

University of Groningen

The Curious Case of the Condom

Wiering, Jelle Oscar

Published in:
Material Religion

DOI:
[10.1080/17432200.2023.2249391](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2023.2249391)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2023

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Wiering, J. O. (2023). The Curious Case of the Condom: How the Secular Matters in the Netherlands. *Material Religion*, 19(3), 236-258. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2023.2249391>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

The Curious Case of the Condom: How the Secular Matters in the Netherlands

Jelle Oscar Wiering

To cite this article: Jelle Oscar Wiering (2023) The Curious Case of the Condom: How the Secular Matters in the Netherlands, *Material Religion*, 19:3, 236-258, DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2023.2249391](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2023.2249391)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2023.2249391>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 06 Sep 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




Article views: 286



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

**the curious case of the
condom: how the secular
matters in the
netherlands**
jelle oscar wiering 

Jelle Oscar Wiering is a postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Religion, Culture, and Society, University of Groningen. His PhD thesis "Secular Practices: the production of religious difference in the Dutch field of Sexual Health," explores the entanglements of sexuality, religion, and secularity in the Netherlands. His current ethnographic research focuses on the interactions of meaningful work, dirty work, and sensemaking.
J.o.wiering@rug.nl

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the material approach to religion can productively be extended to the domain of the secular, so as to grasp its material dimension. It investigates the Dutch field of sexual health to examine the ways in which the male condom was employed to underscore an image of religion as an obstacle to open conversations about sexual matters. It analyzes how the condom was deployed during sex education classes to evoke discussions about sexuality, but also to demonstrate the organizations' alleged comfortability with discussing these objects. I argue that, in my fieldwork, the condom materialized secularity because it was key to the introduction of what my interlocutors called "an open attitude" towards sexuality: an open appreciation of sexuality that implicitly references religion as the antithesis of a good sex education class. In doing so, the stereotypical representation of religion as prudish and constrained is reproduced and cultivated through sex education classes.

Keywords: condom, secularity, secular materiality, sexuality, sex education, the Netherlands

Material Religion volume 19, issue 3, pp. 236–258

DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2023.2249391](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2023.2249391)



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Introduction

I am at a refugee center somewhere in a forest in the Netherlands. We—that is, ten youngsters aged 14–18 who all arrived from Eritrea only a few days ago; Erica, the educator; Tanah, a translator; and I—are in an improvised classroom attending a class on sex education. The lesson is far from structured, and it is often interrupted by hilarious incidents. At the very beginning of the class, Erica suddenly pulls from her bag a huge amount of condoms, putting them right on the desk in front of her. Tanah has not arrived yet, so Erica is unable to communicate through the language of the students. Upon seeing the condoms, all students immediately burst out into laughter. Though I cannot understand their language, each of these boys pointing at one another suggests that they deem these condoms particularly germane for the specific boy they are pointing at. I struggle with my response to this unexpected series of events, as I consider it a hilarious situation, but I do not want to ruin Erica's didactical aims, whatever they are. So, initially, I make sure not to laugh. It turns out, though, that Erica herself is the one who laughs the loudest, so my worries were for naught.

After the lesson, Erica and I walk back to the refugee center's entrance together, returning the key to the classroom. Erica tells me that, because of her experience as a sex educator for recently arrived migrants, she had anticipated the boys' response to the introduction of condoms. In fact, she says, she is quite used to it: "The boys in this group are Eritreans, which means they are Christian. So, they have never spoken about sex before! Introducing the condom [therefore] is always one of the funniest moments of the lesson!"

Heading back home somewhat later, I kept on thinking about Erica's comments. Why was Erica so convinced that these boys never had spoken about sex? How could we then explain the fact that the boys did actually recognize the condom wrappers? Also, was Erica right in putting forward Christianity as the explanation for this presumed lack of conversation?

This article examines the uses of the male condom in the Dutch field of sexual health. It examines what utilizations of the object in these contexts reveal about current dynamics of the relations between sexuality, religion, and secularity in the Netherlands. I will approach the condom as a secular material form¹: as an object that, in particular settings and times, is spoken about and put forward to (implicitly) inculcate a particular image of what religion supposedly is. In doing so, I seek to provide insight into the "embodied and other material dimensions of being secular" (Engelke 2015, 45; see also Asad 2003).

I argue that, in my fieldwork, the condom materialized secularity because it was key to the introduction of what my interlocutors called an open attitude towards sexuality: an open appreciation of sexuality that implicitly references religion as the antithesis of a good sex education class. This open attitude became best tangible when these interlocutors performed the

ordinariness of the condom: when they treated the condom as something totally ordinary, regular, and simple in an unexcited way. In doing so, however, they implicitly referenced religion as the antithesis of a good sex education class, confirming the stereotypical representation of religion as prudish and constrained.

The article proceeds as follows: I will first elucidate the notion of secular materiality that I employ here and discuss why I think it is relevant to approach some objects as “secular.” Then, I will introduce the Dutch field of sexual health and turn to my fieldwork among sexual health organizations in the Netherlands. I illustrate how many actors in this field consider religion, and Christianity in particular, as a challenge to modern, supposedly unconstrained, forms of sexuality. Consequently, I show how this polarized imaginary of religion and nonreligion² was embedded in sex education classes and other professional activities that I attended, and how the condom was used as an object that supports the cultivation of this representation.

