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Afterword. Towards Religious Studies ‘New Style’¹

AFTERWORD

Reflecting on the contributions to this special issue, in this afterword I argue that the current fragmented state of religious studies in the Netherlands may well be taken as a laboratory to develop a study of religion for the future. Religious studies ‘new style’ can break with all sorts of path-dependent constraints, including the religious studies/theology binary, and should conduct research and teaching about religion against a global, postcolonial horizon in the broader context of the humanities.

The recent institutional restructuring of the academic study of religion in the Netherlands – effecting the closing down of ‘theology’ in favour of ‘religious studies’ in three of four public universities as well as a shift of theology into confessional institutions – has left many scholars in the field puzzled and concerned. What repercussions will this major institutional operation have for teaching and research about religion in the Netherlands? This is a moment to look back and ahead, so as to better grasp why certain decisions were taken, to evaluate recent evaluations (such as the 2012 Research Review Theology and Religious Studies and the 2015 KNAW-report, of which I was one of the co-authors), and to try to discern possibilities for the future. As the study of religion was and still is a highly diversified field with different areas of expertise, methods and theoretical orientations, the recent shifts have different effects for the various disciplines and factions involved. This special issue aims to stimulate further reflection about the new dynamics of this reconfigured field on three levels. One, it spotlights a number of pertinent issues debated among scholars in the Netherlands: the complex relation between theology and religious studies in the aftermath of duplex ordo and simplex ordo arrangements (Molendijk), the past and present predicament of Church history, in the sense of ‘history of Christianity’ (Spaans) and the challenges involved in the cohabitation of Islamic studies and religious studies (Lange). Second, introducing the institutional set-up that organizes the relation between theology and religious studies in the United Kingdom (Knott) and Germany (Stausberg),

¹ I would like to thank Christian Lange, Arie Molendijk and Jo Spaans for useful, stimulating and encouraging comments on an earlier version of this text and Mitch Cohen for language editing.

it situates the Dutch field in a comparative perspective. Third, it offers a broader content-driven reflection about the future of a multidisciplinary study of religion in the humanities that moves ‘beyond religious studies’ as we usually know it (Chidester).

As a relative newcomer to the field of religious studies and theology – until my move to Utrecht as professor of religious studies in 2011, my disciplinary context was cultural anthropology – I have followed the institutional reshuffling and ensuing debates with keen interest, often feeling puzzled and disheartened. Getting to know the field of the academic study of religion (which I was barely acquainted with, even though I was involved in the anthropology of religion) was not simply a question of familiarizing myself with a new institutional environment with its discourses, divisions (in terms of labour, methods and approaches), modes of debating, manners and sensibilities. I found myself in a rapidly transforming field that was increasingly difficult to understand – not only for me, but also for seasoned scholars. For me, the continuation of religious studies and the closing down of theology that took place in Utrecht in 2013 (and that also occurred at the University of Amsterdam earlier and at Leiden University around the same time) entails big conceptual challenges. For it has yielded a *religiewetenschap* that is much broader than religious studies in, for instance, the German context, where it is the secular Other of Protestant or Catholic theology. The kind of religious studies emerging at public universities in Amsterdam, Leiden and Utrecht² is more inclusive, encompassing disciplines such as ‘Church history’ and ‘biblical literature’, as well as ‘World Christianity’ (the secular heir of missiology and oecumenical theology), Islamic studies and the study of other traditions, conducted from multiple perspectives.

I recognize the sense of confusion noted by Molendijk, whose provocative questions certainly hit a nerve: ‘Does religious studies have a common ground of method or interest, or is it just a mixed bag of specialties? Are there special skills, competences or methods that define the scholar of religion? What are its preferred subjects?’ (this volume, p. 14). It is quite a mix indeed and this may yield ‘a mixed bag’ and enduring fragmentation, if not addressed conceptually. And yet, the state of mix, I would argue, also offers opportunities for rethinking the study of religion along new lines in the light of current constraints. This is clearly articulated by Spaans, who discerns ‘new opportunities for a long overdue modernisation of the historical disciplines’ (p. 20), and Lange, who

