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## **The Study of Religion in the Netherlands**

### THE STUDY OF RELIGION IN THE NETHERLANDS

This essay outlines the major issues and tensions in the field of theology and religious studies in the Netherlands. The institutional variety of the field is huge and one of the reasons why it is hard to come to fruitful cooperation. Moreover, as one research assessment formulates it, ‘the research landscape of theology and religious studies in the Netherlands has in a very short time gone through an amazing, and for a sound scholarly research climate barely acceptable number of changes, fusions, mergers, transfers’. This time-consuming process has put a lot of pressure on scholars. Now it is time to join forces and contribute to the future of the academic study of religion as it serves the general public interest in the Netherlands and abroad.

Assessments of the academic study of religion in the Netherlands often have a paradoxical character.<sup>1</sup> Although the quality of research and teaching is praised in the assessments, at the same time one fears for its collapse. The field would suffer from serious disintegration and a lack of societal relevance. Moreover, the last Research Review of Theology and Religious Studies in the Netherlands, which dates from 2012, notes a lack of reflection on the conceptual foundations of the disciplines under review, and on the scope and definition of the research fields concerned.<sup>2</sup> Thereupon, the Royal Netherlands

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my colleagues Birgit Meyer (fellow editor of this special issue), Gerard Wiegers, Marcel Sarot, Jo Spaans, and Hetty Zock for their helpful suggestions and critical comments on earlier versions of this contribution. It is quite difficult to be specific and precise in describing, analyzing and evaluating the field of the academic study of religion – by which I understand religious studies as well as theology – in the Netherlands. The diversity of the various practices of studying religion and the variety of the institutional contexts in which this is done are huge and the danger of generalizing on the basis of your own experience paramount. This makes it all the more valuable to get feedback of seasoned colleagues who work in neighbouring institutions and disciplines.

<sup>2</sup> Research Review Theology & Religious Studies 2012, QANU 2013 (Q 354), see <http://www.rug.nl/news-and-events/news/archief2013/nieuwsberichten/theology-religious-studies-2013.pdf>. The last comparative research review before 2012 stems from 2000. In the in-between period faculties and departments organized their own reviews, which makes it very difficult to compare them. The tendency was that Groningen had the best research institute, followed by Leiden and at some distance by the VU University. According to the 2012 review Utrecht has succeeded in establishing a new promising

Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) started an investigation and published in 2015 an overview of the state of the art, which concludes that both theology and religious studies were unprepared and helpless, when in the recent past they were ‘hit by an avalanche of budgets cuts, performance-driven measures and ad hoc crisis policy-making’.<sup>3</sup>

The 2012 Research Review has addressed the rapid pace of change as follows:

[T]he research landscape of theology and religious studies in the Netherlands has in a very short time gone through an amazing, and for a sound scholarly research climate barely acceptable number of changes, fusions, mergers, transfers and other accommodations, mostly unintended by the researchers themselves, sometimes unwelcomed and counter-productive.<sup>4</sup>

Even if the scholars involved had been better prepared, it is doubtful whether they had stood a chance against the type of management that has public institutions, including universities, in its grip. It is not easy to defend oneself against instrumental and administrative forms of rationality which are mainly or even solely interested in measurable targets and financial costs. Unremunerative programmes are simply shut down, because too few students are enrolled.

The field of theology and religious studies in the Netherlands is rather small. Eleven state-funded institutions host some 2000 students, including more than 400 students from the University of Humanistic Studies, which does not have religion as its core business. Several faculties of theology (and religious studies) have been closed in recent decades. At state universities the remaining parts were integrated in larger humanities faculties and continued under the name religious studies. This was a painful process and contributed to the already existing confusion about what religious studies basically is about; not all staff members who became members of the new department ‘religious studies’ (*religiewetenschap*) had considered themselves to be ‘religious studies scholars’ previously. This transition is not per se a bad thing, as new venues for cooperation open up, but being a small department or

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research group. The University of Amsterdam, its sister institutions at Leiden and Nijmegen, and the University of Humanistic Studies at Utrecht chose not to be part of the 2012 review.

