experiences of the ordinary believer and the emphasis placed on the lived experience or the lived religion. For example, how believers put their religious ideas and ideals and principles into practice.

**Becoming engaged in the research project**  
*Eline:* Wonderful. Thank you Thijs and Lorenza. It's really interesting that your backgrounds are quite different with this research projects spiked both of your interests nevertheless. So generally speaking, the research project focused on current and historic coping strategies during pandemics or in other words, how did individuals and communities in the past and present deal with health crises in terms of religion? This is a topic that barely received any attention during the COVID 19 pandemic, and the news that was reported was even mostly negative. For example, focusing on infection risks of mass religious events. So given this generally unfavorable image of religion and religious communities during pandemics, the topic of the research project was a bit unusual to focus on precisely this. Thijs, what was it about the project that attracted you to it? Could you tell me something about the research project and what you did in it?

*Thijs:* Absolutely. I looked from a historical ideological point of view at the way Protestant organizations and their members in the Dutch city of Leiden have reacted to the Spanish flu pandemic, which raged between 1918 and 1920. And by focusing on their interpretations of the pandemic within church life and often contested meanings attached to group rituals like going to church, the Day of National Prayer and the sacraments. And all this within the overarching context of governmental and public debate about the Spanish flu. And the research has shown how these communities have reacted to the Spanish flu and expose how they look at health, faith and belongingness amidst a devastating pandemic.

*Eline:* All right, so you took a historic perspective and applied it to the Spanish flu from about a century ago. Lorenzo, your research was focused on the current COVID 19 pandemic. What did you set out to do with your research?

*Lorenza:* I mean, the objective was to investigate and potentially compare two pandemics that occurred at extremely different times, both in terms of society and in terms of technology. And to do so, we used the lens of religion, because obviously religion has revealed itself to be such an important factor for communities in times of crisis. For me, it was important to touch upon, as I said, technology because the restrictions on gatherings have been, on the one hand, an enormous challenge to religious life, while on the other, they've created these new alleys for opportunity and, and there have been discussions on inclusivity and accessibility. And in general, there's the opportunity to now create a church experience more tailored to the members of the community, to each individual member as well. But ultimately, I believe that our goal as a team was to uncover these opportunities and to bring them to the attention of a wider audience. And this goes for not just church goers and religious communities. So in other terms, how can we use the challenges brought by COVID 19 as guidelines to create a more thoughtful and inclusive policy. Has experiencing social life online shown us new ways of interacting as communities?

*Eline:* It is really interesting, Lorenza, and I guess those questions are what this podcast series is all about, and historical and humanities research may not be the first things that come to mind when dealing with a pandemic, but there’s actually a lot of value and concrete lessons to be learned there. We praten zo verder met Thijs en Lorenza over het onderzoeksproject, maar eerst deel ik graag een gesproken column van Dr. Paul van Trigt. Paul is een van de initiatiefnemers van het project, en hij reflecteert in deze column op de meerwaarde van niet medische, wetenschappelijke disciplines wanneer het aankomt op gezondheidscrises.

**Column Paul van Trigt**  
*Eline:* Pap, staat in de bijbel dat je je niet mag laten vaccineren? Met deze vraag kwam mijn dochtertje thuis aan het begin van de pandemie. Nog voordat er überhaupt sprake was van een vaccin. Mijn naam is Paul van Trigt en ik werk als universitair docent sociale geschiedenis aan de universiteit Leiden, en deze vraag triggerde mij. Omdat het iets laat zien van de manier waarop religie een rol speelt in het alledaagse leven. Zomaar op een basisschool in Amsterdam-west, waar mijn dochtertje in gesprek raakte met een klasgenootje die lid is van de Russisch orthodoxe kerk. Het triggerde mij ook omdat ik als historicus weet dat religie altijd een belangrijke rol speelde bij de manier waarop mensen reageerde op pandemieën, en op kwesties van ziekte en gezondheid. Ik raakte hierin over gesprek met mij collega Tom-Eric Krijger, een historicus werkzaam bij religiestudies aan de universiteit Leiden. En we besloten samen een onderzoekje op te zetten, waar ook over verteld wordt in deze podcast. Het leek ons goed om ons onderzoek in te bedden in de zogenaamde LDE-alliantie. Een alliantie tussen de universiteit Leiden, de technische universiteit Delft en de Erasmus universiteit in Rotterdam. Een alliantie waarin deze drie universiteiten samen werken, maar ook samen werken met maatschappelijke partners rond een aantal thema's. En een van die thema's is een gezonde samenleving. En wat mij opviel bij het onderzoek dat loopt is dat er vanuit allerlei disciplines bijdragen worden geleverd, maar eigenlijk nauwelijks vanuit de historische wetenschap, geesteswetenschappelijke wetenschap. Daarom hebben we in 2021 een symposium georganiseerd onder de vlag van de LDE, waarbij we nadrukkelijk in gesprek zijn gegaan over ons onderzoek met onderzoekers uit andere disciplines. en we zullen dat gesprek zeker een vervolg geven. Nou wat voegt het dus toe als je met een historische, een geesteswetenschappelijke blik kijkt naar de pandemie en naar religie in het bijzonder. Ik denk dat deze podcast daar al duidelijke voorbeelden van geeft. Nadia Bouras bijvoorbeeld betoogt dat religie een veel minder belangrijke rol speelt dan je zou verwachten. wat je bijvoorbeeld zou verwachten op basis van bepaalde berichten in de media. En zij pleit ervoor om veel meer te kijken naar sociaaleconomische positie van mensen met een migratie achtergrond in plaats van kijken naar hun religie. Ook het verhaal van rabbijn Vorst is verassend. Hij verteld dat de orthodoxe joodse gemeenschap het vaccin omarmd heeft, terwijl we in de media vooral lezen over orthodoxe religieuze gemeenschappen die dat niet lijken te doen. Nou ik denk dat geesteswetenschappelijk historisch onderzoek bij kan dragen aan dat soort brood nodige nuanceringen die laten zien hoe complex de werkelijkheid is. En dat bij uitstek geesteswetenschappelijk historisch onderzoek kan helpen om die complexe werkelijkheid beter te begrijpen. En met dat begrip hopen wij bij te dragen aan de gezonde samenleving van de toekomst en daarmee ook relevant te zijn voor de mensen voor wie die toekomst in bijzonder van belang is. Mijn dochtertje, haar klasgenootje en velen andere.

