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## Au Fond. The Phenomenology of Gerardus van der Leeuw\*

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**Abstract:** This article explores Gerardus van der Leeuw’s view of phenomenology of religion. The phenomenological method he defended is basically a hermeneutical approach in which an observer relates personally and even existentially to the “phenomena” (s)he studies in order to determine their essence (*Wesensschau*). In his anthropology (that reflects on the basic structure of human beings) a similar way of relating to the world is discussed: the “primitive mentality” that is characterized by the “need to participate” (*besoin de participation*). Both phenomenology and *mentalité primitive* imply a critique of modern scholarship. This fundamental criticism of the prevailing (historical) approach in the humanities including religious studies explains the growing distance between van der Leeuw and the majority of scholars of religion in the decades after his death in 1950.

Der Aufsatz handelt über Gerardus van der Leeuws Auffassung von Religionsphänomenologie. Die hantierte phänomenologische Methode ist im Grunde genommen eine hermeneutische, in der der Beobachter sich persönlich und sogar existentiell verhält zu den “Phänomenen”, die er studiert, um ihr Wesen zu ergründen (*Wesensschau*). In seinem Anthropologie, die die Grundstrukturen des menschlichen Seins nachspürt, wird eine ähnliches Verhältnis untersucht: die sogenannte “primitive Mentalität”, die gekennzeichnet wird vom “Bedürfnis zur Partizipation” (*besoin de participation*). Sowohl die Phänomenologie als auch die *mentalité primitive* implizieren eine Kritik der modernen Wissenschaft. Die Fundamentalkritik der vorherrschenden (historischen) Methode in den Geisteswissenschaften, einschließlich der Religionswissenschaft, erklärt die wachsende Distanz zwischen van der Leeuw und der Mehrzahl der Religionswissenschaftler in der Zeit nach seinem Tode im Jahr 1950.

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“La Hollande veut connaître le réel, et Dieu” (Malraux)

## 1 Prolegomena

Speaking about phenomenology is basically asking for trouble. There is no consensus at all who is part of the “phenomenological movement”. In his classical overview Herbert Spiegelberg already discerned a variety of phenomenologies, and there was much more to come.<sup>1</sup> His focus is on philosophy, but he mentions “adaptations” for non-philosophical purposes as well, such as the phenomenology of religion. He refers here to Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye’s 1887 handbook of the history of religions as the first non-philosophical specimen of this branch of learning. Only with Gerardus van der Leeuw’s *Phänomenologie der Religion* did Spiegelberg see a first “attempt” to establish a link with philosophical phenomenology. Then the question comes up of how far phenomenology of religion can be considered to be a more or less coherent movement in itself. Recently Jonathan Tuckett has made a firm plea to distinguish sharply between various types of phenomenology of religion.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and later phenomenologists of religion is especially controversial.

Gerardus van der Leeuw is often a key figure in these discussions. And rightly so, in my view, as he is the one who actually did not only practise phenomenology, but *claimed* to develop a phenomenological approach as well.<sup>3</sup> But what does this method consist of? The many learned and detailed expositions

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**1** Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement. A Historical Introduction*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963; Bernhard Waldenfels, *Phänomenologie in Frankreich*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987.

**2** Jonathan Tuckett, “Clarifying Phenomenologies in the Study of Religion. Separating Kristensen and van der Leeuw from Otto and Eliade.” *Religion* 46, No. 1 (2016): 75–101; id., “Clarifying the Phenomenology of Gerardus van der Leeuw.” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 28 (2016): 227–263; cf. the meticulous work of Jacques Waardenburg, *Reflections on the Study of Religion. Including an Essay on the Work of Gerardus van der Leeuw*. The Hague etc.: Mouton, 1978; id., “Religion between Reality and Idea. A Century of Phenomenology of Religion in the Netherlands.” *Numen* 19 (1972): 128–203, here 199 f.