<sup>3</sup> KNAW, *Klaar om te wenden... De academische bestudering van religie in Nederland. Een Verkenning*, Amsterdam 2015 (abbreviated: KNAW 2015), 15. The report is in Dutch and includes an English-language summary on the pages 9, 11, 13, 15 and 17 (next to the Dutch summary).

<sup>4</sup> Research Review Theology & Religious Studies 2012, 7.

even sub-department in a shrinking humanities faculty does not make it easier to survive. Somehow it is hard to get a steady influx of first-year students. One reason is that the job prospects are not evident, as ‘religion’ is no obligatory part of secondary school curricula in the Netherlands.<sup>5</sup>

The present article takes its point of departure in the 2015 report of the KNAW. The report surveys the whole field of the academic study of religion, including theology, in the Netherlands. This report is a major achievement, which does not mean that it is beyond criticism. In various rounds of discussion I will try to outline the major issues and tensions in the field, which at least to some extent explain why it is hard to come up with convincing solutions for this important, but rather fragmented field of study.

### **Varieties of Theology and Religious Studies**

The reading of the 2015 KNAW report is a dizzying experience, as it shows the amazing variety of the organisation of the Dutch academic study of religion, research and teaching programmes. This makes it difficult to discern patterns in the changing landscape of the study of religion. Especially the institutional variety may explain to a certain extent the confusion – even among sympathetic colleagues from abroad who for instance write review assessments – about what is happening in the field.

The KNAW report lists four types of institutional embedment of the study of religion in the Netherlands. The *first* type concerns the three so-called broad universities with faculties that have *both* theology and religious studies. Whereas theology in Groningen is explicitly non-confessional, the VU University Amsterdam (originally a neo-Calvinist university, which was founded by Abraham Kuyper) and the Radboud University (formerly Catholic University Nijmegen) provide confessional approaches as well.<sup>6</sup> The *second* category consists of three broad universities (Leiden, Utrecht, and the University of Amsterdam) with small religious studies programmes only, which are located within the Faculty of Humanities. *Thirdly*, there are four theological universities,<sup>7</sup> three of them representing three different Protestant churches and one Roman Catholic, which mainly offer confessional edu-

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<sup>5</sup> This journal has published a special issue on the (usefulness of the) teaching of religion in secondary schools: *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 61/4 (2007), 265–360. Three English-language contributions on the situation in Germany, Denmark, and France are included. Recently (21 June 2016) the *Nederlands Genootschap voor Godsdienstwetenschap* (Dutch Association for the study of Religion) has organized a major conference on this subject: [www.godsdienstwetenschap.nl](http://www.godsdienstwetenschap.nl).

<sup>6</sup> KNAW 2015, 31, speaks of theology in a confessional context, which may be a more precise formulation.

<sup>7</sup> These institutions are officially termed universities, but only provide a theological training programme.

cational programmes. Most of them have less than 150 students; only the Protestant Theological University (PThU), that provides the training of the ministers and other ecclesiastical servants of the main Dutch Protestant Church has around 300 students.<sup>8</sup> The University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, which counts more than 400 students, is also mentioned under this third rubric. The *fourth* type comprises the study of religion in other faculties, such as Law, Humanities and the Social Sciences.<sup>9</sup> No special training programmes or research institutes focusing on religion are involved here. Nevertheless scholars from these faculties successfully compete for funding programmes focusing on religion, such as the Future of the Religious Past (2002–2012) that was sponsored by the Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research.<sup>10</sup> There is a long tradition of research on religion outside theological or religious studies institutions. For instance: the study of the phenomenon of pillarization (politico-denominational segregation) of Dutch society, has traditionally been carried out mainly by general sociologists and historians.<sup>11</sup>