**Conducting the research project**  
*Eline:* Thijs you researched the effects of the Spanish flu pandemic between 1918 and 1920 on Leiden. How did you go about this? What was it about this specific pandemic that caught your interests?

*Thijs:* Well, from the beginning, I was very interested in the Spanish flu because the impact was so enormous and so vast, and at first glance there were a lot of similarities with the current COVID 19 pandemic, which is still raging as we are recording. My initial question was how did the Netherlands and religious communities specifically reacted to the Spanish flu? And to get some answers, I first started with a broad review of existing literature so that is secondary sources, like books and articles related to Spanish flu and its effects in the Netherlands specifically. And during that process, I came across a newspaper from 1918 and it spoke of a municipality that instituted measures at an early stage, and it was the city of Leiden. And well, cinemas, schools, and theaters were closed down due to the pandemic, but not religious schools nor churches. And of course, you shouldn't ignore such a very interesting contrast. The place to find some answers to this interesting contrast are the rich archives of heritage Leiden, known in Dutch as "erfgoed Leiden en omstreken". And I explored the meetings and reports of church councils and religious schools, meetings of the city council and local newspapers as well, both secular and religious. And they offered me a broad and in-depth picture of the religious life in of during the pandemic and how they reacted to this. Well, very enormous and vast pandemic.

*Eline:* Yeah, I see. So it is both a combination of secondary and primary sources. So you got your hands dirty, so to say. Lorenza, your research was focused on a contemporary topic, namely the COVID 19 pandemic. When you started out, did you expect to find any similarities, for example, in the research Thijs was doing compared to yours?

*Lorenza:* I mean, it's interesting. I think the projects were definitely meant to echo each other. But what actually happened is that there was a lot of similarities, as I previously mentioned. So I had originally decided to research Eucharist during times of COVID to see if, you know, the online format had kind of offered any new ways of taking communion that didn't require being in the same space. This also seemed to fit perfectly with Thijs' preliminary findings, which mostly concerned how religious culture and the Spanish flu weren't necessarily always aware of the benefits of social distancing, and thus kind of continued with their some of their measures in terms of, in terms of churchgoers. I'd imagined that during COVID 19, each community would have found their own way of doing Eucharist depending on their confession, their socio-economic capabilities or on individual creativity of church members. But both through research and through initial anecdotal evidence, I realized that Eucharist was kind of celebrated in the online domain, either through members bringing their own food and beverage. That's one thing or just not celebrated with mass limited to kind of a recorded sermon and any rituals performed at another time. So I decided to focus on one parish only, and this made it easier both in practical terms and in terms of finding out what I wanted to know, which is how did different people in the same church, at different levels of church organization, How did they experience the transition to online and how did they make sense of the new way of performing religious community? And it actually made it very interesting to focus on only one church because you kind of get to see different perspectives at the same time. And obviously there was limitations due to the pandemic itself.

*Eline:* Yeah, I absolutely see. Makes sense. It's really interesting what you say about looking at multiple levels within one religious community. So Thijs, you immerse yourself in religious documents from a century ago in the Leiden archives and Lorenza, as I was hearing you talk, you were trying to mingle with a particular current church community. So how did both of that work out during a pandemic? What challenges did you encounter during your field work?

