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# Sworn To The Sacred

How the performance of the ritual oath “*Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig*” conveys religious meaning into a secular space

Isis Johanna Josephine Reusken - s5293308

Bachelor's thesis Religious Studies

First supervisor: Dr Joram Tarusarira

Second assessor: Dr Elena Mucciarelli

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## Abstract

This bachelor's thesis examines the ritual oath "*Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig*" that is uttered by Dutch ministers and secretaries of state when they are sworn in. Dutch politics is secular, and yet politicians can swear on God that they will be an honest officer. So this study was carried out to better understand how religious meaning is conveyed when ministers and secretaries of state take the oath. This research was conducted by observing videos of the past three swearing-in ceremonies, an interview with a former Minister who was part of the ritual, and a literature study. This research will explain what verbal and non-verbal elements are present during the ritual of the swearing-in ceremony, what the role of the space is in which the ritual takes place, and how religious meaning can be transferred during the performance of a ritual. This knowledge will be applied to the ritual performances of the oath that are observed. The most important conclusion of this study includes how performative speech acts, such as the ritual oath, convey religious meaning into a secular space. Furthermore, this thesis suggests future considerations for related studies.

**Keywords:** ritual; oath; speech act; politics; secular space; religious meaning.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

“*Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig*” (So truly help me God Almighty) is a ritual oath that Dutch civil servants can utter during their swearing-in ceremonies. Before they are formally responsible for their duties, civil servants raise two fingers and ask for the help of God the Almighty. When one does not want to say the oath, there is also the option to say the pledge: “*Dat verklaar en beloof ik*” (I declare and promise that). The performance of either the oath or the promise during a swearing-in ceremony is prohibited by law. On March 25, 1992, Dutch law established that when Dutch ministers or secretaries of state are sworn in, they may swear on God or promise and declare that they will perform their duties honestly. Since the text to be sworn by saying the oath during the ritual is established by law, one cannot refer to any deity other than God.<sup>1</sup> Most Dutch people will know the ritual oath from the swearing-in of ministers and secretaries of state, since their swearing-in is broadcast on live television. Ministers in the Netherlands are democratically elected every four years. The ministers, together with the Prime Minister and the secretaries of state, constitute the cabinet. The ministers give political direction to their ministries, and the secretaries of state assist the ministers in this regard. How many ministers and secretaries of state the Netherlands has and what the tasks of the secretaries of state are vary per cabinet term.<sup>2</sup>

That ministers and secretaries of state can ask for God’s help in fulfilling their duties and obligations can be seen as remarkable considering the separation of church and state in the Netherlands and the secular identity of the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> Understanding how the ritual oath conveys religious meaning within the secular context in which it is uttered can contribute to how this ritual is interpreted.

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<sup>1</sup> “Wet beëdiging ministers en leden Staten-Generaal”, KOOP. Effective as of March 25, 1992. Accessed on May 13, 2025. <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0005430/1992-03-25>

<sup>2</sup> “Over de regering”, Ministerie van Algemene Zaken. Effective as of June 28, 2024. Accessed on May 22, 2025. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/regering/over-de-regering>

<sup>3</sup> Detlef Pollack and Gergely Rosta, “Religion in Free Fall : The Netherlands.” *Religion and Modernity : An International Comparison*. First edition. (Oxford, OX: Oxford University Press, 2017), 163, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1643197>

According to Talal Asad, religion does not disappear in a secularized society. There remains room for religious aspects and meanings, but shaped to fit a non-theological society.<sup>4</sup> However, the role of a ritual can change in a secular society, Lorenc and Mikołajczak's research showed. They examined the swearing in of the Polish president and concluded that the oath is the only remaining religious element from this ritual.<sup>5</sup> J.L. Austin examined speech acts and how they should be interpreted. According to him, the words spoken while performing a ritual can have authority, and language has means to perform actions.<sup>6</sup> Rituals in themselves are the negotiators of powers, according to research by Catherine Bell.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, according to Thomas Luckmann's research, the perception persists that religion belongs in the private sphere when the role of religion is described in a secular society.<sup>8</sup>

This existing literature on topics closely related to this study offers insight into the concepts in general and must be understood to map the broad field of research. Indeed, much significant research has already been done on rituals, speech acts, and the transmission of religious meaning. There has also been considerable research on secular spaces, politics, and the separation of church and state. However, to the best of its knowledge, no extensive research has been done on this particular ritual and its meaning in the secular space of Dutch politics. The results of this study may shed further light on the taking of the oath and the consideration of Dutch politics as completely secular. It can also provide new insights into the ritual. This can be useful for religious studies within the field of ritual studies, research on politics and religion, and the Dutch heritage of this ritual.

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<sup>4</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular : Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 189-194, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804783095>

<sup>5</sup> Magdalena Lorenc and Michał Mikołajczak, "Liturgical References in the Swearing-in Ceremonies of the President of the Republic of Poland after 1989." *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne* no. 3 (2018): 152, <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssp.2018.3.9>

<sup>6</sup> J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*, (London: Barakaldo Books, 2020), 26, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2507789>

<sup>7</sup> Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 196, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10511357>

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Luckmann. "Religion and Personal Identity in Modern Society" *The Invisible Religion : The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. Edited by Tom Kaden and Bernt Schnettler. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), 67, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003257875>

This study aims to research how religious meaning is transferred by the performance of a swearing-in ritual in a space that is considered secular.

## Research question and sub-questions

The research question of this thesis is:

*How does the performance of the ritual oath “Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig” by Dutch ministers and secretaries of state convey religious meaning within a secular space?*

The research question is divided into the following three sub-questions:

1. *What is the role of verbal and non-verbal elements in the performance of the ritual oath?*
2. *How is the space in which the ritual takes place part of the performance of the ritual?*
3. *How do performative speech acts convey religious meanings?*

The first sub-question examines the swearing-in ritual through all the elements involved that can be observed and will be answered by observing videos of the ritual. The second sub-question will relate the space and context where the ritual takes place to the observations. The third sub-question operates on a theoretical level since this question will be answered by the theories being studied. To gain additional insight into the ritual and to answer the sub-questions, an interview will also be conducted. The empirical data, discussion, and conclusion will arise from the answers to these three questions and the research question, and these sections will all follow the structure of the three sub-questions.

## Structure of the thesis

After this first chapter of introduction is concluded, the second chapter addresses a literature review bringing relevant academic research and theories related to this study forward. In chapter three, a conceptual framework is established that explains the approach to the main concepts from the research question. This is followed by chapter four, which addresses the research methodology. It will be explained in this chapter

how this research was conducted methodologically and how ethical issues surrounding the research were considered. This is primarily to explain why certain choices were made regarding the research. Then the empirical data from the videos and interview will be presented in chapter five, which will then be linked to the literature in the discussion in chapter six. This thesis concludes with chapter seven, a conclusion that concludes and summarizes the essence of this thesis.

## Chapter Two: Literature review

Over the years, research on swearing-in rituals has been conducted from different approaches and disciplines. Asking for God's help by taking an oath in a courthouse or as a politician with a phrase such as “*So please help me God*” occurs in more traditionally Christian countries than just the Netherlands. Psychologists study whether defendants in the United Kingdom and the United States who do not take the oath but take the affirmation are more likely to be tried than defendants who choose to take the oath.<sup>9</sup> Legally, the oath “*I swear by Almighty God that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth*,” and the affirmation “*Solemnly, sincerely and truly declare and affirm*” are equally binding.<sup>10</sup> However, research shows that whether a defendant utters the oath biases decisions made by a judge and jury.<sup>11</sup> The explanation for this is that the oath is seen as “correct” due to traditionalism and the underlying prejudice in American and British society that non-believers are not or less moral.<sup>12</sup>

From a juridical perspective, it is argued that secular South Africa should stop requiring people to give an oath or affirmation before testifying in a court of law. An oath has no place in a modern secular state, and it is irrelevant to indirectly ask people about their personal beliefs in a public place like a court.<sup>13</sup> Instead of asking witnesses to promise to tell the truth by taking an oath or affirmation, the court itself should indicate this by reminding witnesses that lying in court is prosecutable.<sup>14</sup> Both studies on taking oaths in a court of law provide insight into the field in which research has already been done on taking an oath and referring to God in contexts that are not inherently religious.