This quadripartite division reflects the complex and confusing evolution of the academic study of religion in the Netherlands over the last 140 years. Intellectually the division may not be very compelling, but the institutional perspective is probably the best take on the matter. Somehow I am inclined to put more emphasis on the various ways religion is approached. In this respect many scholars involved see a contrast or even opposition between Religious Studies and Theology. Religious studies – in Dutch *godsdienswetenschap* or *religiewetenschap(pen)* (*Religionswissenschaft[en]*) – is mostly defined by a kind of ‘methodological atheism’ or better ‘methodological agnosticism’, meaning that scholars cannot pass judgement on truth claims of religious practitioners.<sup>12</sup> In its definition of *religiewetenschappen* the KNAW report

<sup>8</sup> KNAW 2015, 113 (statistics 2013).

<sup>9</sup> KNAW 2015, 45.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nwo.nl/en/research-and-results/programmes/the+future+of+the+religious+past>.

<sup>11</sup> James Kennedy, Markha Valenta, ‘Religious Pluralism and the Dutch State. Reflections on the Future of Article 23’, in W.B.H.J. van de Donk, A.P. Jonkers, G.J. Kronjee, R.J.J.M. Krum (eds.), *Geloven in het publieke domein. Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie*, Amsterdam 2006, 337–351. Arie L. Molendijk, ‘Versäulung in den Niederlanden: Begriff, Theorie, lieu de mémoire’, in Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, Klaus Große Kracht (eds.), *Religion und Gesellschaft. Europa im 20. Jahrhundert* (Industrielle Welt. Schriftenreihe des Arbeitskreises für moderne Sozialgeschichte 73), Köln etc. 2007, 307–327.

<sup>12</sup> This idea goes at least back to Théodore Flournoy’s 1903 principle of the ‘exclusion de la transcendance’ in the psychological study of religion. Reductionist and religionist approaches are not very prominent in the Netherlands; cf. Jan G. Platvoet, ‘Pillars, Pluralism and Secularisation. A Social History of Dutch Sciences of Religion’, in Gerard Wiegers (ed.), *Modern Societies and the Science of Religions*, Leiden 2002, 82–148,

more or less follows this understanding: in religious studies the truth claims of religious phenomena cannot play a normative role.<sup>13</sup> Theology is defined here as the critical reflection on the beliefs of a specific religion, whether or not this is done from a normative (religious) position.<sup>14</sup>

The distinction between theology and religious studies is not clear-cut. Much depends on how it is defined.<sup>15</sup> The authors of the KNAW report know this, of course, and stir their course carefully. In a section titled ‘beyond theology’<sup>16</sup> they review the study of religions, excluding Christianity, but including new religious movements and the so-called ‘world religions’, such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Daoism. There is a long tradition of the academic study of non-Christian religious traditions in the Netherlands. Here the KNAW report distinguishes four relevant areas of study.

The *first* issue mentioned is the institutionalisation of the comparative study of religion at public universities by the 1876 Law on Higher Education. Leiden and Amsterdam founded new chairs in ‘comparative religion’. The first occupants – C.P. Tiele in Leiden and P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye at the University of Amsterdam – were internationally respected and influential scholars who shaped the field by the handbooks they wrote and edited.<sup>17</sup> In 1927 the Catholic University of Nijmegen established a position in the history of religions, and in 1965 the VU University of Amsterdam founded a similar chair.<sup>18</sup> *Secondly*, the report refers to the chairs in mission studies – the first two were established in the 1930s at confessional universities. *Thirdly*, the report points to the long history of the study of Islam in the Netherlands, which goes back to the early seventeenth century. Recently, Islam is very much perceived as a societal problem, and hence the study of Muslim immigrants and their descendants is booming. There are chairs for the study

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here 131–134. Gerard Wiegers, ‘Afscheid van het methodologisch agnosticisme?’, *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 45 (2005), 153–167, discusses criticisms of the paradigm of methodological agnosticism.

<sup>13</sup> KNAW 2015, 25, 29.

