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Preface. The Study of Religion Today

Religion is one of the most challenging subjects of study. Long expected to vanish with modernization and development, religion is there to stay, in various shapes and forms. The variety of what is captured under the term ‘religion’ is enormous and the perennial attempts to define the concept seem doomed to fail. Its definability itself has been subject to debate, revealing Eurocentric assumptions that have long governed theories and methods. Also the question of how to study religious phenomena is hotly debated. Which themes, approaches and methods are most fruitful to develop new directions? These questions are even more urgent in a situation of rapid institutional change. In the Netherlands scholars from the University of Utrecht have taken the initiative to address these issues and organized a symposium ‘Past Trajectories – New Directions. The Study of Religion Today’ in 2013. This conference is one of the sources of inspiration for this special issue.¹ Another important point of reference is the report of the academic study of religion in the Netherlands issued by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) in 2015. The report concludes that when the field was recently hit by an avalanche of budget cuts and performance-driven measures neither scholars nor administrators had a clear idea which role the study of religion should play in Dutch academia and society.² Addressing this challenge, this special issue explores in an exemplary way the varying institutional contexts in which the study of religion is situated in the Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom. Discussing the relationship between religious studies and theology, as well as between Islamic studies and the study of Christianity, taken as a whole the issue points to innovative venues for the study of religion today.

It is evident that the study of religion in the Netherlands has to deal with a number of salient institutional developments. One of the major issues is the

¹ Christoph Baumgartner, Christian Lange and Birgit Meyer organized this event and also drafted a ‘programmatic text’, parts of which are used in this preface. Three of the speakers at this symposium also contribute to this special issue: Kim Knott, Christian Lange and Arie L. Molendijk.

² *Klaar om te wenden... De academische bestudering van religie in Nederland. Een Verkenning*, Amsterdam: KNAW, 2015, 15. Birgit Meyer was one of the co-authors.

relationship between theology and religious studies, which is controversially discussed by various participants. Notwithstanding all differences of opinion, it can be argued that there is a growing tendency in the Netherlands to reconfigure theology as the denominational study of a particular religious tradition that should serve religious communities. Religious studies, by contrast, tends to be profiled as a secular counterpart to theology that incorporates the study of religious texts and traditions as cultural and literary phenomena. As such, religious studies is understood to be embedded in the larger project of the Humanities, including some social scientific approaches.

The special issue starts with the situation in the Netherlands. Arie L. Molendijk's essay introduces the KNAW report, situates the uneasy relationship between theology and religious studies in the Netherlands in its complex and multifarious history, and pleads for more collaboration between the two fields in serving the general public interest. According to many observers an important effect of the current reconfiguration of the Dutch study of religion is the relatively strong emphasis on Islam, a view which is disputed or at least put into historical perspective by Christian Lange in his contribution to this special issue. Addressing the institutional framework of Islamic studies and religious studies in the Netherlands, Lange discusses some mutual misperceptions and offers some methodological reflections on future possibilities for collaboration between the two disciplines. Jo Spaans' article critically examines the vicissitudes of the study of Church History in the Netherlands and points to missed opportunities, arguing for a cultural approach to the history of Christianity and for a rapprochement with the discipline of history in general.

The next two articles deal with the institutional arrangements in the United Kingdom and Germany. It is helpful to look at the particular Dutch constellation in a wider perspective. Kim Knott analyses recent developments in the UK, where theology and religious studies were brought under the umbrella 'TRS', without generating much cooperation between the two fields, but securing a united stance in the face of public demands. In the last two decades the two main institutional drivers of research on religion in Britain have been the assessment of university research and the impact of public research funding, which has led to a focus on research for the public benefit. Michael Stausberg discusses the institutional and legal arrangements of theology and religious studies in Germany, through which the Christian churches maintain an important role while the non-confessional study of religion is in a weaker position. The constraints of the German system are evident, but Stausberg also points to new educational policies that further the study of religion as well as to the on-going internationalization of *Religionswissenschaft* in Germany.

Taken together the above contributions also show how the field of the academic study of religion has developed in recent decades. There is to some extent a shift from language-based studies of religious texts to a focus on religion as 'lived' and 'experienced'. The ongoing transformation of religion and its role in contemporary imaginaries and debates has yielded new research themes and approaches, such as 'post-secularity', 'non-religion' and unaffiliated spirituality, as well as the 'sensorial', 'material', 'iconic', and 'aesthetic' turns. Pleading to imagine the study of religion 'beyond religious studies,' David Chidester discusses new multidisciplinary approaches that evolve around materiality. Critical deconstruction of the category of religion has initiated a move away from essentialized and Eurocentric understandings towards the study of the transmission and deployment of the category in contingent historical circumstances. Reflecting on the issues at stake in this issue, in her afterword Birgit Meyer points out that the current upheaval in the Dutch field may offer possibilities for a religious studies 'new style'. Finally, Peter Nissen discusses a key text from the recent past: Colleen McDannell's *Material Christianity. Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Yale University Press, 1995), which is a milestone in the study of material religious culture.

We would have wished to include more contributions, but space was limited. The essays presented here are part of the first issue of *NTT. Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion*. We very much welcome the idea of the editorial board to develop the *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* into an international podium for the study of religion in general. It is our hope that the present issue will stimulate further conversation about the past and future of the study of religion against a broader, global horizon, and trigger contributions along these lines for the new NTT.

Birgit Meyer (University of Utrecht) and Arie L. Molendijk (University of Groningen) are guest editors of this special issue on the Study of Religion Today.