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<sup>9</sup> Ryan T. McKay, Will Gervais, and Colin J Davis. “‘So Help Me God?’ Does Oath Swearing in Courtroom Scenarios Impact Trial Outcomes?” *British Journal of Psychology* (London, England : 1953), 114, no. 4 (2023): 991, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12651>

<sup>10</sup> McKay, et al., ‘*So Help Me God?*’, 992.

<sup>11</sup> McKay, et al., ‘*So Help Me God?*’, 1011.

<sup>12</sup> McKay, et al., ‘*So Help Me God?*’, 1009-1010.

<sup>13</sup> P.J. Schwikkard, “The Oath : Ritual and Rationality.” *South African Journal of Criminal Justice* 32, no. 3 (2019): 375,

[https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?lname=&public=false&collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/so\\_afrcrimj32&men\\_hide=false&men\\_tab=toc&kind=&page=357](https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?lname=&public=false&collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/so_afrcrimj32&men_hide=false&men_tab=toc&kind=&page=357)

<sup>14</sup> Schwikkard, *The Oath*, 376.

A particularly relevant study was done by Magdalena Lorenc and Michał Mikołajczak on the taking of an oath by Polish presidents at their swearing-in ceremonies. It is argued that this ritual has become secular due to changes to the law in 1997. In Poland, since April 2, 1997, it has been established by law that the president must utter an oath at their swearing-in ceremony. Taking this oath is seen as the starting point of the newly elected president, and from when the president carries out his duties.<sup>15</sup> This research examines the ties between the liturgy of the sacraments and the state ceremony of swearing-in the president of Poland.<sup>16</sup> This research also touches upon secularization and public religion in Europe.

To this day, the liturgy of the sacraments is a model for public celebrations in Europe. Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde stated that “*for thousands of years, thinking and theories of the political order in society have been associated with religious imaginations, and in Christian times – also theological ones*”.<sup>17</sup> Christianity has left an indelible mark on European societies and still today has an influence on the formation of the symbolic space of which political culture in particular is a part.<sup>18</sup> The religious influences on state ceremonies, such as swearing-in rituals, come from the Middle Ages because there was no distinction between religious and secular authority at that time.<sup>19</sup>

Arnold van Gennep's theory of liminality from 1909 is not applicable to the legal procedure of the performance of the swearing-in ritual of the Polish president. Indeed, Polish ritual lacks a clear distinction in the stages of separation, liminality, and incorporation. Thereafter, an immanent feature of the liminal stage is the overturning

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<sup>15</sup> Magdalena Lorenc and Michał Mikołajczak, “Liturgical References in the Swearing-in Ceremonies of the President of the Republic of Poland after 1989.” *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne* no. 3 (2018): 136, <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssp.2018.3.9>

<sup>16</sup> Lorenc and Mikołajczak, *Liturgical References in the Swearing-in Ceremonies of the President of the Republic of Poland after 1989*, 136.

<sup>17</sup> Lorenc and Mikołajczak, *Liturgical References in the Swearing-in Ceremonies of the President of the Republic of Poland after 1989*, 140.

<sup>18</sup> Lorenc and Mikołajczak, *Liturgical References in the Swearing-in Ceremonies of the President of the Republic of Poland after 1989*, 140.

<sup>19</sup> Lorenc and Mikołajczak, *Liturgical References in the Swearing-in Ceremonies of the President of the Republic of Poland after 1989*, 141.

of order with its associated norms. This is not applicable in a ritual where the subjugated person has been legally elected and has not yet assumed the position.<sup>20</sup>

Although uttering the oath is prohibited by law in Poland, referring to God is optional.<sup>21</sup> If “*So help me God*” is being said after the formal oath:

*By taking the office of the President of the Republic of Poland by the will of the Nation, I solemnly swear that I will be faithful to the provisions of the Constitution, I will steadfastly protect the dignity of the Nation, independence and security of the State, and the well-being of my citizens will always be the highest command for me.*<sup>22</sup>

then that would be the only literal remnant of the influence of religion on the swearing-in ritual.<sup>23</sup> After 1997, the word ‘oath’ lost its binding to religion and is defined by Lorenc and Mikołajczak as: “*solemn, usually public and verbal promise of a particular way of conduct, verbalized in words of officially defined content and sometimes also submitted in a specific form*”<sup>24</sup> However, the swearing-in is still a ritual because it is performed in a specific context in which prescribed words are spoken and the performance causes an assumed effect.<sup>25</sup>

Besides research on swearing-in ceremonies, studies on secularism are also relevant for this research, and as the research of Lorenc and Mikołajczak shows, these two topics can be interrelated. Looking at secularism in the Netherlands, research has shown that

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<sup>20</sup> Magdalena Lorenc and Michał Mikołajczak, “Liturical References in the Swearing-in Ceremonies of the President of the Republic of Poland after 1989.” *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne* no. 3 (2018): 147, <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssp.2018.3.9>

<sup>21</sup> Lorenc and Mikołajczak, *Liturical References in the Swearing-in Ceremonies of the President of the Republic of Poland after 1989*, 151-152.

<sup>22</sup> Lorenc and Mikołajczak, *Liturical References in the Swearing-in Ceremonies of the President of the Republic of Poland after 1989*, 141.

<sup>23</sup> Lorenc and Mikołajczak, *Liturical References in the Swearing-in Ceremonies of the President of the Republic of Poland after 1989*, 152.

<sup>24</sup> Lorenc and Mikołajczak, *Liturical References in the Swearing-in Ceremonies of the President of the Republic of Poland after 1989*, 151.

<sup>25</sup> Lorenc and Mikołajczak, *Liturical References in the Swearing-in Ceremonies of the President of the Republic of Poland after 1989*, 152.

it is one of the most secular countries in Western Europe.<sup>26</sup> Opposite to the decline of religion in the Netherlands, there is a growing interest in individual beliefs.<sup>27</sup> The segment that is involved in the development of the growth of individual religiosity is that religion and self-identity belong in the private sphere.<sup>28</sup>

The role of religion in the public sphere is part of many academic debates within the field of religious studies. Scholars argue that the privatization of religion is one of the dimensions of the modern process of secularization. The other two dimensions are the division of the economic, scientific and governmental domains from the religious domain of the church, leading to religion being becoming more specialized within its own realm and a reduction in religious belief and practice within an ethnic group or nation-state, often coinciding with the growing prominence of science and technology as more trusted sources of understanding and guidance.<sup>29</sup>

Although religion may have left the public sphere, religion still has a role in secularized societies. Embedded in lived civilization is a moral order that is experienced as a secular age. Within this framework, we safeguard the norms of social, political, and moral life, and there are only transcendent references that do not disturb this order. A man who lives in this way has a buffered identity and lives in a disenchanted world.<sup>30</sup> However, there are broad frameworks of how history unfolds that are called “master narratives”. We tend to think that the stories that belong to this master narrative, and which religion is part of, belong to the past, but these frameworks still affect our

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<sup>26</sup> Detlef Pollack and Gergely Rosta, “Religion in Free Fall : The Netherlands.” *Religion and Modernity : An International Comparison*. First edition. (Oxford, OX: Oxford University Press, 2017), 163,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1643197>

<sup>27</sup> Pollack and Rosta, *Religion in Free Fall*, 181.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Luckmann. “Religion and Personal Identity in Modern Society” *The Invisible Religion : The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. Edited by Tom Kaden and Bernt Schnettler. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), 67, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003257875>

<sup>29</sup> Rosemarie van den Bremer, José Casanova, and Trygve Wyller, eds. ““God is Hidden in the Earthly Kingdom:” The Lutheran Two-Kingdoms Theory as Foundation of Scandinavian Secularity” *Secular and Sacred? : The Scandinavian Case of Religion in Human Rights, Law and Public Space*. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 56, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10822303>