<sup>14</sup> KNAW 2015, 25. In the Dutch text the term ‘geloofsgoed’ is employed, which may be taken somewhat broader as referring to the religious tradition in its entirety.

<sup>15</sup> KNAW 2015, 25. The Report’s understanding of theology has been immediately criticized by a group of scholars from the Protestant Theology University (PThU), who claim that theology is more than reflection on the own religion, as the issue of transcendence (God) is implied in the religious search for what is good, true and beautiful. See the special issue ‘De eigenheid van theologie. Een reactie op *Klaar om te wenden*’, *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 70 (2016), 87–150.

<sup>16</sup> KNAW 2015, 37–44.

<sup>17</sup> Arie L. Molendijk, *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands*, Leiden 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Platvoet, ‘Pillars, Pluralism and Secularisation’, 100f., 130.

of contemporary Islam established inside and outside departments for theology and religious studies. *Fourthly*, the report mentions research of religion in other disciplines. Leiden University, for instance, is famous for its study of South-Asian languages and cultures (including religions). The first chair in ethnology – with regard to the Dutch East Indies – has been founded in 1876 in Leiden.<sup>19</sup>

This initial survey of the field in the second chapter of the KNAW Report leads to the conclusion that in recent decades the field of the study of religion in the Netherlands has been moving swiftly, because the context of religion and religious institutions is rapidly changing as well.<sup>20</sup> That is doubtless the case, and the KNAW Report gives more useful information about ongoing research and education at the various institutions and the research assessments. It elucidates also common misunderstandings about the relationship between theology and religious studies, analyses differences of opinion and common interests, and comes with a plea for more cooperation and even a specific plan for a Netherlands Academy of Religion with a shared research programme on ‘lived religion’.

Yet all the information that the report provides leaves the reader – at least this reader – with a sense of perplexity. The field of the study of religion as represented here is fragmented. Karl Marx’ modernist adage ‘all that was solid melts into air’ seems to be readily applicable in this case. What are the driving forces in this rapidly changing field of study? What can we expect? Where are we heading? Although the report does present quite a few perceptive observations, comments and even possible solutions, it is hard to see which factors have been decisive according to the KNAW report in this process of fragmentation, changes and budgets cuts. It is a challenging task, but as an individual scholar it may be easier to highlight some major changes (many of them also mentioned in the KNAW report), as you neither have to reach a consensus with colleagues nor have to strive for a complete analysis.

### **Typically Dutch – the Rise and Fall of the ‘duplex ordo’**

I will start with two caveats. Firstly, the most I can do in this short contribution is to sketch those developments in the study of religion in the Netherlands that in my view are crucial to understand the present-day situation. I will focus on institutional changes and not so much on broader societal processes such as the decline in church membership which, of course,

<sup>19</sup> Molendijk, *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands*, 183–6.

<sup>20</sup> KNAW 2015, 46.

are extremely important to understand what happened to the study of religion in recent decades in the Netherlands. Secondly, my perception is doubtless influenced by my training at the Leiden Faculty of Theology in the late 1970s. Traditionally Leiden has been the most liberal of the state faculties of theology. The other state faculties were located in Groningen, Utrecht, and at the University of Amsterdam. The only faculty that has survived so far is Groningen. Biased as I may be, I will start with a discussion of the emergence of religious studies in state faculties of theology. Here and not at the confessional institutions the (comparative) study of non-Christian religions has flourished and gained an international reputation.<sup>21</sup>

This brings me to the organisation of these institutions, which is typical for the Netherlands. The Law on Higher Education from 1876 meant – especially in Leiden – a rather strict separation between the scholarly state programme on the one hand and the ecclesiastical training programme on the other. The state professors were appointed by the government,<sup>22</sup> and the ‘ecclesiastical’ professors by the main Dutch Protestant church. This system is called the *duplex ordo* (the twofold order). In this understanding theology was basically reconfigured as the study of religion with a strong focus on Christianity (Protestantism and Bible). The disciplines that served the Church most directly (dogmatical and practical theology) were taken out of the theological state programme and were transferred to the connected, but separate vocational (‘ecclesiastical’) training programme of the Dutch Reformed Church. The preferred methods of the state training programme were essentially the same as those in the humanities. In the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century the social sciences (mainly psychology and sociology) were added to the state programme. The introduction of ethnographical or – in modern parlance – cultural anthropological approaches (including fieldwork) into Dutch religious studies programmes took place at a rather late stage – in the late 80s and 90s of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> As already mentioned, the emphasis on the study of Islam – including its modern forms – in the religious studies programmes is also a recent development.