Secular Materiality

The study of religion and materiality invites the question of the materiality of secularity: can the material approach to religion productively be extended to the domain of the secular, so as to grasp its material dimension? A quick glance at the plethora of literature on secularism (in the sense of an ideology), as opposed to the amount of research on secularity, understood as the actual arrangement of religious and secular matters, indeed underscores the urgency of this suggestion.

I do not understand secularity as an innocent neutrality that remains after all religions and their normativities have been consigned to the private sphere. Instead, to better grasp what secularity is, I find it useful to draw on the work of Charles Hirschkind, who previously took up this issue and wrote an explorative essay about what secularity would look like in a concrete, embodied form. He writes:

[My] analysis of the secular [...] directs us less toward a determinant set of embodied dispositions than to a distinct mode of power, one that mobilizes the productive tension between religious and secular to generate new practices through a process of internal self-differentiation. (Hirschkind 2011, 643)

I think a significant, and much underexplored feature of secularity concerns how practices of mobilizing the religious/ secular tension produce particular representations of what religion is, and hence what it is not (Wiering 2020). Therefore, a first task this article appoints itself, is to provide an ethnographic case study to the study of the secular, which explores representations of religion to examine how the line between the religious and the nonreligious is carved out in Dutch society.

Second, this article seeks to show that the distribution of these representations of religion happens through ostensibly unrelated everyday activities such as sex education classes. Drawing on objects such as condoms, and particular embodied performances related to the condom, the line between the religious and the secular is carved out and experienced on the level of—and through—everyday performance, objects, and bodies. It proposes to further explore the material dimension of secularity as such secular dispensations—including material ones—have the potential to transform how religion is perceived and understood in society, which in turn might influence state governances, the distribution of funding, as well as people's actual ways of living (Mahmood 2013, 56).

Finally, by investigating secularity in the particular context of sexuality, it also aims to contribute to the area of research that explores the intersections of religion, sexuality, and secularity. Scholars working within this subfield of secular studies have problematized the popular interpretation of secularization as a liberating force that introduces gender and sexual equality, and religion as an oppressor (Cady and Fessenden 2013; Scott 2017). Rather, there appears to be an agreement now on the understanding that it is religious and secular *encounters* that give rise to the many contestations related to sexuality and gender one encounters in West European public discourse and beyond. In this article, I seek to further develop these understandings regarding the entanglements of religion, sexuality and secularity, by focusing on the level of the contemporary daily life of sex health professionals and their various audiences.³

In what follows, I draw on my ethnographic research among sexual health organizations where I investigated such secular practices (Wiering 2020, 2022), including the objects and embodied performances employed in these practices, through which the people in my research sought to produce and disseminate a representation of what they perceived as religion.

“Neutrality” in the Dutch Field of Sexual Health

To properly understand how religion was implicitly referred to in my interlocutors' professional activities, but also how the condom played a role in this regard, this section will first unpack my interlocutors' notion of neutrality. To be able to do so, though, it will first provide a brief introduction to the Dutch field of sexual health. I use the notion “Dutch field of sexual health” to refer to a particular field that consists of all the people who voluntarily or professionally work on the topic of sexuality. Between 2016 and 2018, I conducted 13 months of fieldwork in this context. I observed 15 sex education classes taught by different professional organizations and I also taught 30 sex education classes myself as a trained volunteer for a professional organization. The sex education classes aimed at teaching people (students, their parents, other professionals, or migrants) about sexuality. In

practice, this meant that these lessons attempted to encourage people to have conversations about sexuality, but also to encourage people to engage in sex in healthy ways. The term “healthy,” then, was mainly deployed to refer to sex with both partners’ consent and the inclusion of contraceptives. Some of my interlocutors were people who are likely to be associated with sexual health: several sexologists, some general practitioners, and nineteen sex educators.⁴ Others were less likely associated with the topic, for example former activists who had been very active during the Dutch sexual revolution in the late 1960s.

This period is germane because it still influences the Dutch field of sexual health in significant ways. In Dutch collective memory, the sexual liberation in the 1960s is believed by many Dutch to have extracted pleasure and freedom from the clutches of Christian moralizing (cf. Bartelink and Knibbe 2022). This latter process is often referred to as the “sexual revolution,” when, as the story goes, liberation and development towards sexual openness gained momentum. The narrative states that, before the 1960s, the Netherlands was known as a pillarized country, where each religious denomination and ideological grouping developed its own array of societal organizations (Hellemans 1988; Lijphart 2008). These pillars centered on Protestantism, Catholicism, socialism, and liberalism, each having their own political party, sports teams, schools, shops, and welfare organization, as if it formed an ethnic community (Van der Veer 2006, 118). Though each of these pillars strove to be insulated from the others, the narrative states that they have shared at least one important conviction: speaking about sex was a taboo. This awkwardness pertaining to speaking about sex is assumed to have been shed during the 1960s, when sex and sexuality became topics of discussion, and public opinion on these matters started to change course. Since this period also heralded the decline of Christianity in the Netherlands, for many Dutch these processes of sexual liberation and unchurched are inextricably linked (Wiering 2017; Bartelink and Knibbe 2022). It is important to note the assumed link between sexual liberation and unchurched because for many secular Dutch it implies that prudish people are religious people, and the other way around, and that criticizing a more conservative stance on sexual matters means the same as criticizing a religious stance.

