

Losing my Religion?

**Religious and Spiritual Coping
in Times of Individualisation**

International Series in Mental Health and Religion

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Chapter 1

Introduction and research question

'I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice. It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other.' The speaker is Sheila Larson. She became well-known through Bellah and his colleagues' research (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler & Tipton, 1985, p. 221). In their book *Habits of the heart*, these authors described the cultural climate in the United States in the second half of the 20th century. They put Sheila Larson – a pseudonym – on the scene as a typical representative of the cultural and religious climate in the Western world.

This culture and religion are characterised as individualised. Religion is seen as a personal and private affair and no longer as a communal and institutional issue. The extent of this kind of individualistic tailoring of religion appears to be considerable, also in the Netherlands (Bernts & Berghuijs, 2016).¹

The question can be asked whether it would not be more adequate to speak about spirituality rather than about religiosity. Religion usually is associated with systematised convictions and with membership of established religious institutions. Spirituality on the other hand often is linked with personal experiences of the divine. This distinction runs parallel with the distinction between, on the one hand, a more institutional and communal orientation, and, on the other hand, a more individual orientation (Hill et al., 2000).

1 Here we mention this theme only briefly, as with many themes in the introduction. In the second chapter we will extensively discuss this issue and other issues mentioned here. We will then also discuss the size and the range of the various phenomena.

More specifically, the individualised culture is characterised as 'expressively' individualistic. Expressive individualism is a variant of individualism, in which the self, and the development and expression of the self, are central (Bellah et al., 1985). Applied to religion, the development of the self has a central position in expressive-individualistically inspired religiosity (Taylor, 2002).

From a psychological perspective, we call such focussing on the self 'narcissism'. The most concise description of this is: a strong psychological interest in oneself (Westen, 1990). In narcissism this means in particular an excessive yearning for a grandiose self and for admiration by others (Wink, 1996). With the dissemination of expressive individualism in the past decades, narcissism has become an increasingly important personality characteristic. This has happened not only in the United States (Newsom, Archer, Trumbetta & Gottesman, 2003; Twenge, 2014; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell & Bushman, 2008), but also in the Netherlands (Van den Brink, 2001).

Narcissism makes people vulnerable; narcissism can be an assault on their wellbeing. People with a strong narcissistic attitude yearn for grandiosity and for recognition by others of that grandiosity. If recognition fails to occur, or if they are criticised, they feel deeply hurt. They then can feel overcome by existential depletion (Kernberg, 1986; Kohut, 1971). A depletion manifesting as boredom: a strong and all-pervasive feeling of apathy and lack of interest (Kohut, 1977; Lasch, 1978; Capps, 1993). People with strong narcissistic traits are also susceptible to anxiety (Twenge, 2013). In narcissism, the worries about oneself centre on the preservation of an image of the self as great and grandiose. Consequently, these worries about oneself are constantly encircled by anxiety. In this case, anxiety is a way of anticipating the loss of confidence in oneself (Glas, 2001), namely the confidence that one is a great human being.

The question is whether people will appeal to religion when trying to solve these kinds of problems regarding their wellbeing. Do they use religion in order to manage them, when they are struggling with the boredom and anxiety caused by narcissism? Do they resort to religious coping? Just like other forms of coping, religious coping is oriented towards restoring self-confidence and towards providing an awareness that one has control over one's life (Pargament, 1990). Such goals are especially important for people with a narcissistic habitus (Morf &

Rhodewalt, 2001), and religious coping could perhaps contribute to overcoming narcissistic injuries.

With the question about utilising religious coping in narcissistic problems we find ourselves in a domain full of contrasts. On the one hand, the focus on the self, which characterises expressive individualism and narcissism, is accompanied by a strong suspicion of education, marriage, family, school, church, politics, religion, and so on. In short, there is a huge suspicion of institutions, including religious ones (Elchardus & Heyvaert, 1991; Aupers, 2004). This negative attitude towards religion might result in a negative attitude towards utilising religious coping with narcissistic problems. In this connection, the question could even be asked whether an expressive-individualistic styling of religion isn't almost a contradiction in terms.

