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## Remapping our mindset: towards a transregional and pluralistic outlook

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### ABSTRACT

The future of the study of religion/s must be actively envisioned and pursued. In the aftermath of the deconstruction of ‘religion’ and the idea of ‘secularization’ as imbued with a Western teleology, it is necessary to rethink and reconfigure the study of religion/s against a global horizon. In this essay I propose that we should move out of the unproductive Religious Studies-Theology binary and frame our work in the midst of the humanities. A new mindset is needed for scholarly research on religion, and to achieve this I point at the new vistas arising from a transregional and pluralistic outlook.

### KEYWORDS

Transregional research;  
plurality; Africa; Europe

The ‘future of the study of religion/s’ cannot be discerned in a crystal ball, but must be actively envisioned and pursued so as to have a chance to materialize. Why is it at all important for the scholarly discipline of Religious Studies<sup>1</sup> to occupy a prominent place in our universities now and in the future? Which future do we want to help realize in the here and now? Which ideas, strategies and steps are necessary to make it happen? Such big questions can only be addressed through intense conversations about the various viewpoints presented in this special issue, and elsewhere.

Grounded in my position in the interface of Anthropology, African Studies and Religious Studies, I want to suggest that the study of religion/s, as it emerged as part and parcel of European modernity, is to be liberated from the Religious Studies-Theology binary in which it has long formed the latter’s secular Other, and to further develop concepts and methods for a transregional and pluralistic outlook. This is necessary in order to remain responsive to the projected future of religion on a global scale. According to a recent report by the Pew Foundation (2015), this projected future will involve a steady

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<sup>1</sup>Usually, the terms *religiewetenschap* (Dutch) and *Religionswissenschaft* (German) are translated as ‘Religious Studies’, the conventional designation employed in the Anglophone sphere. Because of the ambivalent meaning of the adjective ‘religious’, which of course refers to the object of research and teaching and emphatically not to ways in which these are conducted, this translation is somewhat misleading. Perhaps we rather should adopt the upcoming term ‘Religion Studies’? And yet, with regard to other disciplines and fields we find a similar use of adjectives, as in African studies or political sciences. Possibly, the wish to replace the term Religious Studies by Religion Studies is driven by a somewhat oversensitive urge to stress the dissociation from our object of study. I would like to leave this issue for further debate. Here I use Religious Studies to refer to the discipline, while the term study of religion/s pertains to multidisciplinary research on religion in a broader sense.

decline of Christianity in Europe and the United States and the shift of its centre of gravity to Africa, Asia and South America, as well as a relatively fast numerical growth of Muslims, who may almost equal the number of Christians in 2050. Moreover, I would like to add that due to increasing mobility of people it is reasonable to expect religious plurality all over, including de-churched Europe (a point which the report does not address).

Against this backdrop, the deconstruction of religion as a modern European – and even post-Enlightenment Protestant – category and the critique of its misguided universalizing pretensions is well taken. As is the critique of the secularization thesis as being imbued with a Western teleology, according to which religion was expected to vanish from the public sphere, with Europe forming the vanguard and model of modernity. My sense is that Religious Studies, as it is practiced in Europe and the United States, finds itself in some kind of limbo in the aftermath of these important deconstructions. The object of our study, and the paradigms in which to anchor it, have become uncertain. This is good for critical self-reflexion; but for an object-centred discipline as Religious Studies which by definition focuses on ‘religion’ across time and space, this uncertainty also forms a major challenge. What will be the next steps? How to study religion – however understood – in moving towards the future?

### Religious studies in the humanities

Before outlining my provisional answers to these questions, let me briefly introduce the institutional setting of Religious Studies in the Netherlands in which I work and which differs – at least currently – from that in other European countries. But nothing is set in stone, and one certainly may wonder which consequences the decline of church membership across Europe will have for the future institutional embedding of Theology and how this shift will affect Religious Studies. For me the Dutch situation has something futuristic about it.