The professed relation between unchurched and sexual liberation was clearly reflected in my interlocutors’ ideas about religion, and particularly Christianity: they often conceived of it as an anachronism that imposed constraints on its practitioners. Many interlocutors recalled the importance of the liberating transformations in the sexual revolution, and they sometimes explicitly associated these with the decline of institutional forms of Christianity that advanced in the same period. One retired sexologist for example told me:

Well, religion has been an obstacle for sure. If you think about these young women [living in the 1960s] in small villages. When they visited a general practitioner and stressed they wanted to have the birth control pill, the general practitioner would just call their parents straight away: "Your daughter is here and she wants to have the birth control pill! That will definitely not happen!" That really happened like that. And such general practitioners often were Christians, and some of them were really small-minded [‘naargeestig’] and very intrusive. And so were the sex education classes, really moralistic and not based on facts. And this constraint [‘beklemmendheid’] is a feature of religion that [also] leads to a lot of problems I saw [throughout my career] among religious patients.

Other professionals similarly told me that they experience problems in their interactions with Christians. They said that most Christians still⁵ found it difficult to speak about sexuality, as they considered such conversations to be embarrassing. This (assumed) opposition between sexual liberation on the one hand and outdated Christian prudishness, on the other hand, is key to my interlocutors’ concept of neutrality: through accentuating and criticizing the (assumed) viewpoint of the religious Other, the nonreligious position was implicitly denoted as a neutral default option that had overcome the issues that the religious side was still struggling with.

At an early stage in our conversation, many interlocutors made clear to me that they were not religious. Instead, they described themselves as "being neutral," which they explained as a state of refraining from taking up any moral stance. Therefore, they were not necessarily against religion, they said, as long as it did not transgress the boundaries of "neutrality." When I further inquired about this rather general conception of neutrality, it often was further illuminated to me through examples of, purportedly neutral, conceptions of sexuality. Such norms, then, often were underpinned by particular accounts of the sexual revolution or grounded in outcomes of biomedical studies. My interlocutors had become so convinced about the universal veracity of these notions that they had assigned these a neutral status.

The example stressed abundantly in this context was that of people’s necessity to accept other people’s homosexuality, which is a finding that corresponds with other studies that have investigated the intersections of sexuality, religion, and secular-ity (Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010). Muslims and their presumed obdurate unacceptance of homosexuality were often put forward as problematic in this regard. One female sex educator told me: "They [Muslims] don’t have to like it [homosexuality], as long as they accept it." As this example already indicates, here we can see clearly that the boundaries of my interlocutors’ neutrality were conceptualized in contrast to stereotypical notions of what it means to be Christian or Muslim (cf. Schrijvers and Wiering 2018).

Though this particular example shows how their self-conceptualized neutrality was contrasted with Islam, most often, though, it was constructed against stereotypical conceptions of Christians. In sex education classes, I observed that Christianity was frequently portrayed as a set of rules that instilled adherents' deviant ways of living, particularly regarding gender and sexuality. A stage play on sex education that I attended can serve as illustrative example. The play featured six young people and the character of a Christian girl stood out as she literally embodied a deviant lifestyle because she was the only person in the play who wanted to delay sex until her marriage. But she also was the only one who did not join the group of adolescents when they went out to dance and drink alcohol in a club. She had a limited time on stage, and she, in contrast to all other characters, had no funny lines in her script at all. The female friend she shared a tent with in the play even expressed her discomfort with her religiosity: "You are not going to pray in our tent now, are you?" (Schrijvers and Wiering 2018, 152). Notably, four out of the six characters performed an, obviously fake, sex scene (with condoms) during the show. The Christian girl, however, did not. All in all, the otherness of a religious way of living was materialized and performed in many ways in the play. The play chose a female character, a Christian girl, who was represented as a minority, and who was clearly marked as the odd one out, the one who was made fun of even by her friend, and the one with limited presence on stage.

Another important reflection of the field's negative appreciation of religion was its actual implementation in all the sex education classes I attended. People's "beliefs" ["geloven"] were discussed amidst undesirable topics such as STDs and abortion. This implicitly puts religion in the same corner as these topics and hence it suggests that religion has a negative relationship with sexuality. It reflects the field's larger understanding of the potential of religion to cause problems for sexual health.