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<sup>21</sup> Due to this focus confessional institutions of theological training – both Catholic and Protestant – get less attention in this contribution.

<sup>22</sup> Otto J. de Jong, *Benoemingsbeleid aan de Rijksuniversiteiten (1876-1931)* [rede 346<sup>ste</sup> dies natalis Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht, 1982], shows that confessional considerations played a role for quite a long time in the appointments of the professors, especially those in the theological faculties.

<sup>23</sup> Although field work is part of some training programmes, it is – as far as I can see – not a key element of religious studies as such in the Netherlands.

This arrangement may be confusing. The German church historian Adolf Harnack – for one – wrote already around 1900 that the Dutch had abolished their faculties of theology.<sup>24</sup> The study of the Christian religion in the state faculties that is not formally tied to the service of the church does not add up to ‘theology’ in this view.<sup>25</sup> Basically, the other theological institutions in the Netherlands ask for such a commitment and are more closely related to a particular religious or humanist organisation or church.

The new 1876 arrangement *together* with the introduction of the discipline of the comparative study of religion by the same law into the (state) curriculum may easily lead to confusion as to what ‘religious studies’ actually is about. In this constellation the term ‘religious studies’ is ambiguous, as it can (and does) refer to a specific field of study (‘comparative religion’ or ‘religious studies’ in modern parlance) *and* to all the disciplines of the faculty as such, which use the same literary, historical and philosophical approaches as the scholars of religion in the narrow sense of the word. This is not to deny that the comparative study of religions in the past focused largely on the other ‘world religions’, in particular on (ancient) religions of the Near East, which were thought useful for the understanding of early Christianity and ancient Judaism.

The *duplex ordo* arrangement has more or less come to an end, as the Dutch Reformed Church founded in 2007 its own institution to educate its ministers. This Protestant Theological University (PThU) is in fact a full-fledged faculty of theology with an emphasis on dogmatical and practical theology. It is an independent, state-funded institution, which has a bilocation and cooperates closely with the theologians of the University of Groningen and the VU University of Amsterdam. From a Protestant perspective the founding of the PThU is the most significant development in the field of theology and religious studies in recent times. It is the theological training centre of the main Dutch Protestant Church. While the smaller confessional institutions (category 3 of the KNAW report) have difficulties maintaining their academic quality (research assessments are fairly critical in this respect), the PThU is the only confessional institution which succeeds in keeping high

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<sup>24</sup> Adolf Harnack, ‘Die Aufgabe der theologischen Fakultäten und die allgemeine Religionsgeschichte (Nachtrag)’ (1901), *Christliche Welt* 15 (1901), 1104–1107, reprinted in Harnack, *Adolf von Harnack als Zeitgenosse*, 2 vols., Berlin – New York 1996, vol. I, 816–824; A. Harnack, *Die Aufgabe der theologischen Fakultäten und die allgemeine Religionsgeschichte*, Berlin 1901, reprinted in *Adolf von Harnack*, vol. I, 797–815, here 801.

<sup>25</sup> Practically most professors were practising Protestants, who had left their parish for the university.



standards of research. In the next section I shall sketch the consequences of this development for theology and in particular for religious studies.