As a response to the steady decline of membership in Christian churches and hence the decline of the number of theology students in the Netherlands, over the past twenty-five years boards of public universities fused Faculties of Theology with Faculties of the Humanities, and subsequently closed down Theology. Religious Studies’ becoming Theology’s successor at all public universities (except at Groningen University) implied a fundamental institutional and conceptual reorganization (Meyer and Molendijk 2017). This also involved the arrival of scholars with expertise in disciplines and fields that traditionally were not part of Faculties of Theology, including Islamic Studies, and anthropology.<sup>2</sup> The upheaval stirred by this reorganization certainly has had negative effects, including the danger of marginalizing Religious Studies in academia, but it also opens up new possibilities for the future (Meyer 2017, 103–105). Most importantly, it invites us to re-imagine our object of study beyond the Theology-Religious Studies binary that still shapes the study of religion/s in many other settings. Once we recognize that Christian theology is no longer the most significant Other against which to position Religious

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<sup>2</sup>I am referring here to Theology at public universities, where churches traditionally had no formal say about the appointment, research and teaching of theology professors, except those in immediate relation to pastoral practice. Next to this, there are also special (*bijzondere*) universities with strong links to the Catholic and Protestant churches, and confessional universities that mainly focus on Christian religion (Molendijk 2017, 10–13).

Studies, we can break with certain path-dependent trails and reimagine our object of study afresh against a broader horizon.

In my experience, the institutional embedding in the humanities is conducive for developing a broader mindset in thinking about religion in, especially, the Netherlands and Europe. Recent critical work on secularism inspired by Asad (2003) shows that ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ are not opposed but co-constitutive and interrelated, and that the secular is deeply enmeshed with Christian notions. This means that presumably secular expressions – for example, the ways in which we deal with images – should be situated in a deeper history through which their provenance from Christianity can be thematised. In my own work, I have developed a strong interest in the use of images as religious media that are made to visualize a professed invisible and that may achieve a sacred status (and by the same token become targets for desecration and societal commotion). Being critical about the strong focus on language and text in the study of religion, I found it fruitful to learn – from scholars in art history and visual culture studies (including what is called *Bildwissenschaft* in German) – how to look at, conceptualize and study images as specific religious ‘media’ (Belting 2006, 2016; see also Weigel 2015). These transdisciplinary encounters, which also involved scholars in Old Testament Studies, Islamic art historians, artists and anthropologists, were mutually beneficial, as is testified by two recently edited volumes, one about images charged as offensive (Kruse, Meyer, and Korte 2018) and the other about the sensorial regimes developed within and across Judaism, Christianity and Islam in addressing the role of images and the imagination in the figuration of the unseen (Meyer and Stordalen 2019).

Many big themes cannot be handled with the expertise in one discipline alone, and require cutting across the academic division of labour institutionalized in our universities. I see many possibilities for further engagement with scholars in the humanities, as well as in the social sciences (and even the natural sciences). As experts in Religious Studies, we can help to discern and read the afterlives of religion, especially Christianity, in various cultural forms, in the domains of literature, films, museums, heritage and identity politics. At stake here is a process of the *culturalization* of Christianity that occurs at the flipside of de-churching. Regarding the Netherlands, where as a consequence of de-churching one church per week has closed over the past ten years, there is also a big task for Religious Studies scholars to study the ways in which the material remains of the Christian past (Beekers 2016; Meyer forthcoming) are re-valued and reframed as cultural heritage and, especially by right-wing politicians, are mobilized in an exclusivist manner as exponents of a traditional Dutch identity (Van den Hemel 2018; see also Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016). So, in the future, the study of secularism and de-churching will certainly form an important theme in the study of religion/s (see also Astor, Burchardt, and Griera 2017). By taking a material approach to the ways in which the remains of the Christian past on the garbage heap of secularization are handled and revalued – being destroyed (Beekers 2016), recycled (Gerhards and de Wildt 2015; Meyer forthcoming), touristified (Stausberg 2011), heritagized (Oliphant 2015; see also Coleman and Bowman 2019)<sup>3</sup> – we can assess what a productive, transdisciplinary Dutch research programme (2000–2011) once aptly called ‘the future of the religious past’ (e.g., de Vries 2008). But of