² The situation in Groningen, where religious studies exist within a faculty of theology and religious studies, is different yet again. Here religious studies may come closer to how the discipline is also known outside of the Netherlands. But still, being part of a public university, theology is not conducted from a confessional standpoint; the disciplines relevant for the training of pastors are part of the divinity school.

states that ‘the recent shifts in the institutional set-up of the humanities in the Netherlands and in much of Western academia forces them [scholars in Islamic studies, BM] to rethink their position critically’ (p. 35). While I admit that there are many reasons for pessimism, in this afterword I would like to strike a more positive note and sketch contours of a new vision for the future of the study of religion in general and religious studies in particular.

Institutional Frameworks

As scholars, we prefer to talk about content, rather than about institutional structures and administrative policies. This is why the latter are rarely subject to content-driven scholarly analysis and are instead taken as an unavoidable topic that has to be addressed periodically for the sake of research assessments and similar operations. And yet, as such structures and policies shape research and teaching in theology and religious studies to a great extent, they require much more attention. The recent interventions that are the cause of our current worries and concerns occur in larger path-dependent configurations that mirror earlier ways of organizing academic teaching and research about religion. A comparative historiography of the theology-religious studies nexus, which arguably enshrines a deep ‘archaeology’ of Church-state relations in secular national configurations across Europe (and even on a global scale), still needs to be written. Here I simply want to draw out some features that account for the distinctiveness of religious studies in Dutch public universities compared with Germany and Britain.

In contrast to the Netherlands, in the United Kingdom and Germany theology is confessional by definition. In both settings, theologians and religious studies scholars insist on the boundary that separates them. But while in Britain ‘Theology and Religious Studies’ has become an administrative rubric employed pragmatically with regard to academic policy and a broader public, in Germany the distinctions between the two are clearly visible and emphasized. This is so, as Stausberg points out, because theology enjoys certain legal privileges through which the Churches have a say in the establishment of chairs, the safeguarding of teaching areas and the appointment of staff. The same privileges do not pertain to religious studies (nor to any other discipline), and in addition, the chairs in religious studies that are situated in theological faculties also fall under the formal authority of the Churches. Understandably, this arrangement, quite unbelievable from a secular Dutch perspective, predisposes scholars in German religious studies to keep a critical distance to and define themselves in opposition to theology.

By contrast, in the Netherlands theology was differentiated into *simplex ordo* and *duplex ordo* frameworks, in which the professors who were teaching

theological disciplines, such as biblical literature, Church history, philosophy of religion, comparative religion or sociology of religion, in public universities did not fall under the authority of Churches.³ In terms of its scientific methods and orientation, the latter kind of theology, as Molendijk also points out, may well be circumscribed as ‘religious studies’ (though it was not called by that name). De facto, many scholars currently working in *religiewetenschap* in the Netherlands have been trained in the *duplex ordo* configuration (as is the case with Jo Spaans and Arie Molendijk, who were both trained in Leiden). They fit in with the newly formed centres and (sub)departments of *religiewetenschap* much more smoothly than one might assume from a UK- or Germany-based understanding of religious studies or *Religionswissenschaft*.⁴ So the division between religious studies and theology that prevails in Germany and, notwithstanding the shared use of the ‘Theology and Religious Studies’ label, also informs the self-understanding of scholars in religious studies in Britain (who as Knott points out tend to regard theology as an ‘uninvited guest’), cannot simply be transferred to the Dutch field, where theology was framed differently in the past and where the recent restructuring reshuffled the field. Religious studies is conducted in various institutional configurations, with or without theology. While religious studies and theology still coexist in one public university (Groningen) and in universities founded on Christian principles (Radboud University Nijmegen, VU University Amsterdam and Tilburg University), in the other public universities *religiewetenschap* is all that is left of the former theological faculties. In the new configuration, the financial future and institutional support of religious studies appears to depend more and more on its capacity to respond to societal demands and prove its relevance by offering not only knowledge about religion, but also normative guidelines (so far the preserve of – confessional – theology) to an increasingly un-Churching society.