However, there are indications that religion and religious coping on the one hand, and expressive individualism and narcissism on the other hand, are in no way mutually exclusive. Some authors point at religion's adaptive capacity, i.e. religion's capacity to adjust to an expressive-individualistic culture. This adaptation implies that contributing to the development of the self becomes the purpose of religion (Taylor, 2002). Apart from this, people with a narcissistic attitude sometimes have a utilitarian attitude towards religion, as is clear from a positive connection that was found between narcissism and an extrinsic religious orientation (Watson, Hood, Morris & Hall, 1987; Watson, Morris, Hood & Biderman, 1990). Furthermore, people with a narcissistic habitus sometimes utilise religious coping and prayer (Zondag & Van Uden, 2010; 2011). Prayer too can be seen as a form of religious coping (Hood, Hill & Spilka, 2009).

The above concise exposition generates many questions, some of which we want to answer in the present study. There is, for instance, the question regarding the connection between, on the one hand, expressive individualism and narcissism and, on the other hand, religion and spirituality. According to the above outline, the data about religion are contradictory; we will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter. And within this context we know hardly anything about spirituality. There are indications that spirituality might better fit in

with tendencies toward individualisation, and hence could be an alternative for religion, but on the other hand it seems that this tendency is not persevering (Bernts & Berghuijs, 2016).

A second question concerns the position of religious and spiritual coping in narcissistic problems like boredom and anxiety. Data about the utilisation of religious coping are in short supply, and even less is known about the use of spiritual coping. Maybe we are introducing the term 'spiritual coping' here somewhat unexpectedly. Spiritual coping is coping that is a continuation of spirituality, just as religious coping is a continuation of religion. And just like there are indications that spirituality is an alternative for religion, spiritual coping might be an alternative for religious coping.

We now can formulate the principal questions for our research: 1. In which ways are religion and spirituality connected with expressive individualism and narcissism? 2. What is the significance of religious and spiritual coping for managing boredom and anxiety in a culture that emphasises individualism and narcissism?

We will answer these questions by means of a survey that was carried out using questionnaires. The present study is organised as follows. In Chapter 2, we will discuss the principal concepts of our research. We will elucidate individualisation, narcissism, boredom, anxiety, and religious coping and spiritual coping. In this chapter we will also discuss the connections between these concepts. Chapter 3 concerns the implementation of our research. We will elaborate on the operationalisation of the concepts and the execution of the fieldwork among a sample of 959 respondents. In Chapter 4, we will discuss the outcomes of our research. In Chapter 5, we will formulate the conclusions and we will articulate our comments.

Our research intends to shed light on the extent to which religion and religious coping still have importance in times of individualisation. Is this the case, or should we speak of 'Losing my religion'? With this title we refer to a 1991 song of the pop group REM, 'Losing my religion' (without question mark).² We reproduce the text of this song here in its entirety; we will return to it in the comments in Chapter 5.

2 This song can be listened to on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwtdhWltSlg>.

LOSING MY RELIGION

*Life is bigger
It's bigger
And you, you are not me
The lengths that I will go to
The distance in your eyes
Oh no, I've said too much
I set it up*

*That's me in the corner
That's me in the spotlight
Losing my religion
Trying to keep up with you
And I don't know if I can do it
Oh no I've said too much
I haven't said enough*

*I thought that I heard you laughing
I thought that I heard you sing
I think I thought I saw you try*

*Every whisper
Of every waking hour
I'm choosing my confessions
Trying to keep an eye on you
Like a hurt lost and blinded fool
Oh no, I've said too much
I set it up*

*Consider this
The hint of the century
Consider this
The slip that brought me
To my knees failed
What if all these fantasies
Come flailing around
Now I've said too much*

*I thought that I heard you laughing
I thought that I heard you sing
I think I thought I saw you try*

*But that was just a dream
That was just a dream*

*That's me in the corner
That's me in the spotlight
Losing my religion
Trying to keep up with you
And I don't know if I can do it
Oh no I've said too much
I haven't said enough*

*I thought that I heard you laughing
I thought that I heard you sing
I think I thought I saw you try*

*But that was just a dream, try, cry, why, try
That was just a dream, just a dream, just a dream
Dream*