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<sup>3</sup>The heritagization of Christianity is emerging as a new research focus in the study of religions, see for instances the outline of the conference ‘Religious Heritage in a Diverse Europe’; Groningen University, 19–21 June 2019, organized by the Centre for Religion and Heritage: <https://www.rug.nl/research/centre-for-religious-studies/centre-religion-heritage/news/2019/190619conference-themes-religious-heritage-in-a-diverse-europe>

course, in the Netherlands and Europe at large, there is more to do for us than deal with the reframing and mobilization of Christianity in secular frames of culture and heritage. The marked religious plurality of European societies also calls for broadening our horizon towards religion/s in other parts of the world.

### Transregional entanglements

So far I have written from my position as a Religious Studies scholar in the Netherlands and pointed to the importance of the afterlife of Christianity as an important research focus. Looked at from the angle of my research in Ghana, where religion is vibrant and atheist stances are virtually absent, this is a weird situation. While, in the Netherlands, and North-Western Europe in general, Christianity appears to be framed increasingly as a religion of the past (and all the more a cradle of European culture and tradition), in Ghana and other African countries, Christianity is thriving. This pertains especially to its Pentecostal variant, which is also embraced inside the historical mission churches and which is usually regarded by believers as the vanguard for a brighter future (Meyer 2015). Given that Africa is one of the regions where Christianity flourishes and will continue to grow in the future, it is surprising that Religious Studies pays so little attention to the study of religion in Africa. Of course, there are many scholars who engage in such research, but in the larger frame of Religious Studies this is regarded as an optional subfield, which is not taken as relevant for the deployment of methods and concepts in the general study of religion. Working groups within national Religious Studies associations as the American Academy of Religion (AAR) or the Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionswissenschaft (DVRW) that focus on religion in regions colonized by European powers – Africa, Asia, Latin America, Middle East- usually remain marginal in to theory formation in Religious Studies. This is due to a failure to recognize that, as these regions have been entangled with European and each other for centuries, these longstanding transregional connections should be the starting point for critical investigation of the conceptual vocabulary of religious studies and for new theory formation from a transregional and decolonial angle. This is what I try to do through my own research (pointed out programmatically in Meyer 2012), in which I seek to turn my longstanding research on religion *in* Africa into a resource for studying religion *from* Africa (see also Meyer 2017). The fact that from a European – though emphatically not from an African – perspective Africa is taken as separate signals not only a problem of amnesia: it also betrays a problematic scholarly mind-set grounded in epistemologies that situate (religion in) Africa at a temporal and spatial distance from the West. The same problem of epistemological distancing also pertains to other, previously colonized regions in the Global South.

This stance must be revised. To do so it is inspiring to delve into the work of David Chidester, who emphasizes the importance of tracing the conceptual vocabulary of Comparative Religion (a term he uses interchangeably with Religious Studies) back to the actual encounters of local populations, colonial administrators, traders, missionaries and scholars in the ‘frontier zones’ of European colonial outreach (Chidester 1996, 2; see also Bergunder 2016; and Van der Veer 2001 with regard to India). Knowledge about what came to be framed as non-Western ‘religion’ was organized through a European mould, which set the standards for translation and comparison. At the same time, the conditions under which the grounds for this knowledge were assembled in actual encounters was obscured

by the use of abstract, mentalistic concepts. Chidester's call to trace the 'triple mediation' that religious practices and ideas underwent in being conveyed from local people, to missionaries and to scholars is important in order to understand how Religious Studies gained its disciplinary vocabulary (Chidester 2014). Focusing on frontier zones in (especially Southern) Africa, Chidester's work resonates strongly with my own work on Africa, and also helped me to rethink it in the course of my transition into religious studies. But tracing back the triple mediation is a de-colonizing endeavour that certainly matters not only for scholars studying religion 'in' Africa, but would be meaningful and productive with regard to other regions, too. The point is that in order to move towards the future, it is necessary to turn back to the origins of systematic research on religion in Europe's colonies (and its own pagan past, or what is claimed as such) so as to develop new critical terms for the study of religion that allow for generalization without, however, being eurocentric.