Opposed to this negative appreciation of Christian notions of sex—and hence one of the key features of my interlocutors self-assigned neutral position—was a strong approval of initiating conversations about sex. Sex was seen as a topic that had to be disentangled from associations of embarrassment as sex had to become a topic that everyone felt comfortable to speak about. Motivated by this idea, the sexual health professionals often held debates about how to encourage people to have more conversations about sex. Anthropologist Rahil Roodsaz similarly observed this conviction about a need for more conversations about sex in her fieldwork among Dutch sexual health professionals in Bangladesh. She captured this conviction in the notion of "speakable" sexuality (Roodsaz 2018, 113), which refers to the idea that sexuality has to become speakable ["seksualiteit moet bespreekbaar worden gemaakt"]. The logic that underpins this idea is that conversations about sex enable people to address the sexual issues that are

bothering them. Thus, by having such conversations, people can solve these issues by drawing on the advice provided by others.

The professionals appeared eager to demonstrate to me that they themselves were capable of speaking about sex. Once, for example, after an interview in a lunchroom in Rotterdam, Jacintha, a 29-year-old woman who had launched her own sexual health organization a couple of years earlier, and I walked back together to the city center. We were engaged in a humorous conversation as we were loudly fantasizing about how funny it would be if I would use some obscene words (“fucking” “penis,” etc.) in the context of my PhD defense, a very formal setting. I had begun my training as a sex educator, and already experienced a certain drive to show Jacintha that I, like her, had become more capable to speak about sex.

While discussing, we entered a crowded area near the supermarket where I knew Jacintha would head in a different direction. Shortly before, I had come up with the plan to make one final joke and to just loudly yell “penis” in the middle of the crowded street. This would serve as some kind of humorous proof that I indeed had begun to learn to no longer feel embarrassed to speak about sex. Finding myself amidst all those people, though, I felt embarrassed, and I changed my mind. Jacintha, however, seemed to have had the same joke in mind as she was loudly yelling “penis penis penis” to me while waving goodbye to me in front of the main entrance of the supermarket. One observes how Jacintha successfully performed a practice of speakability here, whereas I failed, which carved out a line between the sexual health expert for whom it is an (allegedly) ordinary thing to humorously yell “penis, penis, penis,” and the trainee (me).

This example is just one out of many where it became evident that my interlocutors had fully embraced the idea that there was a need for more conversations about sex. That they were devoted to break the taboos circulating around the topic of sex. But also that my interlocutors were convinced that everyone would benefit from having more of these conversations and hence they all were pursuing this aim. Learning to speak about sexuality was considered as the path that had to be walked by everyone. Seen from my interlocutors’ point of view, opposing the plea for more conversations about sex does not make a lot of sense: one only opposes it if one is pulled back by authorities that propagate restrictions and constraints.

So, despite suggesting themselves to embrace a morally neutral stance, my interlocutors departed from a polarized representation in which religious, constraining views of sex were allocated to the one side, and liberated, supposedly open, views of sexuality to the other side. The practice of speaking about sex then served as the most important feature of the liberated side, not only because it was considered a beneficial practice for everyone, but also because speaking about sex openly draws attention and thus enables one to promulgate that one belongs

to the liberated side. The fact that my interlocutors nevertheless saw their own position as neutral is significant here, as it explains why there was very little critical reflection on the idea of initiating conversations about sex: they all conceived of their plea for more conversations about sex as a neutral practice that was simply beneficial for everyone.

Apart from the instances described above, religious-secular binaries were mostly implicitly part of the conversation. However, now that we have seen how my interlocutors' notion of neutrality hinges on a mirror image of stereotypical ideas about religion, one is better equipped to observe its presence. In the following I will describe how the notion of neutrality, and the suspicion towards religion that forms part of this claim to neutrality, was embedded in my interlocutors' professional activities. It is during these professional activities that I observed the usage of the condom.

The Condom in the Field of Sexual Health

In the Netherlands, the widely shared conviction that one should speak openly about sex has also boosted the societal support for sex education. As of 2012, Dutch high schools that fall under the auspices of the Dutch inspectorate for Education (which in practice is all schools) are obliged to integrate the topic of sexuality into their curriculum. Therefore, teaching sex education classes has become a quintessential activity not only for sexual health organizations, but also for schools (see also Naezer, Rommes, and Jansen 2017). Interestingly, there are no clear guidelines as to how such a class should be taught. During my research, I have observed a wide variety of methods and approaches.

One characteristic that most lessons had in common, though, was that they addressed the male condom. They usually featured an explanation of how condoms had to be applied, and how they contributed to "healthy sex." Sometimes, samples were distributed at the end of a class. One organization I came across orchestrated evening workshops for university students, both male and female, which included an exercise for participants to roll a condom onto a large wooden stick. I was told by one of the organization's employees that this exercise was the last part of that workshop, implying that the participants by that time already had had quite a number of alcoholic drinks, which significantly complicated the task. This, according to the female employee I spoke with, also made the exercise much more realistic and even funnier.

In some classes where I observed, teachers illustrated how to put a condom on a wooden stick or a Durex practice model (see Figure 1).

Such materialized instructions were frequently met with enthusiasm and laughter from the attending students. The two female teachers who taught this particular lesson, held at an

FIG 1

“Practicing with a condom,” picture taken by author.



intermediate vocational education class [Regionaal Opleidingscentrum], used the model to illustrate which side of the condom had to be pulled downwards to more easily apply it. They then also highlighted several tricks for this. Also, as can also be seen on the picture, students were recommended to leave some space for sperm.