The religious studies/theology binary forms, at least with regard to the Netherlands, an unproductive deadlock. I would like to propose that the specificity of the Dutch situation in shaping the study of religion in past and present can also be regarded as an asset that allows us to imagine a different, more inclusive kind of religious studies that is freed from having to define itself against theology per se. This pertains especially to the (sub)departments and

³ By contrast, public university professors teaching subjects vital to the transmission of the Christian tradition adopted by Churches, such as dogmatic theology and practical theology, fell under the authority of the Churches in question. Hence the term *duplex ordo*. The coexistence of two orders did of course not imply that the professors on the ‘state’ side were necessarily far removed from the Churches in terms of their outlook. The actual functioning of the *duplex ordo* in practice would deserve further research.

⁴ Obviously, as the contributions by Knott and Stausberg show, the translation of *religiewetenschap* as *Religionswissenschaft* and of both as ‘religious studies’ conceals major differences.

centres of religious studies that stayed on, under new conditions, after the closing down of theology in three public universities. Here the urge to re-conceptualize the direction and identity of religious studies is most pressing and challenging, but the issues I will raise in the following also pertain to religious studies in more conventional configurations in the Netherlands. One important issue arising concerns the study of Christianity. Traditionally, in religious studies in Britain, Germany and the Netherlands Christianity has barely been a focus. This is problematic and up for change. The fact that the Netherlands is ‘un-Churching’ to a phenomenal extent does not imply that Christianity has become irrelevant. It has left a strong imprint on culture and society – now often framed as heritage – and still has a more or less hidden afterlife in various domains, including the built environments and layout of cities, literature, popular culture and advertising. Moreover, the arrival of Christian migrants, often with a Pentecostal orientation, from various parts of the world and the rising interest of young people in the Netherlands for new-style evangelical Churches point to a new Christian presence. To unpack all this, I regard theology (albeit of the kind conducted in the *duplex ordo* tradition) as an important part of religious studies also in the future. So by all means, *religiewetenschap* in the Netherlands needs to retain, and possibly expand, expertise in the study of Christianity in the past and present, in Europe and the world at large.

Could it be that, in the long run, the situation in the Netherlands will not prove to be as exceptional as one may now be inclined to think, in that the Dutch situation may be seen as a forerunner of a broader trend that may hit other European countries with their own processes of un-Churching? Then it would make sense to think about the current *religiewetenschap* not just as a ‘mixed bag’ containing the leftovers of a ruinous restructuring, but rather as a laboratory (or perhaps a kitchen?) for developing a new identity and mission for an academic study of religion beyond the old religious studies/theology divide (that never befitted the Dutch situation anyway, but that may also lose purchase in other countries if the trend of un-Churching continues). Which new self-understandings and perspectives may open up for a religious studies ‘new style’ once it is no longer necessary to ground its identity in the assertion of being different from theology as the main significant other? And how is this identity to be communicated to the broader society, which is deeply divided about religion and still tends to confound religious studies and theology?

Studying Christianity and other Religious Traditions

Of course, incorporating theological disciplines is only one aspect of the religious studies ‘new style’ I am imagining. Obviously, the longstanding dominance of Western Christianity in European societies left its imprint on the study of religion in the Netherlands (as well as in Britain and Germany). It has long been shaped by a Christian bias that mainly focused on Protestant and Catholic traditions in Latin Christianity. The study of non-Christian religious traditions was the preserve of comparative religion, on the one hand, and missiology or oecumenical theology, on the other. Islamic studies was situated outside of theology altogether until fairly recently. Now it is time not only to incorporate sound expertise on other religious traditions, but also, and even more importantly, to critically reflect on colonial legacies in the specific division of labour in the academic study of religion, in approaches to these religions and in the conceptualization of religion as a category in general.⁵ How are religious studies to be reconfigured in such a way that they move beyond Eurocentric frames?