Grounded in my Africanist research, I find that we have reached a point in time where it is necessary to not only acknowledge that religion is a term and concept that was initially foreign to Africa, and trace how it was introduced through colonization and missionization and remained up to our time (with traditional practices of relating to deities being reframed as African Traditional Religion [ATR]). In recognition of the 'career' of 'religion' as a European export into Africa, there is a need to take a second step and study religion *from* Africa (Meyer 2018). The purpose of such an endeavour is to recognize the longstanding transregional connections, through which what we call 'religion in Africa' and Western notions of 'religion' have become entangled with each other (e.g., Mbembe 2014; Tonda 2015). With the centre of gravity of Christianity – and religion in general – shifting to Africa and other regions in the Global South, it is important for scholars in Religious Studies to remap their mind-sets and take seriously such regions as vantage points for developing forms of 'Theory from the South' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012) that go beyond provincializing Europe (Chakrabarty 2001) to also de-colonize how we study 'religion' (e.g., Bergunder 2016). For a viable future of our discipline, such knowledge, established in conversation with our African colleagues, is very much needed.

One intriguing theme for future research concerns the 'power objects' in missionary collections and ethnographic museums. At a time when the return of ethnographic objects from Western museums to Africa is a matter of societal debate all across Europe, scholars in Religious Studies could contribute to unpacking the provenance of such artefacts by tracing the manifold mediations through which they were framed and dismissed as 'fetishes' or 'idols' – often in the context of missionization –, made to express a particular stage in the evolution of religion, and possibly ending up in museum archives.<sup>4</sup>

Embarking on truly transregional Religious Studies<sup>5</sup> also calls for thinking further about the practicalities of collaboration with African scholars, many of whom were

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<sup>4</sup>I just started a project in collaboration with anthropologist and curator Silke Seybold at the *Überseemuseum Bremen*, which holds a large collection of *legba* figures (initially categorized as 'fetishes') assembled by missionary of the *Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft* Carl Spiess among the Ewe.

<sup>5</sup>My take on 'transregional' research is inspired by the Forum for Transregional Studies, Berlin, which brings together various initiatives for transregional research in the interface of area studies and other, more systematic disciplines (<https://trafo.hypotheses.org>). The following quote offers the gist of the transregional approach: "The 'world' looks different, depending on where one views it from. Knowledge is tied to position, so transregional studies must take into consideration a wide variety of perspectives. The goal is not a German or European view of the world, but dialogue with differing interpretations and exchange with researchers from other parts of the world. Not only the objects of study are 'transregional', but also the process and personnel of its study" (<https://www.forum-transregionale-studien.de/en/about-us/transregional-studies.html>).

trained in Europe and the United States. The institutional status and agenda of Religious Studies in Africa differs from European societal and academic settings, which are shaped by secularism, increasing de-churching and an interest in religion – especially Islam – as a problem. By contrast, in Ghana (the African country I am most familiar with), Religious Studies is situated in a strongly religious environment, in which Christianity, Islam and to some extent ATR are main players and religion is a factor in all domains of life, and secularism and secularity are marginal themes. Many of my colleagues are themselves Christian or Muslim practitioners and are actively involved as researchers and commentators on political and normative debates about religion in society. I, by contrast, considering myself a non-believer, tend to stay aloof from such debates in the Netherlands and Ghana, and can afford (but can and should I, in the long run?) to concentrate on academic knowledge about religion.<sup>6</sup> How to work together against the backdrop of such differences, which I see as a productive challenge, will certainly occupy us in further debates.