**3** Arie L. Molendijk, *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands*. Leiden: Brill, 2005, 30–47.

of Gerard van der Leeuw's method have failed to solve this issue. In this contribution I will show why this is a such a difficult question to answer. In my view sophisticated interpretations of the methodological part of his *Phänomenologie der Religion* will never entirely solve this issue, because phenomenology of religion was only to a certain extent a method for van der Leeuw. To understand this, one has to take more or less his whole oeuvre into account. If we get to the bottom (*au fond*) of his approach, it will also become clear why the criticisms of his work after his untimely death in 1950 have been so harsh. How could such a brilliant man have been so utterly wrong in so many cases? I shall start with a brief discussion of the relationship between the phenomenological "methods" of Husserl and van der Leeuw. This turns out to be a complex issue, as van der Leeuw proves to be extremely flexible in appropriating the opinions of scholars who inspired him in some way or another.

## 2 Edmund Husserl and Gerardus van der Leeuw<sup>4</sup>

It may be difficult to judge a book by the translation. Tim Murphy spends quite some time in discussing an explanation of the Husserlian term *epoché* based on the English translation of van der Leeuw's *Phänomenologie*. The footnote that Murphy addresses, however, is not to be found in any of the German editions nor in the French translation that was supervised by van der Leeuw himself. The text of the footnote must be an addition by the translator, which he forgot to put between brackets.<sup>5</sup> The irony of this is that the quotation does not fit Murphy's interpretation, when he tries to establish that Gerardus van der Leeuw was not deeply influenced by Husserl.<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Tuckett severely criticizes Tim Murphy in this respect and refers to "mistakes" in the work of his others, such as the claim that Gerardus van der Leeuw was a student of P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye in Leiden, even though van der Leeuw himself explicitly called both La Saussaye and Kristensen his most important teachers.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Molendijk, *The Emergence of the Science of Religion*, 41–44.

<sup>5</sup> Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1933, English translation by J. E. Turner, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation. A Study in Phenomenology*. London: George Allen Unwin LTD, 1938, 646, n. 1. Translator's notes are normally within square brackets (13). I use this translation in the main text. In important cases I add in the footnotes the German original.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Murphy, *The Politics of the Spirit. Phenomenology, Genealogy, Religion*. Albany: SUNY, 2010, 227. Murphy highlights the role of Hegel in the emergence of the phenomenology of religion.

<sup>7</sup> Tuckett, "Clarifying Phenomenologies in the Study of Religion", 81, note 6; id., "Clarifying the Phenomenology of Gerardus van der Leeuw", 230. Referring to mistakes functions here as a way

Tuckett goes to great lengths to contextualize van der Leeuw’s approach:

“I will not deny that van der Leeuw’s understanding of the *epoché* is not Husserlian. But [...] this is not sufficient to exclude him from philosophical phenomenology. What will be suggested below is that van der Leeuw’s understanding of the *epoché* is Schelerian. The influence of Scheler—and Heidegger—is also important for understanding the connection to Dilthey as it is through their lenses that van der Leeuw understands him”.<sup>8</sup>

Then Tuckett points to another factual mistake in Tim Murphy’s work and refers to Eduard Spranger’s *Lebensformen* (1921), which is indeed a source of inspiration for van der Leeuw. Tuckett also presents some circumstantial evidence that Spranger’s book may be influenced by Max Scheler. Will this kind of interpretation which focuses on *possible* conceptual influences and intertwinements bring us much further? Should not we look first at which connections can be historically established?

Concentrating on the possible influence of Edmund Husserl, the first thing to notice is that his name is mentioned only once in the “Epilegomena”, the methodological part of van der Leeuw’s *Phänomenologie der Religion*. His name occurs in a quotation from Max Scheler, which purports to show that phenomenology has to limit itself to the phenomena.<sup>9</sup> In van der Leeuw’s earlier introduction to the phenomenology of religion the distance between the two approaches had been stressed.<sup>10</sup> And Husserl’s wish to “bracket” the phenomena, aiming at an “objective” vision (*Schau*), seems to differ considerably from van der Leeuw’s methodology, which stresses the “inner connection” between subject and object and the necessity to relate the phenomenon to one’s own life experience.<sup>11</sup> The

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to discredit the interpretation of his opponents, whereas it would not be difficult to interpret at least some of these “mistakes” in a more generous way. Gerardus van der Leeuw, “Confession Scientifique.” *Numen* 1 (1954): 8–15, here 9: “je fus surtout l’élève de deux hommes dont je ne puis dire les noms sans une vive émotion et une reconnaissance profonde”.