### Theology versus Religious Studies

Given the multifarious institutional configurations of theology and religious studies in the Netherlands, any interpretation of what are the major trends of the last decades is open to criticism. Notwithstanding the *rapprochement* between theology and religious studies at some occasions, I would argue that generally spoken the rift between the two fields has deepened in recent years. The 2012 Research Review noted that the two fields ‘often evolve in different domains, on rather diverse conceptual bases, sometimes in virtually opposite scholarly, disciplinary or ecclesiastical traditions and in diverging social and cultural settings’.<sup>26</sup> The review committee evaluated the ‘slower or quicker switch of theological departments towards religious studies’ as a threat to theology proper, which in their view should not be ‘too descriptive’ and inquire ‘into fundamental questions of human nature and existence’.<sup>27</sup> The committee feared for the future of an independent form of theology in the Netherlands – independent both of an external religious studies approach and of ‘its more instrumental use for ministerial training, and also irrespective of the commitment to church policies’.<sup>28</sup>

What the committee saw happening is a process of clericalisation of (confessional) theology, on the one hand, and the establishment of departments of religious studies (with a strong preference for an outsider’s or *etic* perspective), on the other.<sup>29</sup> Especially the Protestant institutions have distanced themselves from the major universities and founded universities of their own, which from my point of view are basically seminaries – notwithstanding the good cooperation between the PThU and the Groningen and VU Amsterdam faculties of Theology and Religious Studies.

Another concern is the way the departments of religious studies have been organized. The KNAW report complains – if this expression is allowed – about the choices that have been made at the state universities, which have transformed their theology faculties into departments of religious studies within broader faculties of humanities or arts. In the view of the KNAW

<sup>26</sup> Research Review Theology & Religious Studies 2012, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Research Review Theology & Religious Studies 2012, 8 and 9.

<sup>28</sup> Research Review Theology & Religious Studies 2012, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. KNAW 2015, 76, Molendijk, ‘Theologie, Kerk en Academie in Protestants Nederland’, *Kerk en Theologie* 58 (2007), 4–21; Marcel Sarot, ‘Theologie en Godsdienstwetenschappen gescheiden?’, *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 45 (2005), 338–347.

report the emphasis has been too much on religious studies as a field in its own right, leaving no or little space, for instance, for philosophy of religion and the study of the sources and history of Christianity.<sup>30</sup> Deans and managers have implemented a too narrow view of religious studies, whereas in the above interpretation of the *duplex ordo* the state faculties had already been remodelled – at least in principle – according to religious studies approaches.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, it has also to be noticed that the managers of the Dutch Protestant Church have withdrawn their ecclesiastical training programme from the state universities, thereby signalling that they were no longer convinced of the merits and usefulness of the state curriculum for confessional theology and the ministry.<sup>32</sup>

### **Interpreting the Changes**

How to interpret the drifting apart of the two fields? In a pessimistic reading of the recent developments one could argue that both church officials and religious studies departments are on the defence. Given the shrinking importance and influence of institutionalized Christianity in the Netherlands the church officials retreat to their own confessional precincts and don't see much extra value in a theological training programme that is deeply embedded in a broad university context. This may be a broader tendency. Some German Protestant professors complain about the ghettoization of theology in their country, about theology students who have 'never seen a university from the inside', as they are enrolled in clerical institutions.<sup>33</sup>

Religious studies departments, on the other hand, are unsure how to define their field. 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? In his contribution to this special issue Christian Lange outlines avenues for fruitful cooperation between Islamic Studies (traditionally based on thorough linguistic skills, but nowadays not averse to theoretical notions) and Religious Studies ('understood, in principle, as a nomothetic and comparative enterprise'), but at the same time he distinguishes the fields rather sharply from each other. What place should the study of Christianity have? What kind of approach and subjects should be favoured,

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. KNAW 2015, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Much was still to be done, of course, but at least no special 'theological' approaches were used.

<sup>32</sup> Molendijk, 'Theologie, Kerk en Academie in Protestants Nederland', 17.

<sup>33</sup> <http://augustanahochschule.de/aktuelles/staatkirche.html>.

given the limited resources we have? The old days of the concentration on biblical studies (including the mastery of Hebrew and Greek) and on the study of Reformation are doubtless gone. These were the demands of the churches. How would the new study of Christianity have to look like?