### Plurality as default

Having focused on the decline of Christianity and its afterlife in secular forms in Europe in the first part of this essay, and on the lively religious environment in Africa in the second, my intention is not to draw an essentializing difference between Europe as increasingly secular and Africa as deeply (or even ‘incurably’)<sup>7</sup> religious. The point is to highlight pressing conceptual issues and identify possibilities for future research. A last issue I want to raise concerns religious plurality, the emergence of which in both settings is of course an effect of longstanding global entanglements.

Plurality has been a lasting, prominent theme in the study of religion/s, Europe included (Kippenberg, Rüpke, and von Stuckrad 2009). With regard to European societies, many scholars are now seeking to grasp the implications of the accommodation of religion, especially Islam, in secular formations that were shaped by historical state-church relations and are grounded in a liberal understanding of religion. As I argued elsewhere, European societies may well be regarded as new frontier zones, in which differences between ‘secular’ and ‘religious’, and differences between religions are negotiated and contested (Meyer 2018). All sorts of conflicts emerge concerning the manifestation of religion in the public domain, with regard to buildings, food, body practices, dress (as I write, the Dutch state has legally prohibited the so-called ‘burka’ from being worn in public institutions and on public transport) and so on. Interestingly, such commotions often thrive on a clash between the legal protection of the freedom of religious expression and ideas driven by a culturalized view of nationhood, which excludes post-migrants even though they are legal citizens (Tamimi Arab 2017) and which, as noted above, may mobilize culturalized versions of Christianity for its Islamophobic and identitarian agendas. Together with other researchers, Religious Studies scholars play a key role in studying and

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<sup>6</sup>Since 2017, together with colleagues from the African Studies Centre (Leiden), my colleague Martha Frederiks and others at Utrecht University, and colleagues at the University of Ghana and Trinity college Ghana, I launched the so-called Madina project, which focuses on the modalities of the co-existence of Muslims, Christians and traditionalists in the suburb Madina of Ghana’s capital Accra. For me this project forms a suitable context to practice transregional research on religion ‘in’ and above all ‘from’ Africa. For more information see: <https://www.religiousmatters.nl/buildings-images-and-objects/madina/>

<sup>7</sup>Parrinder 1969, see P’Bitek 2011 (orig 1970) and Platvoet and van Rinsum 2003 for trenchant critiques.

conceptually unpacking such conflicts and tensions around religion in European societies and beyond.

In this context I acknowledge the importance of paying detailed attention to distinct religious traditions and groups, as it materializes especially in the ‘anthropology of Islam’ and the ‘anthropology of Christianity’. The concern of the scholars involved is to describe these traditions and groups on their own terms and make visible the taken-for-granted secular lens through which they have usually been studied, showing how this lens tends to misrepresent Islam and pointing at hidden convergences between modern (Protestant) Christianity and secular culture. This is important, but at the same time such approaches are prone to reiterate a problematic compartmentalization of expertise in the study of religion/s that we need to transcend. One way of moving ahead is the ‘anthropology of the secular’ that complements the anthropologies of Christianity and Islam, calling attention to the ways in which religions are framed and regulated differentially through policy, legal arrangements and public opinion in specific secular formations (e.g., Cannell 2010; Mahmood 2015).

My point is that, in moving towards a viable future for Religious Studies, we should reflect more about the conceptual implications of plurality and the dynamics of religiously diverse environments. The plurality of religion should be taken as a default epistemological starting point. The dynamics of religious plurality cannot be analyzed adequately as a set of distinct co-existing religious groups that are more or less equal (this being the problematic assumption of normative pluralism). Instead, religious groups relate to each other in an interplay of asserting difference and becoming similar that is underpinned by, but not limited to, state policies of regulating religion. While religious groups often draw strong boundaries between themselves and others, the drawing of such boundaries can best be analyzed from a relational perspective that acknowledges the dynamics of the whole (Spies 2019). Differences and similarities are not absolute, but effected through complex political, social and cultural policies and arrangements, the analysis of which will require transdisciplinary collaboration and a transregional outlook. With concerted efforts already being paid to such issues, I would say that the future of the study of religion/s has begun in the here and now.

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