<sup>8</sup> Tuckett, “Clarifying the Phenomenology of Gerardus van der Leeuw”, 233 f.

<sup>9</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 640, id., *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 676.

<sup>10</sup> Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Einführung in die Phänomenologie der Religion*. München: Ernst Reinhardt, 1925, Vorwort, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 638, id., *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 674: “*Einschaltung des Phänomens in das eigene Leben*” – “The interpolation of the phenomenon into our own lives” (italics original). Cf. Waardenburg, “Religion Between Reality and Idea”, 161 ff.; Wim Hofstee, *Goden en Mensen. De godsdienstwetenschap van Gerardus van der Leeuw*. Kampen: Kok, 1997, 182. For van der Leeuw’s concept of “epoché” see van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 640, 647 f., 652; id., *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 675 f., 684, 688. One of the most revealing and succinct descriptions of *epoché* can be found in Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Inleiding tot de theologie*. Amsterdam: H. J. Paris, 1935, 68 f. In its negative sense, he claimed,

whole personality of the scholar is involved, who has to bring in his own (Christian) religious presumptions and experiences in order to be able to understand other religious phenomena.<sup>12</sup> The original experience cannot be re-experienced by the phenomenologist, because of the great gap between ourselves and the other. The only thing we can do is *reconstruct* the *meaning* of the phenomena. In this way, “‘reality’ is always *my* reality, history *my* history”.<sup>13</sup> But no arbitrariness is implied, because in the act of understanding *my* meaning and *their* meaning (the believers’ meaning) are ultimately one.<sup>14</sup> The fact that something is revealed to me means that subjectivity and objectivity are somehow united with each other. In the end understanding is being understood, van der Leeuw claims, and this fits in perfectly well with his Christian theory of knowledge, which says that love (understanding) is being loved (understood) by God.<sup>15</sup> Because the formulations vary throughout van der Leeuw’s work, it is difficult to summarize his relationship to Husserl or his methodology as such. Still I would

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this methodological rule is nothing else than a mental reservation (*Einklammerung*); it means that reality *as such* cannot be understood. However, *epoché* also has a positive sense: it designates a specific human action of attaching meaning (sense) to brute factuality. In the second edition of the *Phänomenologie* van der Leeuw added an illuminating footnote, which says that Husserl has misunderstood Dilthey in a rationalistic way: “Doch konnte letzterer [= Husserl] Dilthey nicht verstehen, weil er seine eigene Entdeckung auf eine rationalistische Weise interpretiert”. Gerardus van der Leeuw, (*Phänomenologie der Religion*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1956, 774, note 1).

**12** Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 613 (“unsere Schau der religiösen Erscheinungen [beginnen wir] bewußt vom Christentum aus”); cf. the translation in van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 645: “If [...] I [...] deliberately begin our survey of religious phenomena from the Christian viewpoint, I certainly by no means advocate any dogmatic treatment which, in all religions except Christianity itself, can perceive only spurious religion and degeneration. Rather do I retain the typical phenomenological intellectual suspense (*epoche*), while at the same time I bear in mind that this is possible only in the light of one’s own experience, and that this can never be freed from its own religious determinateness. It would therefore be quite possible, in itself, for a buddhist to set out the phenomenology of religion, with his own as the starting point; and then he would naturally discover the culmination of religion in Buddhism. Whether he would be ‘right’ in so doing is, however, not a matter for phenomenology itself to decide, but for theology or metaphysics”.

**13** Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 638; id., *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 674 (italics original).

**14** Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 636; id., *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 673: “Thus the sphere of meaning is a third realm, subsisting above mere subjectivity and more objectivity. The entrance gate to the reality of primal experience, itself wholly inaccessible, is *meaning*: *my* meaning and *its* meaning, which have become irrevocably one in the act of comprehension”.