*Lorenza:* So we're treating it as kind of a baby version of ethnography on very limited scale from online. So as I mentioned, I decided to focus my research given that I wasn't really able to, you know, knock on doors and participate in sermons like I had envisaged. So I decided to focus on one parish in a useful way so that I could focus my efforts on investigating one situation more in depth, rather than sort of trying to grasp the situation across different churches, which is much more complicated. If anything, the interviews conducted with the members of the parish confirmed that even though large gatherings were suspended, the one on one relationships as well as like, minor small groups such as like Bible study groups and dinner groups and youth groups, they actually flourished like it was actually very successful for them, and obviously meeting in real life was also permitted in groups two, three, six. It was kind of different phases, which meant that many became increasingly close with a much smaller group than usual. For this reason, I think I found it a lot easier to focus my energy on one church, interviewing the pastor first and then asking community members to answer a questionnaire about their transition. At the beginning, I thought this was a really big setback, but I think it worked out perfectly as this process still provided me with heaps of insight, actually, and it allowed me sort of talk to people a little bit more. And the pastor was fantastic, and he gave me a bunch of information, and he gave me a bunch of sort of even the formation of the core team that dealt with the media in the parish. That changes a lot. You know, someone you need to open a new entire section of the staff just about. And that was very interesting to kind of witness and to hear about. So, yeah, it would have been extremely nice to interview the pastor in real life and to kind of ask community members in real life about their experience. But alas, it was okay. And again, this is this kind of reflects this one on one relationship the kind of flourished during covid it was. It was, it was great to get their sort of insights one on one. But yeah, I wonder what it would have looked like if we'd already come out of the pandemic by the time I'd had to conduct my interviews. Who knows.

**Researching pandemics in a pandemic**  
*Eline:* Definitely. I can imagine that switching all of your fieldwork to an online setting requires some, well, let's say, creativity. Thijs, you were doing archival research, and I suspect that going online is not really an option for that. How was your experience doing research in the middle of a pandemic?

*Thijs:* You're absolutely correct. And of course, it wasn't easy. As everyone has experienced, daily life suddenly changed due to the COVID 19 pandemic. The university, for example, shut down and instead of meeting face to face, we started using online platforms such as Teams and Zoom. And however, not only the university closed its doors for quite a long time, but also libraries and archives, and this made doing research even more difficult. And in the beginning, I had to rely solely on online sources, and luckily some books and articles were digitally accessible. But of course, the large chunk of it wasn't and well, it made it much more difficult. Searching online for books and articles and fortunately, the local archive was really amazing and helpful in this process, and they offered to make high quality scans of their documents on demand for free. And this allowed me to, well, look into these amazing and rich sources from the couch at home and their excellent service made research about pandemics possible even during a raging pandemic.

*Eline:* Well, that’s wonderful service. So all in all, we're now a couple of months ahead from the research. How do you look back on the whole process? What are some surprising research outcomes that you want to share Thijs?

*Thijs:* Well, first of all, being able to really immerse yourself in a topic for multiple months is a true privilege. And during that period, I read as much as I could about the time period, the effects of the pandemic on the political and social and of course, of religious life in the Netherlands and Leiden specifically. What struck me immediately were the similarities I mentioned earlier with the current COVID 19 pandemic. A tidal wave of newspaper articles were dedicated to the Spanish flu, evoking, rightfully so, fear amongst the local population and the local government in Leiden, for example, restricted movements of their citizens and discouraged large gatherings. Yet religious schools and churches were exempted. Even though the government knew that the flu spread rapidly in large crowds, religious buildings were kept open. In fact, they even encouraged everyone, every Dutch citizen, to come together in their houses of worship. And on the November of the 28th of 1918, they came together for what they called a day of National Prayer. Protestant communities in Leiden organized additional services. And while some members feared that they could get sick of the Spanish flu pandemic, the large majority knowingly got together. And my part in the research has shown that even during times of fear, and especially during times of fear I might say, people yearn for belongingness and togetherness and want to pray to god for salvation and relief from a terrifying and often unknown disease. And in addition, it shows that for many people back then, but also nowadays, health is much, much more than just not catching the virus. There's also religious or spiritual aspect to health. During the Spanish flu, as well as during the current pandemic, people desire to come together in churches and to pray to god. And to understand health, one cannot and should not overlook the religious or spiritual aspects of health. And yet, while the Spanish flu had the world in its grip, it quickly disappeared and also from our collective memory and the current COVID 19 pandemic brought its predecessor back to the forefront. Well, let's hope, and I truly hope, that there are lessons on belongingness, faith, and health will not be forgotten.