To figure out how to do so, Islamic studies are a case in point. The abolishing of philological expertise in Christian theology at a time when the highly text-oriented study of Islam and Arabic had just been relocated in the study of religion (as in Utrecht) comes with its own ironies. But, as Lange points out, it would be wrong to claim that theology declined in favour of Islamic studies. The latter’s association with religious studies⁶ comes with its own challenges. Discussing the losses and gains of this major move, Lange shows how the transformation of institutional structures may prompt scholars to thoroughly and critically rethink their discipline against the broader horizon of religious studies. There appears to be a possibility for a felicitous interplay between transformations triggered within Islamic studies as described by Lange and the remaking of religious studies as a vibrant forum for critical, crosscutting debate. A concerted effort in this direction may work against fragmentation and turn religious studies into more than just a ‘mixed bag’ of scholars and

⁵ Since my move into religious studies, this has been a central issue in my work. See B. Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence*, inaugural lecture, Utrecht University 2012; D. Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion*, Chicago 2013. The postcolonial legacies in Dutch religious studies will stand at the centre of the 2017 annual conference of the NGG (*Dynamics of Religious Diversity: The Study of Different Religions and Religious Difference in Postcolonial Configurations*), co-organized by Christoph Baumgartner and me in Utrecht.

⁶ Lange sees the relation between Islamic studies and religious studies as a cohabitation of two disciplines under the same roof. He certainly has a point, and I also regard Islamic studies as a discipline by its own. Still ‘*religiewetenschap*’ is often employed as a broader term that encompasses Islamic studies. The Utrecht department is called Philosophy and Religious Studies, and Islamic studies are subsumed under the latter.

disciplines or, to invoke Lange's evocative image, an enforced cohabitation of rather odd bedfellows.

To achieve this, three issues require special attention. One is the question of the category of religion employed. Here I find it intriguing that Lange introduces the recent, much debated book 'What is Islam?' by Shahab Ahmed, who argues against the conventional distinction within Islamic studies between religion (Islam) and Muslim cultures, calling instead for a reconceptualization of Islam in new terms beyond a religious/secular binary. Lange suggests that religious studies may offer a suitable intellectual setting to further discuss the implications of the use of a modernist notion of religion in Islamic studies that, as argued by Ahmed and others, stands far apart from and is prone to misrepresent lived ways of being Islamic. In my view, such critical assessments of the use of 'religion' and the search for alternatives in Islamic studies and other disciplines in the study of religion are at the core of the critical groundwork needed to develop a new broad *religiewetenschap* in our time. This is more productive than the vain search for more adequate definitions of religion (now largely out of fashion anyway) or the recurrent problematization of the (un)definability of religion and the withdrawal into particularities (as often occurs in the anthropology of religion).

The second issue concerns comparison. The incorporation of religious traditions on an equal basis into religious studies, of course, calls for an investigation of similarities and differences, both with regard to these traditions themselves and to the ways scholars have approached them. Comparison is called for, but the framework of old-style comparative religion that was grounded in discrete entities and implied evolutionary hierarchies will not do. I see it as one of the major tasks ahead to develop new incentives for comparison, including the study of longstanding religious entanglements (for instance the links between Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and the dynamics of religiously plural settings.

Thirdly, collaboration depends on shared content-driven projects that require multidisciplinary engagement. Along with the focus on ritual practice as a corrective to text-centred analysis mentioned by Lange, many other themes could be proposed. In my own work, for instance, I have sought to develop crosscutting approaches to be employed in the study of religion that emphasize mediation, the role of the body and the sensorium in the genesis of experiences of divine presence and being part of a religious community, and religious material culture (see also Chidester). The KNAW report proposed a focus on 'lived religion' in past and present. There are many exciting possibilities for content-driven multidisciplinary projects. The point is to kick them off together right away.

Religion and/in the Humanities

The reappearance of religion in the 21st century, puzzling for many scholars, drew much attention to religious phenomena and led to new forms of collaboration. The NWO-sponsored multidisciplinary research programme *The Future of the Religious Past* played a key role in organizing a transdisciplinary forum for researchers in the humanities and certain strands of the social sciences (such as cultural anthropology and cultural sociology) that has repercussions until today. While, as Spaans observes, in a discipline like philosophy, the idea of religion being ‘the enemy of the Enlightenment’ (p. 25) still lingers on, across the humanities there emerged an agreement that the master narrative of secularization, which long underpinned the division of labour among academic disciplines and confined the study of religion to theology and religious studies, is no longer adequate. New post-secularist and postcolonial frameworks are being developed that look at religion in relation to, for instance, art and visual culture, politics, media, literature, gender, architecture or heritage in alternative ways. The question is how scholars in religious studies and theology relate to this new broad interest in religion.