<sup>30</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 238-239, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674044289>

thinking even in a secularized society.<sup>31</sup> In that way, religion has a role in shaping our frameworks through which we see the world. This definition becomes evident in Dutch politics because the oath draws on Christian cultural heritage. Secularization in governance and public life is not the complete elimination of religion, but it can be described as the transformation in which religious practices and concepts will fit into a modern, non-theological political structure.<sup>32</sup>

Another research field that this research is dealing with is the field of ritual studies, and in particular, rituals that contain speech acts. J.L. Austin has been a demonstrable researcher when it comes to speech acts. He describes how words and sentences are not just statements but performative utterances that carry commitment and authority. Utterances can be described as having the condition of not being descriptive or reportive, not being true or false, and being part of an action that is described as not saying anything.<sup>33</sup> Those utterances are ‘performative sentences or utterances’ in short, a ‘performative’.<sup>34</sup> There are certain “rules” associated with the performative, according to Austin: “*There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, the procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.*”<sup>35</sup> These rules determine whether the words that are performed have authority. The utterance-origin is the person who does the verbal utterance, but is not necessarily referred to during the performative by ‘I’ or the person’s name. This makes the implicit feature of a speech act explicit.<sup>36</sup> Three different types of distinct acts a speaker performs when speaking that give meaning to the words can be distinguished. The locutionary act is the act of saying something meaningful, the illocutionary act is the act performed in saying something, and the perlocutionary act is the act done by saying something.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 573, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674044289>

<sup>32</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular : Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 189-194, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804783095>

<sup>33</sup> J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*, (London: Barakaldo Books, 2020), 10, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2507789>

<sup>34</sup> Austin, *How to do things with words*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Austin, *How to do things with words*, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Austin, *How to do things with words*, 57.

<sup>37</sup> Austin, *How to do things with words*, 83-86.

Besides the oath, the swearing-in is, by itself, a ritual. Rituals can be the fundamental social act and have a prominent role in preserving cultural knowledge.<sup>38</sup> According to Geertz, political rituals do not refer, symbolise, or express power. Instead, ritual itself is power, and it acts and actuates, which is why rituals are politics.<sup>39</sup> The interpretations of Geertz and other scholars who see rituals as instruments for other purposes, such as politics, are more traditional theories. In more recent interpretive analysis of rituals, it is suggested that rituals are themselves the negotiation and production of power relations and are not a thing in themselves.<sup>40</sup> This draws upon Foucault's theories of power to show that ritualisation can reinforce authority and shape identities.

The context of this study is the Netherlands, which is, as previously stated, one of the most secular countries in Western Europe.<sup>41</sup> The *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* (Central Office of Statistics) is an independent institute that collects data on societal topics, including religion. Data from the CBS revealed that in 2022, 57.2% of Dutch people over the age of 15 do not identify themselves as belonging to any denomination or ideological group. This number is only increasing.<sup>42</sup> After World War II, the process of secularization began in the Netherlands because churches lost their influence on society. Evidence of this in Dutch politics is the fact that churches have not been named in the Constitution since 1983.<sup>43</sup> A political ritual that does not occur at all in the Netherlands is the uttering of “*God bless the Netherlands*”. Whereas this is common in other countries, it also does not happen in the Netherlands after the annual reading of

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<sup>38</sup> Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 54, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10511357>

<sup>39</sup> Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 194.

<sup>40</sup> Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 196.

<sup>41</sup> Detlef Pollack and Gergely Rosta, “Religion in Free Fall : The Netherlands.” *Religion and Modernity : An International Comparison*. First edition. (Oxford, OX: Oxford University Press, 2017), 163,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1643197>

<sup>42</sup> Hans Houben and Marieke Schmeets. “Religieuze Betrokkenheid in Nederland”. Centraal Bureau Voor de Statistiek. Effective as of April 6, 2023. Accessed on June 17, 2025. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2023/religieuze-betrokkenheid-in-nederland?onepage=true#:~:text=Verdeling%20over%20gezindten&text=Met%2018%2C2%20procent%20van,%20met%205%2C9%20procent>

<sup>43</sup> Emmeline Besamusca, and J. Verheul. *Discovering the Dutch : On Culture and Society of the Netherlands*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 167, <https://www.degruyter.com/doi/book/10.1515/9789048526093>

the political agenda in the Speech from the Throne.<sup>44</sup> Connecting the nation, its monarchy and some deity in the Netherlands comes closest on May 4, when the monarch listens to a speech by the nation's highest pulpit in the *Nieuwe Kerk* (New Church) in Amsterdam, after which the monarch lays a wreath on Dam Square to commemorate the victims of World War II. This can be seen as one of the only expressions of civil religion in the Netherlands.<sup>45</sup> These examples illustrate the secular character of the Netherlands.

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<sup>44</sup> Emmeline Besamusca, and J. Verheul. *Discovering the Dutch : On Culture and Society of the Netherlands*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 167,  
<https://www.degruyter.com/doi/book/10.1515/9789048526093>

<sup>45</sup> Emmeline Besamusca, and J. Verheul, *Discovering the Dutch*, 167.

## Chapter Three: Conceptual framework

### Ritual speech acts as a performance

For this research, it is important to explain the distinction between the oath “Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig” (So truly help me God Almighty) and the pledge “Dat verklaar en beloof ik” (I declare and promise that). The Dutch government has established that the oath is taken based on a philosophy of life to which one wants to swear. The tone of the pledge, according to the Dutch government, is neutral, and the one saying the pledge does not swear on anything but instead declares and promises.<sup>46</sup> The language used in a speech act matters for the action the language implies.<sup>47</sup> The oath functions as a performative utterance. This is because the oath is neither descriptive nor reportive, neither true nor false.<sup>48</sup> Besides, the oath comes with an action of stepping forth and raising the right arm to shoulder height with both the middle and index finger up.

The oath is both a locutionary and an illocutionary act. Three elements are associated with the locutionary act.<sup>49</sup> The Phonetic Act is just about making certain noises, the Phatic Act is the utterance of words in a grammatical sequence, and the Rhetic Act is the use of words in a performance with a particular sense and reference.<sup>50</sup> All three elements apply to the oath. Besides saying something meaningful, the oath is about making a solemn commitment, swearing. Making the commitment is part of a procedure that has a conventional effect. It is about certain people in a certain space saying certain things in an institutionalized context that contribute to the nature of the ritual and performative element of the oath.<sup>51</sup> The oath will be seen as a performative utterance that is part of the swearing-in ritual in this research.

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<sup>46</sup> “Eed en Belofte”, Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties. Effective as of February 10, 2025. Accessed on May 8, 2025. <https://www.p-direkt.nl/informatie-rijkspersoneel-2020/rechten-en-regels/integriteit/indienststelling-en-integriteit/eed-en-beloofte>

<sup>47</sup> J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*, (London: Barakaldo Books, 2020), 57, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2507789>

<sup>48</sup> Austin, *How to do things with words*, 10.

<sup>49</sup> Austin, *How to do things with words*, 83-86.

<sup>50</sup> Austin, *How to do things with words*, 84.

<sup>51</sup> Austin, *How to do things with words*, 27.

The swearing-in ritual itself is interpreted as a constitutive of power relations. The swearing-in ritual is seen as the production of power relations, because the ritual is not about God per se or about a Minister; the ritual is about institutionalizing authority. The theory of liminality by Arnold van Gennep will not be incorporated to define the ritual because the participants of the ritual are legally elected and have not yet taken the position until before the utterance. Consequently, there is no liminal stage where the existing order and norms are overturned, resulting in no clear distinction between the stages of separation, liminality, and incorporation, which is an inherent characteristic of liminality.<sup>52</sup> Rather than a ritual that passes phases of liminality, the swearing-in ritual is seen as a legal procedure by which, after taking the oath or pledge, one is responsible for their duties in office.<sup>53</sup>

This research conceptualizes the Dutch oath “Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig” as a performative speech act that, through ritual and legal formality, institutionalizes authority and assigns responsibility to ministers and secretaries of state. The oath is viewed not as a personal expression but as a structured act that reinforces power within an official context.