*Eline:* Wonderfully put Thijs, thank you. So if I listen to you talking, you found some clear similarities with the current COVID 19 pandemic measurements, for example, about the media reporting, restrictions on gatherings from former churches were exempt, and criticisms of those. So the social aspects of religion, I think is one of your conclusions, is something that was discussed in the last year as well. Lorenza, what were your major takeaways from the research project? What unexpected lessons did you learn from them?

*Lorenza:* So I think definitely my take home lessons from the research was the importance of really having a team with such diverse backgrounds. And I remember this was a prerequisite on when I, when I kind of first came across the traineeship, it was definitely all about interdisciplinarity and I did know what that was, and I did know how it kind of functioned. But I really I didn't see the enormous, enormous potential that it had for us because obviously coming from five different backgrounds, there's a lot of exchange of ideas and there's a lot of, basically to tackle any big issue you need more perspectives than just one. And that's also what this podcast is about as well is going to be different guests from different fields and together their input can really bring new perspectives. And I think that was also the point of the symposium that we participated in. So how can you make academic findings relevant to the real world? And that bridge that we kind of built in that moment was also extremely useful to me because academia is not just academia, and policy is not just policy and religion is not just religion. And so I think all of these things together kind of made me think collaterally about how we can use all of this brainpower and use all of these different disciplines to make the world more accessible to more people, be it because they are religious and they're not being allowed to live out there, as Thijs was calling, it spiritual health and religious health, albeit because they are suddenly making use of the online platform because maybe they have some physical difficulty to get to church. And so we're seeing the new opportunities of online church life to kind of. So I'm really thinking about things from multiple different perspectives at the same time with people who work in different fields. That was really useful and really empowering, as well as a trainee researcher. And it was really a very enriching experience, for sure.

*Eline:* Wonderful thanks. So if you think about your research, Lorenza, and you think about one thing, you'd like to sort of, to develop further, what is something that you'd like to investigate more from your research project?

*Lorenza:* I think talking to the pastor of the International Church in Leiden I really, Well, I didn't even realize I knew this, but I kind of was reminded of how important it is to be a pastor in such a place like Leiden, where everybody has a different upbringing and everybody has a different culture and everybody speaks different languages and what it means to be close to people in such a situation as a pastor does, but also to not necessarily have a say on the religious belief system that people hold. Because of course, everybody is so different and so nuanced, and everybody's from a different place and has a different religious upbringing. And so talking, interviewing the pastor was really an eye opener in terms of how can you how can you support a community without imposing anything on the community? And it really reminded me, even though I'm not necessarily a churchgoer myself, it really reminded me of how important it is to so many people to have that support and to have that community and really such inspiring conversations with, with the with the communities of this parish. And I'm really happy I got to do that because it's something that wouldn't happen to me, necessarily in my daily life.

*Eline:* Yeah thanks, I can imagine, if that's something you'd like to sort of dig in to, if you had the opportunity. And for you Thijs, is there anything about your research and your research results, that’s sort of elicit further research?

*Thijs:* Well, while doing the research, it made me think of a quote of Cicero that, well, history is a teacher and looking back at my research into the Spanish flu, it made me think of, Well, how are we dealing with the current pandemic? And there are some true, true lessons about the Spanish flu. And if I could maybe advocate for policy makers and politicians, it is to look back at history. It is a true teacher and there are some lessons to get from it.

*Eline:* Wonderful. I Absolutely fully agree. That's not the point of the podcast, but it's nevertheless true. Lorenza, Thijs, thank you so much for your contribution to this podcast episode. It was really inspiring to hear you talk about your research with such enthusiasm and zest. And I wish you all the best going forward, and I'm pretty sure this is not the last we'll be seeing and hearing of you. So thanks to you.

*Thijs:* Thank you very much Eline.

*Lorenza:* Thank you.

**Outro**  
*Eline:* Hiermee komen we aan het einde van de eerste aflevering van de korte podcast reeks Alleen/samen gezond. Waarin het verassende perspectief van religie op gezondheid en pandemieën centraal staat. De tweede aflevering staat in het teken van religie, gezondheid, en migratie. Te gast zijn Nadia Bouras, expert op het gebied van migratie en integratie van Marokkanen in Nederland en universitair docent bij de universiteit Leiden, en Astrid van Lieshout, communicatie adviseur bij de gemeente den Haag. Samen met hen duik ik in de vraag welke invloed de corona pandemie heeft gehad op migrantengroepen. Wat zijn concrete lessen die we kunnen trekken uit de huidige pandemie? En van welke kennis uit deze diverse en rijke gemeenschappen zouden zowel wetenschappers als beleidsmakers zich bewust moeten zijn? U hoort het in de volgende aflevering van Alleen/samen gezond.