Dutch scholars of religion are in a difficult predicament. What makes the present-day situation even more precarious is the fact that its object of study, 'religion', is also addressed in other disciplines, such as law, cultural anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, philosophy and, of course, theology.<sup>34</sup> Ideally the department of religious studies should contain all this expertise and organize fruitful conversations between their representatives, as Hans G. Kippenberg and Kocku von Stuckrad suggest in their informative and thought-provoking introduction to the study of religion. Yet I am not sure, if we have the power and persuasion to make this dream come true. Departments of the study of religion in the Netherlands are rather small and have to fear for budget cuts. Will scholars from other disciplines who study religion be willing to accept our leadership in organizing the interdisciplinary roundtables and the debate on the research agendas of the future?

From a practical point of view, the key question is how to convince deans and university boards that we do need departments or centres for the study of religion? They look primarily at the influx of new students in full programmes of the study of religion (including theology). Although there is quite some interest among students to take a minor or a few courses in religion, this does not yield much money in the present-day system of university financing in the Netherlands. A more general problem is the insufficient support for higher education in general, and for the humanities and smaller specialties such as religious studies in the Netherlands in particular. There is no strong political party or powerful societal organisation which backs us up.

Moreover, we ourselves are divided. Between the various departments of religious studies and theology there is no substantial cooperation or even a prolonged discussion about the basic questions in which direction we should move, how tasks could be divided, and how the future of the study of religion can be secured. The central institutions we have (such as the efficiently organized and in my view in some respects rather successful national research school NOSTER) which could and should discuss these issues are weak. The

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<sup>34</sup> Hans G. Kippenberg, Kocku von Stuckrad, *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft*, München 2003, 7; cf. Arie L. Molendijk, 'Der Kampf um die Religion in der Wissenschaft', in Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, Friedemann Voigt (eds.), *Religion(en) deuten. Transformationen der Religionsforschung* (Troeltsch-Studien, Neue Folge 2), Berlin – New York 2010, 29–49.

reason that these institutions are so weak is that they depend for money and survival on the support of the participating faculties and departments. And the managers of the departments and faculties are inclined to consider the other departments and faculties as competitors and fail to acknowledge that at the moment there is an urgent need for structural cooperation.

### Conclusions

By way of conclusion I shall confine myself to a few remarks. Some of them have a more explorative character and sketch the dilemma's in how to understand the field of the academic study of religion; others have a more personal character and try to identify where the present-day troubles in the Netherlands may have arisen.

First and foremost – as already has been noted – there is confusion about what religious studies (*religiewetenschappen*) is about. In a general sense it is – as the KNAW report formulates it – the study of religious phenomena with a broad variety of methods. The term ‘religious studies’, however, has also been used to denote the comparative study of religion (*vergelijkende godsdienstwetenschap*) that focuses on methodological and theoretical issues. The study of the history of particular religions has been considered to be a somewhat distinct field of research. The chairs in theological departments of Dutch state universities had often a double teaching assignment: comparative study of religion (*vergelijkende godsdienstwetenschap*) and (the study of the) history of religions (*godsdienstgeschiedenis*). This picture is further complicated by the fact that, traditionally, in the Netherlands the history of religions did not include the study of Christianity and Judaism, because these were covered by (theological) scholars outside the religious studies group. Not all religions and religious phenomena were covered. As the focus of the theology faculties in which the religious studies departments were located was on Christianity, there were not enough financial means to do so and there was also pressure to study those (ancient) religions which were relevant to understand the emergence of Christianity.