## Secularism

For this research, secularism is adopted as the socio-political state in which religion is formally separated from state institutions, yet continues to exert influence through symbolic and subtle ways in society. Religion is out of state institutions because that is part of the process of secularization.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Magdalena Lorenc and Michał Mikołajczak, “Liturgical References in the Swearing-in Ceremonies of the President of the Republic of Poland after 1989.” *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne* no. 3 (2018): 147. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssp.2018.3.9>

<sup>53</sup> “Wet beëdiging ministers en leden Staten-Generaal”, KOOP. Effective as of March 25, 1992. Accessed on May 13, 2025. <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0005430/1992-03-25>

<sup>54</sup> Rosemarie van den Bremer, José Casanova, and Trygve Wyller, eds. ““God is Hidden in the Earthly Kingdom:” The Lutheran Two-Kingdoms Theory as Foundation of Scandinavian Secularity” *Secular and Sacred? : The Scandinavian Case of Religion in Human Rights, Law and Public Space*. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014): 56, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10822303>

Individual religion and religiosity, however, are growing in the Netherlands.<sup>55</sup> People tend to think that individual religiosity belongs in the private sphere because people see individual religiosity as the liberation from social structures.<sup>56</sup>

However, this does not mean that religion disappears completely from the public sphere. Religion reshapes how it appears and functions in society so it will fit with modern, non-theological structures from the public sphere.<sup>57</sup> The oath is an example of this because it is not obligatory to take the oath, but neither is it replaced with the neutral option. The function of the oath referring to God is the same as the neutral pledge.<sup>58</sup> Besides the fact that the secular Netherlands still leaves room for religion in the public sphere, the Dutch citizen is a buffered self in a disenchanted world.<sup>59</sup> The buffered self is shaped by underlying moral frameworks, and these are religiously rooted. These master narratives continue to influence society, and to which people continue to conform even as open expressions of religion decline.<sup>60</sup> The oath taken by ministers and secretaries of state is an example of a master narrative because taking an oath and participating in an oath-taking ritual dates from the Middle Ages.<sup>61</sup>

This research conceptualizes secular space as the public space in which there is still room for religion and religious meaning through the master narrative. The master narrative is based on history, moral frameworks, and traditions that are still visible in societies.

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<sup>55</sup> Detlef Pollack and Gergely Rosta, “Religion in Free Fall : The Netherlands.” *Religion and Modernity : An International Comparison*. First edition. (Oxford, OX: Oxford University Press, 2017), 181,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1643197>

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Luckman. “Religion and Personal Identity in Modern Society ” *The Invisible Religion : The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. Edited by Tom Kaden and Bernt Schnettler. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), 67, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003257875>

<sup>57</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular : Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 189-194, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804783095>

<sup>58</sup> “Eed en Belofte”, Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties. Effective as of February 10, 2025. Accessed on May 8, 2025. <https://www.p-direkt.nl/informatie-rijkspersoneel-2020/rechten-en-regels/integriteit/indienstreding-en-integriteit/eed-en-belofte>

<sup>59</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 238-239, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674044289>

<sup>60</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 573.

<sup>61</sup> Magdalena Lorenc and Michał Mikołajczak, “Liturgical References in the Swearing-in Ceremonies of the President of the Republic of Poland after 1989.” *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne* no. 3 (2018): 141, <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssp.2018.3.9>

## Religious meaning

Meaning systems or meaning refer to how people make sense of the world. Making sense of reality influenced by a religion or belief is how religious meaning is defined in this study, because religion is related to meaning making in life.<sup>62</sup> Religion has a central role in many global meaning systems of individuals because it provides people with an integrated collective of beliefs, goals, and meanings that help people explain the world, deal with personal life events, and problems.<sup>63</sup> Religious meaning will be analyzed in this study by examining the layered meaning that verbal and nonverbal cues convey during a ritual. The oath not only conveys religious meaning through its direct reference to God, but also through its performative nature. This provides a framework for understanding how verbal elements of ritual create meaning. A ritual can also convey religious meaning in a secular setting. Therein, religious meaning is part of the framework that can persist in a secular society. In this way, religious meaning is part of a master narrative. Religious meaning in this study is thus not necessarily linked to an individual or any individual belief anymore. This definition of religious meaning is in line with the ideas of sociologist Peter Berger. He argues that even when secularization has reached a remote point in a society, religious symbols belonging to the institutionalized state can still be found. These symbols may then still hold their meaning because they are linked to religion even in a secular setting.<sup>64</sup> The symbolic cosmos that once had religious legitimacy can persist as culturally authoritative frameworks in secular societies. In this sense, the religious symbols retain religious meaning even when they are present in secular societies.<sup>65</sup>

This research conceptualizes religious meaning as the way people make sense of their lives, influenced by a religion. This can be visible in the symbolic meaning that ritual

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<sup>62</sup> Dariusz Krok. "The Religious Meaning System and Subjective Well-Being: The Mediational Perspective of Meaning in Life." *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 36, no. 2 (2014): 254. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15736121-12341288>

<sup>63</sup> Dariusz Krok, *The Religious Meaning System and Subjective Well-Being*, 254.

<sup>64</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy : Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. (New York: Open Road Media, 2011), 108, <http://www.myilibrary.com?id=591409>

<sup>65</sup> Berger, *The Sacred Canopy : Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, 48.

language and gestures retain in secular settings, even without referring to or requiring personal belief from which the symbols may well stem.

The three concepts are connected to each other. The utterance of the oath is part of the ritual performance and takes place in the secular space. Ritual performance and religious meaning are related to each other because a ritual performance contains and carries out religious meaning, but at the same time, it is religious meaning that gives meaning to the ritual performance of, for example, the oath. Because the ritual performance is performed in a secular space and it contains religious meaning, religious meaning is transferred into the secular space. The relationships between the concepts are visualized in the chart below.

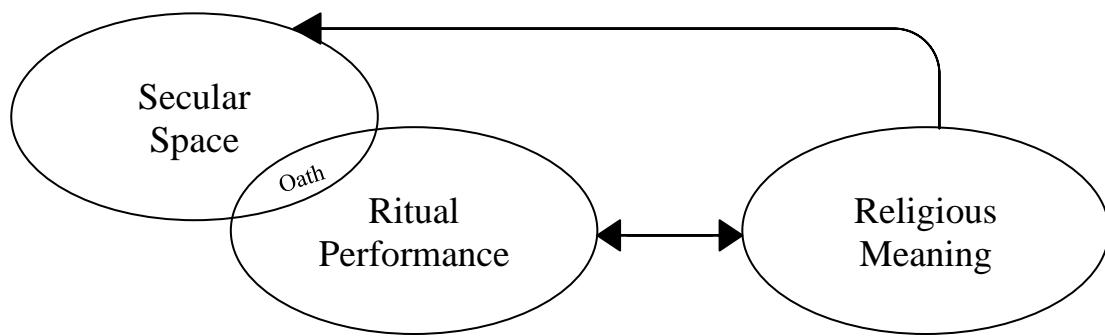


Figure one: I.J.J. Reusken, 22/05/2025

## Chapter Four: Methodology

### Research method

The broadcasts by the *Nederlandse Omroep Stichting* (Dutch Broadcasting Foundation) of the past three swearing-in ceremonies of Dutch ministers and secretaries of state, published by the *Nederlandse Publieke Omroep* (Dutch Public Broadcaster), are the main source of data for this research. I watched and transcribed all three videos multiple times. This is a suitable method for this research because observing the videos gives a clear picture of what the swearing-in ritual entails. The research method of observation allows for the understanding of people's actions in certain contexts and the description of a social setting.<sup>66</sup> Verbal, non-verbal, and spatial elements are the key concepts that were observed separately in all three videos because repeated observation provides richer data.<sup>67</sup> All three news channel videos last about an hour and not only show the ritual, but also discuss relevant issues surrounding the ritual. This provided a complete picture of in what contexts the rituals took place. Of the last three swearing-in rituals, there are complete online recordings to be found, so it was chosen to use these. The method of observing videos made the ethnographic observations more detailed, since there was the possibility to stop the video to take notes.<sup>68</sup> This research method helps to answer the first two sub-questions. The degree of mediatic aspects of the three videos is taken into account during the observation, and it is assumed that they have not influenced the research outcomes.<sup>69</sup>

To determine how religious meaning is conveyed during the ritual, I conducted a literature review and built a conceptual framework to be applied to the empirically observed data from the videos. Both the literature review and the conceptual framework are drawn from relevant research data. Besides giving background information, the literature review, together with the conceptual framework, answers subquestion three.