When I took the above picture, one of the educators demonstratively expressed her amazement. Smiling broadly she exclaimed: “Are you actually making a picture of this demonstration model?” Everyone in the class, including myself, burst out laughing. Based on the contextual understanding I developed through my involvement in the field of sexual health, I interpreted her question as a particular performance that involved the object of the condom.

The teacher's demonstration of surprise at my picture taking reveals how she expected me not to have, or at least to downplay, any curiosity regarding the object. I was expected to be able to, like her, treat the condom as an ordinary, everyday object. By photographing it, I accidentally revealed that I actually did not perceive it to be ordinary. I showed that the object had intrigued or perhaps even shocked me a bit. My actions, subsequently, were employed to serve her purposes, as it enabled her to illustrate to the class that she *did* consider the condom to be an ordinary object. She could highlight to the class my feelings of amazement, and juxtapose them to her cool, controlled reception of it. This, then, confirmed the suggestion that she had arrived at a point where she was no longer intrigued or surprised anymore. The condom, and both our responses to it, had drawn a line, identifying her as a professional and me as someone not *yet* familiar with the object in a classroom setting.

Normalizing the Condom: Try before You Fly

The practice of differentiation, identifying those being comfortable with the object in a classroom setting and those who are not yet, returned on other occasions as well. In autumn 2018, a collaboration of sexual health organizations launched a temporary "condom fit" store, situated at the center of the Utrecht train station. The store distributed free male condom samples and recommended to use an appropriately-sized condom. Inside the store, I came across some people, some of them tourists, and most of them giggling. The following pictures render some impressions of the store (Figures 2–5).

Obviously, the store was initiated to promote condom use and hence to put sex education into concrete action. But it was also launched to communicate that properly-sized condoms could, to a large extent, compensate for the reduction of pleasure that people experience as a consequence of using a condom during sex. The sentence "size does matter," which refers to well-fitting condoms, on picture three, for example, illustrates this. Also, the store featured a changing room, situated prominently in the store, where people could actually try condoms to find an appropriate size. This, but also the more general concept of launching a temporary condom store at the heart of a crowded train station, was a new concept.

Much like the sex educators I mentioned earlier, the people who had launched the store sought to evoke some sort of a shock effect among passersby. Unsuspecting people traveling by train were suddenly confronted with this rather extraordinary store. And again, by drawing on the element of surprise and shock, the initiators implicitly could portray themselves as not shocked anymore. By drawing attention by situating the store in the middle of a crowded station, the organizations performed the conviction that people should

FIG 2

The store. It says: "Try before you fly. The world's first condom store where you can try on condoms! What suits you?" Picture taken by author.



think of condoms, and sex more broadly, as something ordinary and every day. To conceive of condoms as something that one can try on, like clothes. The condom, being an object that most people know, enabled these organizations to show to the public that they integrated this understanding of sex as something ordinary.

Objections to the Condom

In contrast to these somewhat humorous receptions of the condom, I also witnessed some occasions where people in the field—students, parents, but also teachers—did not appreciate (the particular introduction of) the object. For example, in one sex education class for students where I observed, two self-identified Muslim girls were not, or pretended not to be, familiar with the object's name. They, therefore, referred to it as "that thing," which we do not speak about in Islam." No one in class in fact understood the gestures and words the girls used to address the object, which clearly frustrated the girls. After about twenty seconds of frustrating postures and uncomfortable silence, one of the girls remembered that it was called a condom. Considering her specific degrading pronunciation of the word, her previously (performed) ignorance of the object's



FIG 3
 "Inside the store." Picture taken by author.

name, as well as her body language, I am convinced that, in this context, she perceived the object to be genuinely disgusting. To me, it seems that this particular introduction of the condom (including the uncomfortable silence following it) made these girls feel pressured to give their classmates and the teachers a very unwelcome insight into their sexual knowledge and (thus) sexual experiences and views.



FIG 4
"The fitting room." Picture taken by author.

In another sex education class, I encountered a similar expression of ignorance from a self-identified Muslim girl, which again pertained to the word "condom." After that lesson, the regular teacher told me in a one-to-one conversation that they had had another sex education lesson just a few weeks ago, and that everyone had been distributed a condom afterwards. She emphasized to me that all students, including the girl, had been



FIG 5

"Inside the fitting room." We see some tissues and a small trash can. Inside the trashcan the author found one condom wrapper, suggesting that somebody tried a condom that day. Picture taken by author.

there, and that hence everyone was well aware of the name of the object. This girl thus related to the condom in a particular, probably performed, way in order to shield herself for the self-revealing answer she was expected to give. These two examples suggest that the introduction of the condom in this particular way is perceived by some as intrusive, as it demands a

way of relating to the object that reveals intimate information from the student pressured to relate.

In the sex education classes that were given in the form of theatre shows (Schrijvers and Wiering 2018), the condom was present too. Each performed “sex scene”⁶ involved a condom, which of course implies a non-contestable norm that having sex implies using a condom. Given the response of the Muslim girl to the introduction of a condom in the previous paragraph, one begins to see the normativity that the theatre shows entail: there is a supposedly common way of engaging in sex, and if one sees it differently, one is singled out.