In my view, the recent embedding of religious studies in humanities faculties in public universities is basically a positive move. Given my own background and research interests, it comes as no surprise that I very much agree with Chidester’s point that the future of the study of religion lies in investing in sustained collaboration with scholars in other disciplines, whereby a focus on materiality is a fruitful starting point (see also Nissen in this special issue). Indeed, as Chidester puts it, ‘Studying religion (...) focuses attention, not on religion, but on the material conditions of possibility for negotiating the human’ (p. 76). The impressive scholarship he discusses shows how moving ‘beyond religious studies’ may be mutually beneficial for religious studies and the broader humanities, which, after all, have the task to tease out, against a global horizon, what makes us human. Looking at the situation in the Netherlands, I see a major task ahead. The current *religiewetenschap* itself consists of several disciplines, and we still need to think very hard about how to integrate them into a meaningful profile. I think that we need to reflect much more explicitly about the stakes involved in collaborations with disciplines such as history, anthropology, art history or media studies, as well as law, sociology and political science. How are we to reach out and move ‘beyond religious studies’ without furthering fragmentation and eventually – as the ultimate spectre – dissolution beyond recognition in the humanities? Above all, we need to know and be able to convey what *religiewetenschap* is for us and why it is important for academia and society.

While Lange describes the new cohabitation of Islamic studies and religious studies in quite positive terms, Spaans draws a somewhat darker picture for Church history. In her perceptive analysis of the difficulties faced by Church history in the former *simplex* and *duplex ordo* arrangements, she shows that it was a discipline to some extent misconceived (by both practitioners and outsiders). She also raises critical questions about the future of her discipline in the aftermath of the restructuring of the faculties of theology and their various successors in ‘theology and religious studies’ or just religious studies. The place of Church history was and remains difficult to define, and ultimately, as she suggests, a solution may lie in a stronger and more structural cooperation with departments of history. I recognize her worries, certainly in relation to religiewetenschap, which has been pushed more and more towards a focus on contemporary phenomena. However, an institutional move of Church history away from *religiewetenschap* into departments of history would further exacerbate the presentism that I regard as a major threat to religious studies in the Netherlands. Indeed, ‘with secularisation the knowledge about religion as a human practice and a cultural, social and historical phenomenon has dramatically declined’ (Spaans, p. 28). The religious studies I am envisioning by all means needs historical expertise to keep us alert, not only to the past of religion, but also to the historiography of ways of framing the study of religion.

Coda

Molendijk’s insightful questions about religious studies, quoted in the introduction, prompted me to use this afterword to think aloud about a common ground of and for *religiewetenschap* in the Netherlands. Situating it in relation to *Religionswissenschaft* in Germany and religious studies in Britain, I have argued that the current admittedly confused setting may well be employed as a laboratory to develop a study of religion for the future that can break with all sorts of path-dependent constraints and be much better suited for researching and teaching about religion against a global horizon. This requires time and intellectual engagement for a common cause. For now, I envision religious studies above all as an intellectual hub to rethink and reconfigure our understanding and mode of study of religion in a broad sense, from a critical, postcolonial perspective. While I am aware that institutional consolidation is required for making such a vision work, I regard the critical reflexion on our past trajectories and future directions as an important and exciting intellectual project. Having written this piece and sorted out my ideas and experiences, I feel more energized than before. Thinking critically about existing institutional structures, policies, methods and concepts, as well as about possible projects, apparently has the potential to evoke a good sense for new directions. I hope

that this little intervention may prompt colleagues in the academic study of religion in general, and in the (sub)departments and centres of *religiewetenschap* in particular, to join forces and be part of the lab.



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