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<sup>66</sup> Monique M. Hennink, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey. *Qualitative Research Methods*. (Second edition. Los Angeles: Sage, 2020), 171.

<sup>67</sup> Hennink, et al. *Qualitative Research Methods*, 173.

<sup>68</sup> Hennink, et al. *Qualitative Research Methods*, 187.

<sup>69</sup> Hennink, et al. *Qualitative Research Methods*, 188.

In addition to the observation of the videos and the reading of the literature, an online in-depth interview is conducted with a former Minister who once participated in the swearing-in ritual. The interview provides access to data and gives insights from the ritual itself because the interview is about the meaning the participant attached to the experience of the ritual.<sup>70</sup> The interview is a semi-structured interview with only a few preconceived questions prepared with an interview guide. All the prepared questions are open questions so the interviewee will feel invited to share their perceptions and to make sure constructive data is gained.<sup>71</sup> The knowledge from the pre-watched videos and the literature review form the basis for the interview. Thus, the purpose of the interview is to obtain non-public information and the experience of participating in this ritual. This research method allows all three sub questions to be answered.

I analyzed the qualitative data thematically. After transcribing the videos and the interview, reading the literature and defining the concepts, the following codes were defined: verbal elements, non-verbal elements, and spatial elements. Codes symbolize the summative and essential characteristics of the data.<sup>72</sup> Three and broadly defined themes were chosen when coding so that the codes applied to the different forms of data. The codes of the different research methods, but also the codes of the three different videos, were studied. By looking for the similarities of the codes in the three videos, I looked at what is the same in all three videos and thus essential to the ritual. In this way, patterns in the data were sought, and the literature could be analyzed in relation to the empirical data.

The research methods are all qualitative in nature and all data collected will answer the research question in a descriptive manner. The transcripts of the videos and the interview can be found in a separately provided appendix.

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<sup>70</sup> Monique M. Hennink, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey. *Qualitative Research Methods*. (Second edition. Los Angeles: Sage, 2020), 117.

<sup>71</sup> Hennink, et al. *Qualitative Research Methods*, 124.

<sup>72</sup> Muhammad Naeem, Wilson Ozuem, Kerry Howell, and Silvia Ranfagni. “A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22 (2023), 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>

## Ethics statement

There is one interview with a former Minister for this research. The interviewee accepts that the interview is recorded, transcribed, and will be used for this thesis. There is no personal relationship between myself, the interviewer, and the interviewee and there is also no reason to represent and interpret the answers given in a more positive or negative way.

The videos that are watched of the ritual have been shared by the Dutch Broadcasting Foundation on the website of the Dutch Public Broadcaster. The Dutch Broadcasting Foundation is part of the Dutch Public Broadcaster for which the Minister for Primary and Secondary Education and Media is responsible. This makes the Dutch Broadcasting Foundation fall under the Media Law. Despite this, the Dutch Broadcasting Foundation is an independent program funded by the government.<sup>73</sup> Based on this information, it is assumed for this study that the videos are publicly accessible and do not contain confidential information. No references are made to individuals and/or personal data from the videos in this thesis. Only the behaviour, location, and sayings of the three videos are described in a general way as part of the ritual. The interviewee is not a Minister from one of the videos that are being researched. This was deliberately chosen so that the interviewee's answers could not be linked to any of the three videos and in that way could reveal identity. The research refers to the ritual, assuming that this is the same ritual that is repeated using three videos as a description of a ritual. In this way, no reference is made to persons or years to guarantee anonymity.

It is assumed in advance that the research will not harm the researcher, the interviewee, or indirect participants from the videos in any prominent way. However, it is recognized that the research is closely linked to political topics and that there are

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<sup>73</sup> "Wat doet de Nederlandse Publieke Omroep (NPO)?", Ministerie van Algemene Zaken. Effective as of February 15, 2021. Accessed on May 9, 2025. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/media-en-publieke-omroep/vraag-en-antwoord/nederlandse-publieke-omroep#:~:text=De%20minister%20voor%20Basis%2D%20en,aan%20de%20omroep%20zijn%20verbonden>

various interests involved. Ethical issues such as spreading miscommunication, polarization of groups and overgeneralization may be a matter in any research with a political topic. Because the subject of this research is linked to politics but does not have it as its main topic, these possible ways of harming are kept in mind but are not assumed to be done.

## Chapter Five: Empirical data

### Verbal and non-verbal elements of the ritual oath

The first sub-question of this research asks what the role of verbal and non-verbal elements are in the performance of the ritual oath “Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig”. This first paragraph will deal with this question and will explain both of the elements based on the interview and the observations of the video’s *NOS Beëdiging Kabinet Schoof*<sup>74</sup>, *NOS Beëdiging Kabinet-Rutte IV*<sup>75</sup>, and *NOS Beëdiging Kabinet Rutte III*<sup>76</sup>. For the purpose of clarity, a distinction has been made between the description of verbal and non-verbal elements prior to the ritual, the first part of the ritual and the second part of the ritual.

#### Prior to the ritual

Before the swearing-in ritual begins, all ministers are introduced to the king by the (forthcoming) Prime Minister. The king is already inside the room beforehand, after which two lackeys open the door and the Prime Minister enters first. The Prime Minister shakes hands with the king and, as the videos show, stands either to the left or right of the king. While shaking hands, there is a nod, smile and welcome from both the king and the Prime Minister to each other. The Prime Minister addresses the king as “majesty.” This moment takes only a few seconds. Then the forthcoming ministers of the cabinet enter in a line in protocol order. This means the vice presidents first and then the ministries in order of seniority. One by one, ministers appear in a continuous line before the king during which the Prime Minister names the Minister's first and last name, a possible vice presidency and the upcoming Ministry the person will be responsible for. The ministers shake hands with the king. There are smiles, nods and when the ministers address the king they use “majesty” to do so. Sometimes the king

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<sup>74</sup> Nederlandse Omroep Stichting, “NOS Beëdiging Kabinet Schoof”, broadcasted by Nederlandse Publieke Omroep, NPO START on June 2, 2024, 01:05:24, <https://npo.nl/start/serie/nos-kabinet/seizoen-5/nos-beediging-kabinet/afspelen>

<sup>75</sup> Nederlandse Omroep Stichting, “NOS Beëdiging Kabinet-Rutte IV”, broadcasted by Nederlandse Publieke Omroep, NPO START on January 10, 2022, 00:59:59, <https://npo.nl/start/serie/nos-kabinet/seizoen-3/nos-beediging-kabinet-rutte-iv/afspelen>

<sup>76</sup> Nederlandse Omroep Stichting, “NOS Beëdiging Kabinet Schoof”, broadcasted by Nederlandse Publieke Omroep, NPO START on June 2, 2024, 01:05:24, <https://npo.nl/start/serie/nos-kabinet/seizoen-5/nos-beediging-kabinet/afspelen>

says something along the lines of “Good to see you” or “Welcome”. The male ministers wear a jacquets suit especially for the ritual because before the other formalities after the ritual continue, they will change into a suit and tie<sup>77</sup>. The female ministers wear formal clothes that do not seem to conform to any prescription and they will not change clothing during the day.

Depending on which hall the swearing-in takes place in, the ministers take their positions in the hall after being welcomed by the king. They take their positions in one row in front of each other in protocol order. When the ministers are all standing, the king stands directly in front of the ministers. Between the ministers and the king, the Prime Minister and the director of the Cabinet of the King take their positions. The Cabinet of the King provides official support to the king in carrying out his constitutional duties.<sup>78</sup> The director of this cabinet is the master of ceremonies for the swearing-in ritual. During one of the swearing-in ceremonies, the Prime Minister himself had yet to be sworn in; he had not previously been elected Prime Minister. In that case, the Prime Minister takes his position in the middle between the ministers. This is also different for each hall, but that the king stands opposite the ministers is certain. How everyone stands is different. However, everyone stands upright, has a neutral expression and the hands are either in front closed, beside, or behind the bodies. The director of the Cabinet of the King stands behind a transparent speaking table on which lies the text he will later read.