Another theatre show I attended also addressed the condom. The interesting aspect about this lesson was that it was not aimed at students, but at their parents. This show took place at a public high school building. Together with approximately 100 parents, I watched a play about a mother struggling to introduce the topic of sex to her daughter. Before the play began, we were told that the mother had already undertaken action the week before, when she had put a male condom on her daughter’s desk. In the play itself, we then saw the mother entering her daughter’s room a week after that introduction of the condom, and we observed her awkwardly starting a conversation with her daughter about sex-related topics, such as boyfriends. Her daughter was really not pleased with this approach, and urgently requested her mother to leave her room. The play ended, and encouraged by the moderator, a plenary discussion followed the performance.

During the post-play public analysis, the parents and the moderator began to list the many things that they thought went wrong in the play. Listening to the comments of the parents, I learned that many of them were similarly struggling in setting the right scene for such talks with their own children. The parents all agreed that the mother’s approach had been extremely awkward, and that she should have been much more to the point. She should rather have treated sex as if it was something completely normal, “which it is!” one man sitting close to me loudly emphasized.

A surprisingly large part of the discussion expressed the audience’s discontent with the mother’s previous decision to, without any warning, put a condom on the daughter’s desk. Sitting in the audience, I realized I had never thought about the introduction of a condom to one’s children, but to me it seemed that putting it casually on a desk could, in fact, be quite helpful. It could serve as a kind of warning for the somewhat awkward conversation to come. I gradually noticed that the moderator agreed with me, as she, in subtle, unsuccessful ways, tried to convince the audience that casually placing a condom on a desk could indeed be helpful for a child. The parents were absolutely sure, however, about the wrongness of the approach. It simply was a bad idea to introduce a condom like this. One mother said:

Sex is something personal, something magical. It is something you should introduce in a private setting. You should emphasize it [sex] is done with love and passion. Casually putting a condom on a desk is a cold gesture, which violates what sex really is about. If you want to have your kid associate sex with warmth and love, I think you cannot introduce it like this.

After a sixth parent had started yet another plea for a different introduction of the condom, the actress who had played the daughter, interrupted her. While still acting as the daughter, she said:

Well, you know, otherwise [if I had not found the condom on my desk] I should have set out to buy it [the condom] myself and that's quite scary... In fact, I did like the condom on my desk, and also that it was given without a verbal explanation. It made me realize that we are going to have a talk about this in the near future. Now I could prepare myself for this.

During the actress' interruption, many parents in the audience were, much to my surprise, suddenly nodding enthusiastically, and when the daughter's talk was finished, the discussion was completely over. With just a few sentences, the girl, or rather, the actress, seemed to have successfully convinced the audience of something that the moderator had not been able to do despite her many efforts.

One week later, I interviewed the actress. She said that after the theatre show, several parents had complimented her on her performances. "You really were our daughter," they had said. The actress said this happened frequently after shows, and we agreed together that the daughter in the play possessed some interesting powers that could instantly change the mind of a large audience of parents.

Though this play might not have a lot to do with religion, one can observe how my interlocutors' notion of neutrality is shaping this performance in the background. I do not know why the daughter's intervention was so successful in convincing these parents to change their mind. It does seem likely to me, though, that, through the daughter's performance, the actors aimed to show the audience an image of an innocent child who is not bothered by feelings of embarrassment related to condoms and sexual matters more broadly. By confronting the parents with this gendered, and innocent personage of this girl who emphasizes pragmatic concerns, the actors aspire to convince these parents that the problems that these parents have with a condom are illegitimate. The child, after all, does not mind finding the condom lying on the desk.

We thus observe how the introduction of the condom creates a division between those who accept its particular introduction in the theatre show and those who do not. Subsequently, the daughter pushes the parents to join the side

of acceptance where people have said farewell to hampering sexual constraints. And, by sketching this image, the other side becomes a site where people are still held back by restrictive sexual norms.

The Condom as a Secular Material Form

As the various examples presented in this article show, the introduction of a condom tends to evoke remarkable responses. The various ways people deal with the object each time carves out a line between those to whom it is (allegedly) an ordinary object, and those to whom it is not. In this final section, I will reflect on this polarized division, and explain why the act of introducing the condom to create such a division can be considered as a secular practice.

In the opening vignette of this article, Erica decided to simply put a pile of condoms on a table. As a consequence of that act, the Eritrean boys all laughed, and pointed at each other, accusing the others of being in need of such things. The boys did not perceive the objects as an ordinary object at all, which distanced them from Erica, who (acted as if she) did. My picture taking, the uncomfortably laughing tourists in the condom store, the female students' reluctance to pronounce the name of the object: all these reactions carved a line between these respective actors and the sexual health professionals who had introduced the condom.