**15** Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 648; id., *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 684; cf. Gerardus van der Leeuw, “Strukturpsychologie und Theologie.” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, N. F., 9 (1928): 321–349, here 335 f.

say that Husserl’s work was, at most, of indirect importance to van der Leeuw. The complexity is heightened by the fact that van der Leeuw made use of the work of authors who were influenced by Husserl and Martin Heidegger, such as Karl Jaspers and Ludwig Binswanger.

### 3 Phenomenology and Psychology

What cannot be disputed, however, is the influence on van der Leeuw of (hermeneutical) approaches developed in psychology and psychiatry. It is striking how many times van der Leeuw refers to Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) and other authors who worked in the field of psycho-pathology. Jaspers’ distinction between causal and intelligible relationships was taken up by van der Leeuw<sup>16</sup> to outline his own new “method” of *Einfühlung* (empathy). The first time he backs up this new approach – in his *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* – he refers to Jaspers’ *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* (1913, <sup>3</sup>1923) and Ludwig Binswanger’s *Einführung in die Probleme der Allgemeinen Psychologie* (1922), and quotes a text from “the Dutch psychopathologist L. Bouman”.<sup>17</sup> How did van der Leeuw find this relatively obscure text? I can only think of one explanation: Bouman was one of the teachers of H.C. Rümke, later a famous Dutch psychiatrist, who wrote his doctoral thesis on phenomenological psychiatry in 1923,<sup>18</sup> and an intimate friend of van der Leeuw.<sup>19</sup> Van der Leeuw could have got to know these authors through Rümke.<sup>20</sup>

This connection also explains why van der Leeuw had few hesitations to stress the psychological nature of the phenomenological approach. It is “an attempt to re-experience a certain unity as such, to transpose oneself into an

<sup>16</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Einführung in die Phänomenologie der Religion*, 7; id., *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 637; id., *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 673.

<sup>17</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Einführung in die Phänomenologie der Religion*, 8. It is not specified from which text the quotation is taken.

<sup>18</sup> This line of explanation is backed up by Hofstee, *Goden en Mensen*, 52; cf. Jürgen Kehnscherper, *Theologisch-philosophische Aspekte der religionsphänomenologischen Methode des Gerardus van der Leeuw*. Frankfurt am Main etc: Peter Lang, 1998. Rümke explicitly took Jaspers’ point of view and claimed that Bouman introduced it in Dutch psychiatry. Henricus Cornelius Rümke, *Phaenomenologische en klinisch-psychiatrische studie over geluksgevoel*. Leiden: Ijdo, 1923 (Ph.D. Thesis Utrecht), 27.

<sup>19</sup> Henricus Cornelius Rümke, “Ter Herinnering [in memoriam G. van der Leeuw].” *De Nieuwe Stem* 6 (1951): 88–96. To the best of my knowledge, van der Leeuw never referred to the writings of Rümke in the context of phenomenology of religion.

<sup>20</sup> The van der Leeuw collection of the University Library of Groningen keeps letters of Jaspers (1934–1943) and Binswanger (1926–1942), as well as of Spranger (1928–1940).

object as an organic whole".<sup>21</sup> On one occasion, he almost equates the two labels: "Instead of speaking of science of religion and of phenomenological theology, one could also speak of psychology of religion, if only it could be certain that this psychology of religion has nothing to do, and can have nothing to do, with what is presented to us as psychology of religion from America and elsewhere. In other words, our concern is with psychology of structure in Dilthey's sense".<sup>22</sup> But because of the need to distinguish the new approach from this kind of psychology, van der Leeuw prefers the term "phenomenology of religion". It is clear that Dilthey is more important than Husserl for van der Leeuw's type of phenomenology.

The above is just a sample about how to approach Gerardus van der Leeuw's type of phenomenology from a historical perspective, based on the sources themselves. A general comparison of motives in various "phenomenologists" does not yield very much. It is always possible to point out resemblances, but it is more important to discover which thinkers did actually influence van der Leeuw's way of looking at things. In this context it is also illuminative to see how colleagues appreciated this approach. In the next section I will start with some general observations about van der Leeuw's reputation and then move on to basic criticisms of his work from the early stages on. This sets the stage for a cursory reading of his own scholarly autobiography, which he gave the title "scientific confession".