One of the swearing-in ceremonies was during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this, more distance was kept between the king and the Prime Minister, no one shook hands and the ministers stood in two rows in front of the king to ensure distance. There was one Minister who took the oath in another room of the palace because this Minister had tested positive for COVID-19. There was a screen on which this Minister could be seen in the room with the other ministers. Although the swearing-in ritual had to be adapted to this time, it did go on with everyone who was supposed to be there.

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<sup>77</sup> Interview: “Ik probeer me nog te herinneren hoe dat nou gegaan is, want tijdens de beëdiging dragen we allemaal een rokkostuum, althans de heren. Tijdens de bordesfoto hebben we een pak aan.”

<sup>78</sup> “Kabinet van de Koning”. Ministerie van Algemene Zaken. Effective as of December 29, 2023. Accessed on May 29, 2025. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/contact/contactgids/kabinet-van-de-koning>

At one of the swearing-in ceremonies, it happens that one or more ministers were part of the previous cabinet. They then do not have to be sworn in again, even if they become responsible for another Ministry, and do not take their positions opposite the king with the other ministers, but at the side. These ministers were introduced to the king in the same way as the rest before taking their positions. When everyone has taken their positions, the king asks the director of the king's office, who is also leading the ceremony, if he wants to start the swearing in. This is done during the three swearing-in ceremonies with three different wordings:

*“Meneer ..., mag ik u als directeur van mijn kabinet verzoeken te beginnen met de beëdiging van de ministers”<sup>79</sup>*

(Sir ..., may I ask you, as the director of my cabinet, to begin the swearing-in of the ministers)

*“Meneer ..., mag ik u als directeur van mijn kabinet verzoeken de beëdiging van de ministers te laten beginnen”<sup>80</sup>*

(Sir ..., may I ask you, as the director of my cabinet, to allow the swearing-in of the ministers to begin)

*“Meneer ..., zou u willen beginnen met de beëdiging van de ministers alstublieft”<sup>81</sup>*

(Sir ..., would you please begin the swearing-in of the ministers)

Even though the wording is different, the king specifically requests the director to start the ritual. These requests are answered twice with “Of course, majesty” and once with “*Certainly majesty*”. Since the king is requesting to begin the swearing-in ceremony, everything before this is seen as preceding the ritual.

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<sup>79</sup> Nederlandse Omroep Stichting, “NOS Beëdiging Kabinet Schoof”, broadcasted by Nederlandse Publieke Omroep, NPO START on June 2, 2024, 00:17:56, <https://npo.nl/start/serie/nos-kabinet/seizoen-5/nos-beediging-kabinet/afspelen>

<sup>80</sup> Nederlandse Omroep Stichting, “NOS Beëdiging Kabinet-Rutte IV”, broadcasted by Nederlandse Publieke Omroep, NPO START on January 10, 2022, 00:07:44, <https://npo.nl/start/serie/nos-kabinet/seizoen-3/nos-beediging-kabinet-rutte-iv/afspelen>

<sup>81</sup> Nederlandse Omroep Stichting, “NOS Beëdiging Kabinet Schoof”, broadcasted by Nederlandse Publieke Omroep, NPO START on June 2, 2024, 00:12:49, <https://npo.nl/start/serie/nos-kabinet/seizoen-5/nos-beediging-kabinet/afspelen>

### First part of the ritual

After the director of the Cabinet of the King confirms that he will begin the swearing-in, he reads out what is on the paper on the speaking table. The beginning of this text is different all three times. What is always said in the preface is that the director of the Cabinet of the King wants to invite ministers to take the oath or pledge and that taking an oath or pledge is required by law and must be done in front of the king. In addition, more practical matters are alternately told as for example in at the swearing in during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also the director of the Cabinet of the King who explains to ministers that they must take one or two steps forward. The text that follows is the same in all three ceremonies. This is the text established by the law that ministers swear or pledge to.

*Ik zweer, ik verklaar dat ik, om tot minister te worden benoemd, rechtstreeks noch middellijk, onder welke naam of welk voorwendsel ook, enige gift of gunst heb gegeven of beloofd.*

(I swear, I declare, that in order to be appointed Minister, I have not given or promised, directly or indirectly, under any name or pretext, any gift or favor.)

*Ik zweer, ik verklaar en beloof dat ik, om iets in dit ambt te doen of te laten, rechtstreeks noch middellijk enig geschenk of enige belofte heb aangenomen of zal aannemen.*

(I swear, I declare and promise that, in order to do or refrain from doing anything in this office, I have neither directly nor indirectly accepted or will accept any gift or promise.)

*Ik zweer, ik beloof trouw aan de Koning, aan het Statuut voor het Koninkrijk en aan de Grondwet.*

(I swear, I pledge allegiance to the King, to the Statute for the Kingdom and to the Constitution.)

*Ik zweer, ik beloof dat ik de plichten die mijn ambt mij oplegt getrouw zal vervullen.<sup>82</sup>*

(I swear, I promise to faithfully discharge the duties imposed upon me by my office.)

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<sup>82</sup> “Wet beëdiging ministers en leden Staten-Generaal”, KOOP. Effective as of March 25, 1992. Accessed on May 13, 2025. <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0005430/1992-03-25>

Then the director explains so much about the text of the oath and pledge, and starts with naming the last name, a possible vice presidency, and the Ministry, after which the Minister takes at least one step forward. In one ceremony, this were two steps. If the Minister says, “I declare and promise that” it is only a step forward and the uttering of the pledge. The ministers who choose to swear also raise their right arm with the middle and index fingers pointing upward while stepping forward. There is a Minister at one of the swearing-in ceremonies who also makes this gesture while this Minister is not swearing but pledging. The performance of this gesture is not monotonous; some ministers have the arm at a ninety-degree angle, others have the elbow more at the side, some step back after lowering the arm, and still others step back at the same time as bringing the hand down. However, it is always the right hand that goes up with the same fingers pointing up while the other fingers are closed.

In protocol order based on seniority, all ministers are sworn in in order of lineage. In a swearing-in of fifteen ministers, eight ministers choose to take the oath, in a swearing-in of nine ministers, five ministers choose to take the oath, and in a swearing-in of fifteen ministers, six choose to take the oath. Furthermore, the poses are no different from before, and there are occasional smiles, but otherwise the facial expressions are neutral. The king's director does not call the next surname until the previous Minister is back in place in line. Then, when the last Minister stands back in line, it is indicated that this part of the swearing-in is over and that the secretaries of state are about to be sworn in. Depending on in which room the ritual takes place and possible COVID-19 measures, the ministers take their positions in a different place in the room.

As the ministers stand elsewhere, it is appointed that a part is concluded and the king and Prime Minister line up to introduce the secretaries of state, this is referred to as the conclusion of the first part of the ritual. As of this moment the ministers are responsible for their duties.

### **Second part of the ritual**

Then the introduction repeats itself in a similar manner to how it was with the ministers. The Prime Minister and the king stand side by side, the secretaries of state enter in protocol order of seniority of their portfolios, hands are shaken, nods, smiles, and the king is addressed by everyone as “majesty.” The first and last names of the secretaries of state are named and what they are the Secretary of State for. The secretaries of state walk in a line past the king and then also take their positions next to each other in a line facing the king. The male secretaries of state wear a jacquets suit especially for the swearing-in and the female secretaries of state wear formal clothes that do not seem to conform to any prescription. When all the secretaries of state have been introduced, the king stands facing them and the Prime Minister joins the other ministers who will observe the swearing-in. It is now asked by the king if the director of the Cabinet of the King would like to begin the swearing in of the secretaries of state to which the director agrees three times. Then the director starts with a differing preface but he mentions every time that the secretaries of state are invited to take the oath or pledge, that is obligatory by law and must be done in front of the king and that the secretaries of state should take one or two steps forward. If needed, partialities are also explained by the director. The text that follows is the same in all three ceremonies. This is the text established by the law that secretaries of state swear or pledge to.