The particular utilizations of the condom thus supports constructing a polarized division. For the sexual health professionals, the condom, they want others to believe, is just an object like any other. These professionals thereby suggest to have *moved beyond* feelings of embarrassment. They cherish an alleged openness about sexuality that is liberated from previous sexual constraints, and the condom serves as a useful tool to quickly and tangibly demonstrate this attitude towards sexuality. To casually introduce the object in a sex education lesson constitutes a tangible way to show that Dutch sexual health professionals, indeed, are capable to treat sexuality-related topics and objects that others might find shocking or embarrassing, as ordinary. Moreover, it also enables identifying those who are not capable to perceive the object as such.

William Connolly and many after him have argued that the secular is nearly always represented in ways that empty it of any such affective and emotional textures, emphasizing neutrality, impartiality, factuality, rationality and reason as its constitutive features (Connolly 1999; Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen 2019). And, indeed, what we observe in the cases of the condom in this article, is that nonreligious subjects perform their assumed neutrality by demonstrating a (supposed) lack of anxiety, or any such emotional registers: they perform their neutrality by treating it as something totally ordinary, regular, and simple in an unexcited way.

I hasten to add that humor constitutes an exception in this nonreligious sexuality performance. In fact, humor appears to play a central role in cultivating this alleged neutrality. Humor is not just an affect that is approved of in this neutrality discourse—much in contrast to disgust, performed ignorance, or disinterest depicted by the religious actors we saw. The examples in this article also suggest that humor is intentionally mobilized to, first, designate and even enact (physical) settings where juxtapositions of awkwardness and comfort are negotiated. Second, it appears humor and laughter are provided as temporary solutions for students to deal with the feelings of awkwardness that they are encouraged to eventually overcome. Humor thus constitutes an approved temporary protective shield for the pupils and students still developing their neutrality.

Obviously, the notion of neutrality that the sexual health professionals depart from is rather simplistic. One might very well ask whether the notions and practices maintained by the sexual health organizations on which I focused in my research—e.g. casually distributing condoms or initiating conversations about sex between students and teachers whom they have never met before—will always resonate with views maintained by parents, religious or not. This implies that the category of people pursuing neutrality, much like the category of people supposedly embracing sexual constraints is by no means as homogenous as suggested.

The point is, however, that the sex education classes do assume and communicate such a polarized understanding with an amalgamation of notions of neutrality, modernity, and sexual liberation on the one side and an enmeshment of ideas of religion, the past, and sexual constraint on the other. And, because Dutch sexual health organizations are capable of communicating this polarity according to which they themselves are liberated, and those who think differently are constrained, a denigrating notion of religious views on sexuality but also as religion as such, is sustained and further cultivated. The power to mobilize the tension between the supposedly religious and nonreligious is thus used to convey a (materialized) representation that implicitly (re-)ascribes to religion denigrating features such as constraining and being an anachronism, which then legitimizes and fortifies sexual health organizations' own supposedly nonreligious, modern identity.

The condom in this context is a key object in how secularity happens materially because it is utilized to orchestrate a setting where people feel triggered or pressured to pick a side. The theater shows had all the characters engage in condomized sex, except for the unfunny Christian character, which conveys this girl to have embraced a sexual discomfort or disinterest. We have seen how the two Muslim girls felt uncomfortable dealing with the object, thereby picking the other side than the sex educators. But we also saw how the sexual health organizations

utilized the object to prove their self-identification as having moved beyond embarrassment. Upon being introduced to the condom, one is pushed to identify whether one teams up with the side of sexual health professionals, who allegedly treat sex as something ordinary and promote others to learn to do so too; or to join the side of outdated prudish constraints. This secular practice, materialized through the iconic object of the condom, shows that the establishment of secular power is not limited to top-down policies, nor that it is engendered necessarily by forms of verbal communication articulated explicitly at religion. Rather, secularity takes place in all kinds of facets of society, including sex education classes.

Conclusion

This article approached the condom as a secular material form because it was observed in my fieldwork as an object that, among sexual health organizations, served in secular practices of carving out a line between the religious and the nonreligious. The object was called upon in sex education classes to underscore and reify the organizations' comfortability with conversations about sexuality, while, in the same contexts, religion was implicitly proposed as a challenge to liberal interpretations of sexuality because of its supposedly constraining potential. Through materially and discursively depicting and inculcating this polarized state of affairs, these classes contribute to sustaining and producing an image of religious ideas about sex as oppositional to supposedly liberal interpretations of sex.

Hence, this article has suggested that the secular (re-) production of representations of religion and nonreligion is not limited to state regulations. Rather, it suggests that the secular practice of identifying what religion is happens on many levels in society and that it uses objects and bodies to do so. I suggest that more research is needed that explores how, in different segments of society, representations of religion and nonreligion are experienced, developed and distributed, and how bodies and objects are part of this. Doing so will help us to better understand the normativities that religious practitioners face, but also how these are sustained through, at first sight, unrelated, everyday practices, and objects.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kim Knibbe, Birgit Meyer, Katja Rakow, Charles Hirschkind, Christoph Gröll, and the five anonymous reviewers of *Material Religion* for their insightful and extensive feedback. All remaining errors are my own.

Funding

The work conducted for this article, and the article's publishing, were both funded by the Dutch NWO, project number 360-25-160.