This historical constellation has understandably led to tensions between religious studies scholars in the proper sense, on the one hand, and the other scholars in the theological departments, on the other hand. Notwithstanding the fact that – principally – they shared the same methodological apparatus, factually there were differences that grew stronger along the second half of the twentieth century, as religious studies scholars affirmed their independence and ‘theologians’ (as the rest of the faculty was seen) – at least some of them – were explicitly leaning toward the interests of the main Protestant church. Also due to the influence of the work of Karl Barth some

Dutch church historians – to mention just one example – considered their field as an ‘auxiliary discipline’ of the encyclopedia of theology (of which systematical theology was thought to be the ‘crown’). Others wanted to further oecumenical interests.<sup>35</sup> In the 1970s religious studies scholars in Leiden have tried to limit the influence of the professors in the adjacent divinity school that provided the ecclesiastical training programme for ministers in the Dutch Reformed Church. This may sound a bit onesided, and, of course, one can mention examples of good cooperation too, but still it does not make it easier to formulate a common agenda for the future.

As long as the primary goal of faculties of theology was to prepare students – be it in a *duplex ordo* system – for the ministry in the main Protestant church, the disciplines which were thought to be useful for this purpose had a *raison d’être*, but now the Dutch Protestant Church has decided to withdraw from the state universities, these faculties – including its subfield of religious studies – collapse. This hypothesis would confirm Friedrich Schleiermacher’s idea that the theological disciplines are basically held together in one faculty by their orientation toward the leadership of the church they serve.<sup>36</sup> The ambiguity of a faculty – called theology – which prided itself in providing their students with good scholarly knowledge that only in an indirect way was thought to contribute to the (second *ordo*) ecclesiastical training programme of the church has contributed to the difficult situation we are in at the moment.

It will not be easy to end the deadlock we are in. Several institutions – such as the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER), the Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies (NISIS), and the Dutch Association for the Study of Religion (NGG) – could contribute to this goal. Yet, this list is also an indication of the fragmentation of the field, and, therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the KNAW Report proposes a new initiative – the Netherlands Academy of Religion (NAR) – to overcome the present situation.<sup>37</sup> Because of the fragmented landscape of the academic study of religion and the many diverging interests, it will be difficult to establish more and sustained cooperation in the field of the study of religion. Nevertheless, this is what should happen. In the

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<sup>35</sup> H. Berkhof, Otto de Jong, *Geschiedenis der Kerk*, Nijkerk 1975<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Kurze Darstellung des theologischen Studiums zum Behuf einleitender Vorlesungen*, Berlin 1830<sup>2</sup>, edited by Heinrich Scholz, Darmstadt 1982, § 97.

<sup>37</sup> In the meanwhile the NAR has been established: <https://www.knaw.nl/nl/actueel/nieuws/nederlands-platform-religie-en-levensbeschouwing-opgericht>.

context of innovative funding programmes such as the Future of the Religious Past and awards new venues for the study of religion are explored.<sup>38</sup> We need a broad view of the academic study of religions – including the study of Christianity. Personally I would be inclined to include also those forms of theology that have a broader focus than the own church community and address issues that are relevant for society as a whole. Questions about moral, philosophical and religious orientation are of eminent importance for present-day society and the study of these issues should not be relegated to relatively isolated denominational schools.

Moreover, we must come as quickly as possible to some sort of division of labour between the various institutions. Departments of religion and theology that still have some form of autonomy and actively promote education and research that is relevant for Dutch society should take the lead. Only this way it can be avoided that fields of study – such as the study of the *longue durée* of Judaism – are no longer represented in the Netherlands. The confessional study of theology which mainly serves a particular church cannot be part of this venture and could be concentrated at one location. Doubtless the Netherlands need a centre for the study of religion that has a strong trademark. The Netherlands Academy of Religion has to assemble the existing expertise, which is spread over too many institutions inside and outside faculties and departments of religious studies (and theology), and will hopefully contribute to the future of the academic study of religion as it serves the general public interest in the Netherlands and abroad.

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<sup>38</sup> Very prominent are the recent achievements of Birgit Meyer, who has won several prestigious awards. See: <http://www.nemokennislink.nl/publicaties/antropologe-en-godsdienswetenschapper-birgit-meyer-winnares-spinozapremie-2015>.