#### 4 Reputation

Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950) was a man with many interests and extraordinary talents. He had a great taste for music and literature, an easy way of communicating, a talent for organizing, and above all he was an inspiring teacher. Nowadays, as we live in an age of hyperboles, it may not mean much any more, but he truly was a brilliant man. At the age of 28 he became professor of the history of religions at the University of Groningen, where he stayed till the end of his life, notwithstanding offers to move to other institutions, such as the University of Chicago. A great variety of Dutch and international scholars, such as Joachim Wach, Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber, Helmuth Plessner, H.C. Rümke, Raffaele Pettazoni, and Denis de Rougemont

<sup>21</sup> Van der Leeuw, "Strukturpsychologie und Theologie", 322 (translation Waardenburg, *Reflections on the Study of Religion*, 227).

<sup>22</sup> Van der Leeuw, "Strukturpsychologie und Theologie", 324 (translation Waardenburg, *Reflections on the Study of Religion*, 227).

contributed to the *Festschrift* on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday.<sup>23</sup> Van der Leeuw also presided over the first international conference of the *International Association for the History of Religions* in 1950 in Amsterdam.<sup>24</sup> After the ending of the Second World War he accepted the offer to become minister of education, the arts and the sciences. At his funeral prime minister Willem Drees spoke of van der Leeuw as a person of national importance.<sup>25</sup>

Doubtless Gerardus van der Leeuw has been a major figure in the cultural history of the Netherlands and the global study of religion and theology, but nowadays it is hard to assess his importance. His most important and gifted pupil Fokke Sierksma wrote that his teacher had been interred in the pantheon of great men, with whom we don't have to bother again.<sup>26</sup> His successor at the Groningen chair for the history of religion, Theo van Baaren, opined that theologians highly valued van der Leeuw as a scholar of religion, because they did not know anything about this field, and put him in a separate box as a theologian. In his view it would be better to state the opposite.<sup>27</sup> Whatever may be meant by this, it shows how difficult it is to come to a fair appreciation of the work of this once much admired scholar. Already in 1957 van Baaren had launched a severe critique of van der Leeuw's *Phänomenologie*, which convincingly showed the poor ethnographical basis of this opus magnum.<sup>28</sup>

But also during his lifetime colleagues were not convinced of the merits of van der Leeuw's approach. His teacher Kristensen was critical about van der Leeuw's *Phänomenologie*<sup>29</sup> – to say the least – and in a personal letter his old friend Karel Hendrik Roessingh gave the following appreciation of one of van der Leeuw's early books:

**23** Willem Jan Kooiman, Jan Mari van Veen (eds.), *Pro Regno pro Sanctuario. Een bundel studies en bijdragen van vrienden en vereerders bij de zestige verjaardag van Prof. Dr. G. van der Leeuw*. Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1950. The book provides an extensive bibliography of van der Leeuw's work with some 650 titles.

**24** Claas Jouco Bleeker, Gerardus Willibrordus Joannes Drewes, Klaas Aldert Hendrik Hidding (eds.), *Proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress for the History of Religions*. Amsterdam: North-Holland Publication Company, 1951.

**25** Fokke Sierksma, "Prof. Dr. G. van der Leeuw in tienjarig perspectief." *Het Parool*, 26 november 1960.

**26** Sierksma, "Prof. Dr. G. van der Leeuw in tienjarig perspectief".

**27** Hofstee, *Goden en Mensen*, 116 (personal communication).

**28** Theodoor Pieter van Baaren, "De ethnologische basis van de faenomenologie van G. van der Leeuw." *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 11 (1957): 321–353.

**29** Willem Hofstee, "Phenomenology of Religion versus Anthropology of Religion? The 'Groningen School' 1920–1990." In Sigurd Hjelde (ed.), *Man, Meaning & Mystery: Hundred Years of History of Religions in Norway. The Heritage of W. Brede Kristensen*. Leiden: Brill, 2000, 173–190, here 173 f.