ORCID

Jelle Oscar Wiering  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6082-3680>

notes and references

- ¹ I do not understand 'materiality' here as it has been understood in the wake of the framework of the so-called 'material turn', in which objects themselves are suggested to have particular forms of power or even agency. I simply understand materiality as the "the stuff and practices of sensual living together, interpreted and crystallized through concepts that could just as easily obfuscate power relations [...] as help us to see them." (Klassen 2014).
- ² Please note the difference between the terms nonreligion and non-religion. The former refers simply refers to nonreligious issues, whereas the latter refers to "anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion" (Lee 2012, 131).
- ³ In another paper, I focus on the role of gender and secular affect in sex education classes. See Wiering (2022)
- ⁴ These professions sometimes overlapped: several sexologists I spoke with also taught sex education classes and several general practitioners were also sexologists.
- ⁵ The word 'still' ['nog'], which was often used in similar ways as it is used in this sentence, reflects my interlocutors' disassociation of Christianity and modernity.
- ⁶ This scene did of course not include real practices of sex. The actors went into a covered shower and threw their clothes, and also a condom, over the cabin walls. Consequently, they pretended to be having sex by hitting the walls of the cabin in a rhythmic manner.
- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bartelink, Brenda, and Kim E. Knibbe. 2022. "Why the Dutch (Think They) Break Taboos: Challenging Contemporary Presentations of the Role of Religious Actors in Narratives of Sexual Liberation." *New Diversities* 24 (2): 13–28. doi:10.58002/7gd1-9b77.
- Cady, Linell E., and Tracy Fessenden, eds. 2013. *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*. Vol. 14. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Connolly, William E. 1999. *Why I Am Not a Secularist*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Engelke, Matthew. 2015. "The Coffin Question: Death and Materiality in Humanist Funerals." *Material Religion* 11 (1): 26–48. doi:10.2752/205393215X14259900061553.
- Hellemans, Staf. 1988. "Verzuiling en ontzuiling van de katholieken in België en Nederland. Een historisch sociologische vergelijking." *Sociologische Gids* 35 (1): 43–57.
- Hirschkind, Charles. 2011. "Is There a Secular Body?" *Cultural Anthropology* 26 (4): 633–647. doi:10.1111/j.1548-1360.2011.01116.x.
- Klassen, Pamela. 2014. "Making Religion Mental: A Response to Birgit Meyer's 'Mediation and the Genesis of Presence.'" *Religion and Society* 5: 231–237.
- Lee, Lois. 2012. "Research Note: Talking about a Revolution: Terminology for the New Field of Non-Religion Studies." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27 (1): 129–139. doi:10.1080/13537903.2012.642742.
- Lijphart, Arend. 2008. *Verzuiling, pacificatie en kentering in de Nederlandse politiek*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2013. "Sexuality and Secularism." In *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, edited by Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden, 47–58. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mepschen, Paul, Jan Willem Duyvendak, and Evelien H. Tonkens. 2010. "Sexual Politics, Orientalism and Multicultural Citizenship in The Netherlands." *Sociology* 44 (5): 962–979. doi:10.1177/003803851037574.
- Naezer, Marijke, Els Rommes, and Willy Jansen. 2017. "Empowerment through Sex Education? Rethinking Paradoxical Policies." *Sex Education* 17 (6): 712–728. doi:10.1080/14681811.2017.1362633.
- Roodsaz, Rahil. 2018. "Probing the Politics of Comprehensive Sexuality Education: 'Universality' versus 'Cultural Sensitivity': A Dutch–Bangladeshi Collaboration on Adolescent Sexuality Education." *Sex Education* 18 (1):

- 107–121. doi:[10.1080/14681811.2017.1403894](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2017.1403894).
- Scheer, Monique, Nadia Fadil, and Birgitte Schepelern Johansen. 2019. *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Schrijvers, Lieke L., and Jelle O. Wiering. 2018. "Religious/Secular Discourses and Practices of Good Sex." *Culture and Religion* 19 (2): 139–159. doi:[10.1080/14755610.2018.1444655](https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2018.1444655).
- Scott, Joan W. 2017. *Sex and Secularism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Van der Veer, Peter. 2006. "Pim Fortuyn, Theo Van Gogh, and the Politics of Tolerance in The Netherlands." *Public Culture* 18 (1): 111–124. doi:[10.1215/08992363-18-1-111](https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-18-1-111)
- Wiering, Jelle O. 2017. "There is a Sexular Body: Introducing a Material Approach to the Secular." *Secularism and Nonreligion* 6: 1–11. doi:[10.5334/sn.78](https://doi.org/10.5334/sn.78).
- Wiering, Jelle O. 2020. "Secular Practices: The Production of Religious Difference in the Dutch Field of Sexual Health." PhD diss., University of Groningen.
- Wiering, Jelle O. 2022. "Why Aren't You a Woman?": Gender and Secular Affect in the Dutch Field of Sexual Health." *New Diversities* 24 (2): 59–72. doi:[10.58002/4cjpg-5w50](https://doi.org/10.58002/4cjpg-5w50).