*Ik zweer, ik verklaar dat ik, om tot staatssecretaris te worden benoemd, rechtstreeks noch middellijk, onder welke naam of welk voorwendsel ook, enige gift of gunst heb gegeven of beloofd.*

(I swear, I declare and promise, that in order to be appointed Secretary of State, I have not given or promised, directly or indirectly, under any name or pretext, any gift or favor.)

*Ik zweer, ik verklaar en beloof dat ik, om iets in dit ambt te doen of te laten, rechtstreeks noch middellijk enig geschenk of enige belofte heb aangenomen of zal aannemen.*

(I swear, I declare and promise that, in order to do or refrain from doing anything in this office, I have not accepted or will not accept, directly or indirectly, any gift or promise.)

*Ik zweer, ik beloof trouw aan de Koning, aan het Statuut voor het Koninkrijk en aan de Grondwet.*

(I swear, I pledge allegiance to the King, to the Statute for the Kingdom, and to the Constitution.)

*Ik zweer, ik beloof dat ik de plichten die mijn ambt mij oplegt getrouw zal vervullen.<sup>83</sup>*

(I swear, I promise to faithfully discharge the duties imposed upon me by my office.)

Then, in like manner, the last name will be named, and the name for which the Secretary of State is responsible. The secretaries of state can either take the oath or pledge with the same words as the ministers do. With the oath, they do so, raising the right arm and index and middle fingers, but not with the pledge. The king nods after the oath or promise is spoken. Arms are closed in front of the body, beside the body, or behind it, and except for a smile, facial expressions are neutral. At a swearing-in of eight secretaries of state, four take the oath; at a swearing-in of six secretaries of state, one takes the oath; and at a swearing-in of thirteen secretaries of state, three take the oath. The king's director does not call the next surname until the previous Secretary of State is back in place in line. When all the secretaries of state have been sworn in, the director asks the king to close the ceremony, and he does so with congratulations and a wish for success in the performance of the duties of office.

Because the king closes the ceremony, this is seen as the conclusion of the second part of the ritual and thus the entire ritual.

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<sup>83</sup> “Wet beëdiging ministers en leden Staten-Generaal”, KOOP. Effective as of March 25, 1992. Accessed on May 13, 2025. <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0005430/1992-03-25>

## Space of the ritual

The second sub-question of this research asks how the space in which the ritual takes place is part of the performance of the ritual oath. This second paragraph will deal with this question and will explain both of the elements based on the interview and the observations of the video's *NOS Beëdiging Kabinet Schoof*<sup>84</sup>, *NOS Beëdiging Kabinet-Rutte IV*<sup>85</sup>, and *NOS Beëdiging Kabinet Rutte III*<sup>86</sup>.

The location of the ritual is normally the *Oranjezaal* (Orange Hall) of *Paleis Huis Den Bosch* (Palace House Den Bosch). This is the palace where the king lives with his family. Because of COVID-19 restrictions and reconstruction work in and around the palace, only one of the observed rituals actually took place in the Oranjezaal. The other swearing-in rituals were performed in the ballroom of *Paleis Noordeinde* (Palace Noordeinde). Both palace halls could be described as chic and luxurious since they both are decorated with paintings, chandeliers, gold, arches, and pillars. The rooms are both lit with lights from both standing and hanging chandeliers, and both rooms have no windows. Where the king, Prime Minister, ministers, and secretaries of state stand during the ritual is not always the same in the three rituals observed but there are certain similarities. So when the ministers and secretaries of state enter the hall, they will walk past the king and he will welcome them. The entering of the king into the hall is in none of the three videos shown.

When all the ministers or secretaries of state have entered the hall and are positioned in one or two lines, the king will stand on the other side of the hall in the middle of them. The Prime Minister, when not being sworn-in, and the director of the Cabinet of the King are positioned more on the side. From the videos it has become evident that by taking the oath or pledge, one should at least take one step forward. This declines

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<sup>84</sup> Nederlandse Omroep Stichting, "NOS Beëdiging Kabinet Schoof", broadcasted by Nederlandse Publieke Omroep, NPO START on June 2, 2024, 01:05:24, <https://npo.nl/start/serie/nos-kabinet/seizoen-5/nos-beediging-kabinet/afspelen>

<sup>85</sup> Nederlandse Omroep Stichting, "NOS Beëdiging Kabinet-Rutte IV", broadcasted by Nederlandse Publieke Omroep, NPO START on January 10, 2022, 00:59:59, <https://npo.nl/start/serie/nos-kabinet/seizoen-3/nos-beediging-kabinet-rutte-iv/afspelen>

<sup>86</sup> Nederlandse Omroep Stichting, "NOS Beëdiging Kabinet Schoof", broadcasted by Nederlandse Publieke Omroep, NPO START on June 2, 2024, 01:05:24, <https://npo.nl/start/serie/nos-kabinet/seizoen-5/nos-beediging-kabinet/afspelen>

the physical space that is in between the king and the people sworn-in. The Minister, who was present via a screen because of a positive COVID-19 test, also took a step forward while not being in the same room and line as the other ministers. The ritual space is also filled with the gestures made by ministers and secretaries of state when taking the oath. How and if this gesture should be performed is not explained by the director.

The ministers and secretaries of state are informed by the Ministry of General Affairs on paper before the ritual what will happen and what they should do.<sup>87</sup> During the ritual, at some points, the ministers and secretaries of state are also directed where to go and where to stand. The swearing-in ritual is the formal moment after which a Minister is responsible for their duties. The interviewee said that their sworn-in did not feel like a starting point but as the formal moment of being accountable and responsible. The space of the ritual added to this feeling, they said:

[Well, with the distinction, I had already started because I was informed and involved, but I had not yet taken a decision and that is not possible because until the moment you take the oath, the other person is still responsible ... So hum ... You are already brought up to speed, while you are not yet a Minister. Anyway, it did feel like a solemn moment in the setting of *Huis Den Bosch*, the *Oranjezaal*, the queen. You do feel that moment.]<sup>88</sup>

The value and importance of the swearing-in ritual of ministers and secretaries of state is described by the interviewee:

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<sup>87</sup> Interview: “Nee, dat was op papier, want dat is ... ja, ik zeg het allemaal ... hum ... het is wel jaren geleden. Dus heel precies weet ik natuurlijk niet meer, maar dit soort dingen werden gecoördineerd door het ministerie van AZ en die stuurde gewoon aan alle secretariaten van alle ministers en staatssecretarissen die instructie.”

<sup>88</sup> Interview: “Nou, met het onderscheid, ik was al begonnen want ik was geïnformeerd en betrokken, maar ik had nog geen besluit genomen en dat kan ook niet want tot het moment dat je de eed aflegt is de ander nog verantwoordelijk ... Dus hum ... Je wordt al op snelheid gebracht, terwijl je nog geen minister bent. Maar goed, het voelde wel in die setting van *Huis Den Bosch*, de *Oranjezaal*, de koningin, dat voelt natuurlijk wel als een plechtig moment. Dat voel je wel dat moment.”

[Well, each time it does, of course, it has the formal value that with that, your term of office begins. Each time it has the public value, you declare in front of the interested party or those who are going to supervise you or the public ... hum that you accept the office and you will fulfill it with integrity.]<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>Interview: "Nou, het heeft elke keer wel natuurlijk de formele waarde dat daarmee je ambtsperiode begint. Het heeft elke keer de publieke waarde, je spreekt uit ten overstaande van de belanghebbende of degene die toezicht op je gaan uitoefenen of het publiek ... hum dat je het ambt aanvaardt en je het op integreren wijs zult vervullen."

## Chapter Six: Discussion

### Speech acts and religious meaning

The third sub-question of this research asks how performative speech acts convey religious meaning. This first paragraph will deal with this question by answering it based on the literature review.

A speech act carries commitment and authority because it can be seen as a performative utterance or speech act.<sup>90</sup> The utterance of words, sounds, or sentences becomes a performative speech act if it is pronounced by a particular person in a particular circumstance that includes an accepted conventional procedure with a conventional effect.<sup>91</sup> Language is thus not only necessarily a tool to convey information but also a means to perform actions, provided the speaker has the requisite authority and the context is appropriate. As the chart visualizing the relationships between different concepts showed, a performative speech act should contain religious meaning in order to convey it. The layered meaning of verbal and nonverbal signs that are present during a ritual is what is understood as religious meaning. This is not necessarily related to any personal belief. Speech acts are rituals because of their nature, in which a particular person performs the speech act in a particular circumstance according to a procedure. The language used in a speech act has a layered meaning since it implies action, commitment, and authority. During the performance of a speech act, the one performing may use body language or gestures, which are the layered nonverbal signs of religious meaning. Since performative speech acts contain religious meaning in the act itself, religious meaning can be conveyed as the speech acts are performed. Religious meaning can also be conveyed during the performance of a speech act because the speech act can carry a commitment influenced by religion. For example, when swearing to a particular belief during a speech act, one's behaviour is committed and affected by a certain religion.

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<sup>90</sup> J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*, (London: Barakaldo Books, 2020), 10, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2507789>

<sup>91</sup> Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*, 26.

### **“Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig” and religious meaning**

This second paragraph will deal with the question of how religious meaning is conveyed during the swearing-in ritual of Dutch ministers and secretaries of state into the secular space. This second paragraph is based on the data from the literature, observations, and the interview.

At the start of their role as a civil servant, ministers and secretaries of state are obliged by law from uttering the oath or the pledge to swear or promise that they will be an honest officer. The Dutch government has established that the oath is taken based on a philosophy of life to which one wants to swear. The tone of the pledge is neutral, and the one saying the pledge does not swear on anything but instead declares and promises. Dutch politics and the Dutch state are both secular.

However, the performance of the oath “Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig” does convey religious meaning into the secular space in which the ritual is performed. The oath is considered a speech act since it is pronounced by a particular person in a particular circumstance that includes an accepted conventional procedure with a conventional effect. This makes the oath a ritual. It can thus be argued that the utterance of the oath is a ritual within the swearing-in ritual of ministers and secretaries of state. The ritual of performing the oath contains religious meaning because of the verbal utterance of “Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig”. This oath has symbolic significance and is layered since the one saying it does not only ask for God's help, but also swears on the Bible to be an honest officer. This saying also marks the start of one's formal responsibility as a Minister or Secretary of State. The raising of the fingers is not formally explained before the swearing-in as the stepping forward is. But because the raising of the fingers is only done by the ministers and secretaries of state uttering the oath, this nonverbal gesture underlines the solemnity of the oath informally. By stepping forward, raising the fingers, and uttering the oath, the religious meaning is brought into the space in which the ritual takes place.

The ritual space in which the ritual performance of the oath takes place is secular because, besides the oath, there is no religious meaning in the space in which the ritual

takes place. This becomes evident in the way that there are no symbols or layered religious meanings in the physical place of the ritual, the way of behaving of the participants, and what is being said during the ritual. Religion is out of state institutions because that is part of the process of secularization. However, there is still space for the religious meaning of the oath. This is because within secular spaces, there is still room for religion and religious symbols. These symbols are part of the master narrative of Dutch society and its history. So, the oath once provided meaning for individuals' lives, but that is not always the case anymore, which makes it part of the master narrative for Dutch society.

Under Dutch law, a Minister or State Secretary swears on the Bible that they will be an honest civil servant if they choose to take the oath. Although this study did not address the behavior of ministers or state secretaries who took the oath, the law implies that civil servants who take the oath will act according to the Bible. In this way, religious meaning is conveyed when taking the oath, namely by influencing the behavior of ministers and state secretaries during their term as civil servants. This is also how the former Minister interprets the conveyance of religious meaning by the oath and the intended behavior of a Minister or Secretary of State:

[Yes, because in the oath, you invoke the help of God Almighty. So, you have to believe in that and put your trust in it.]<sup>92</sup>

The ritual oath “Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig” conveys religious meaning in a secular space by symbolically linking political responsibility to a historically rooted, transcendent moral framework. Although the Dutch state is formally secular, the continued use of this oath shows how religious traditions persist in the public sphere.

## Limitations

This research does come with certain limitations. First, beforehand, there was already the assumption that religious meaning would be conveyed during the ritual

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<sup>92</sup> Interview: “Ja, want in de eed roep je de hulp in van God almachtig. Dus daar moet je dan wel in geloven en je vertrouwen instellen.”

performance of the oath “Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig”. Based on this assumption, the research question was formulated. The question for this research is *how* religious meaning is conveyed, and this led the research in a certain direction. The outcome of this research would arguably be different if the question was not *how* but *if* or *to what extent* religious meaning is conveyed during the performance of the oath. This would be interesting for future research. Second, this research adopted a certain definition of religious meaning, secular space, and ritual. There are no universal definitions for these concepts. Other interpretations and definitions of these concepts might have led to different results and conclusions. Future research with different definitions or on a different ritual within politics would be interesting for the field of political studies and ritual studies. Third, the interview was conducted to gain an understanding of the experience of being part of the swearing-in ritual. The interview was not used as the main source of data. However, for the research and the risk of generalisability of the subject group, it would have been valuable to conduct more interviews. I reached out to more people fitting the subject group, but I got no response. Future research on the experiences of participants of the ritual would be interesting to study the religious meaning of the ritual for persons, and not only for the public sphere.

As a researcher studying qualitative data, I examined the topic based on my own interpretations of the collected data. That is why reflexivity about how the positionality of the researcher influenced the research is an important possible limitation. For me, as a third-year bachelor's religious studies student, I have some experience with researching the study of religion. This has benefited me during the writing of the thesis because of the topic's religious nature. However, I have not much experience with studying political topics. Since I observed videos and not real life performances of the performance of the ritual oath, I was an outsider during my ethnographic research. This may have limited my access to the context in which the ritual takes place. This research was designed to earn my bachelor's degree. That is why this is a relatively small research considering the time given for it and the word count. This may have affected the depth and complexity of the research. Those aspects of my positionality may have influenced how this research is conducted and how the data is interpreted.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

When becoming a Minister or Secretary of State in the Netherlands, one is obligated by law to be sworn in and swear or promise to be an honest civil servant. Dutch law states that ministers and secretaries of state can choose whether they want to swear on the Bible or promise to do this. If a Minister or Secretary of State wants to swear, they will utter “Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig” and if they want to promise, they will utter “Dat verklaar en beloof ik”.

Performative speech acts contain religious meaning in the act itself, which is why religious meaning can be conveyed as the speech acts are performed. The ritual performance of the oath is a speech act since it is pronounced by a particular person in a particular circumstance that includes an accepted conventional procedure with a conventional effect. The utterance of the oath is a ritual on its own within the swearing-in ritual of ministers and secretaries of state. Through ritual and legal formality, the oath institutionalizes authority and assigns responsibility to ministers and secretaries of state. In the analysis of the ritual performance of the oath “Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig” by Dutch ministers and secretaries of state, several verbal and non-verbal elements have been brought forward. While standing in a line in front of the king, ministers and secretaries of state who are about to be sworn in step forward, raise their right middle and index finger, and utter the oath. These elements include religious meaning because of their symbolic and religious layers. A Minister or Secretary of State not only asks for God's, but also swears on the Bible to be an honest officer. This saying also marks the start of one's formal responsibility as a Minister or Secretary of State, and the raising of the fingers underlines the solemnity of the oath.

The space in which the speech act of the oath during the swearing-in ceremony takes place is formal and secular. This is because the ritual has a formal procedure, and the swearing-in of ministers and secretaries of state is obliged by law. The ritual space does not contain any religious symbols or layered meanings. The public sphere of the Netherlands is secular, which means that even though religion is not influencing the public sphere, there is still room for religious master narratives and moral frameworks.

Those are based on traditions and history. The performance of the oath is part of the traditional master narrative, which is why it continues to exist in a secular society.

In the Netherlands, there is within the public sphere room for religious narratives and symbols of which the traditional speech act “Zo waarlijk helpe mij God almachtig” is part of. Because the oath contains religious meanings, the performance of the oath also conveys religious meaning into the secular space through the master narrative. The ritual oath does this by symbolically linking political responsibility to a historically rooted, transcendent moral framework. Although the Dutch state is formally secular, the continued use of this oath shows how religious traditions persist in the public sphere.

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