“Don’t quote so overwhelmingly much. [...] With insiders it only creates the impression that the writer has a most convenient card-index. Even worse, I think, is your approach, as far as it is misleading. You often create the impression that various authors basically agree with your point of view, whereas they don’t, even at the issue at stake”.<sup>30</sup>

This is no small criticism. These kind of reproaches signal an issue that goes very deep with van der Leeuw’s approach, which he outlines in an autobiographical sketch.

## 5 Scholarly Autobiography

Gerardus van der Leeuw seldom spoke about his own work. The major exception is his speech at the occasion of the conferment of an honorary doctorate at the Masaryk University of Brno (Czech Republic) in 1946.<sup>31</sup> The title “scientific confession” indicates already a critique of common scholarly practice. Talking about his years in Leiden as a student he immediately points to a new form of piety as well as to a new scholarly élan which does not cherish the illusion that all great scholarship has been done by liberals. W. Brede Kristensen is the teacher who has inspired his love for the history of religions. Van der Leeuw characterizes Kristensen’s teaching as “psychological” (*plutôt psychologique*), as focussed not so much on historical development as on common traits of religions over time and place (9). This approach has been very important to him, van der Leeuw writes. Reading the work of Rudolf Otto and Nathan Söderblom convinced him further that he was on the right track.

Van der Leeuw continued his studies at the universities of Berlin and Göttingen for one year, and presented his thesis on the concept of God in old Egyptian texts in Leiden in 1916.<sup>32</sup> He told his audience that he began to look for means to cover the whole field of the religions of the world and to find a way that leads from the various phenomena in the broad variety of religion to the essence of religion. The work of Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye and Edvard

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<sup>30</sup> Roessingh in a letter to van der Leeuw, 17 June 1919 (my translation). The letter is quoted in Hofstee, *Goden en mensen*, 38 f.

<sup>31</sup> Gerardus van der Leeuw, “Confession Scientifique.” *Numen* 1 (1954): 8–15. I will translate and paraphrase in a free manner and give the page numbers in the main text. The plan to publish this speech also in a volume with a selection of his essays – provisionally titled *Deus – Homo. Verspreide Godsdienstwetenschappelijke Opstellen* – has not been realized.

<sup>32</sup> Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Godsvoorstellingen in de Oud-Aegyptische pyramidetexten*. Leiden: Brill, 1916.

Lehmann<sup>33</sup> taught him how to describe the “religious phenomenon systematically” (10). This kind of “phenomenology of religion” – this is the first time this crucial term is used in the “confession” – involves according to van der Leeuw not only drawing up an inventory and giving a classification of the phenomena “as they appear in history”, but a “psychological description” as well.

“[This is] not only the description of what is visible from the outside, but above all of the lived experience born of what can only become reality after it has been admitted into the life of the observer him- or herself” (10).<sup>34</sup>

The phenomenologist has to be personally involved – their own experience and subjectivity are brought into play. This approach has been a guiding principle – as van der Leeuw stressed – in his whole work not only as an historian of religion, but also as a theologian, art critic and even as a politician.

Carrying on the magnificent, but “essentially unphilosophical” work of La Saussaye and Lehmann, van der Leeuw claims that he found himself in the midst of the “great phenomenological stream” that was predominant in other fields of study as well.<sup>35</sup> This led to redefinitions of concepts such as “holy” and “power”, and to a new round of methodological reflection. It is remarkable, how casual van der Leeuw formulates the “discovery” of the “new science” (*science nouvelle*) and presents it more or less as his own invention. Without much ado, van der Leeuw’s “confession” then switches to the important issue of the “multiformity of mental life” (11). This is no small thing indeed, as he claims that one cannot understand religious life on the basis of modern thought as it has been developed by Descartes and Kant. One has to admit – he goes on – the existence of a primitive mentality, not preceding, but also co-existing with modern thought: “il y a un moderne dans tout primitif et un primitif dans tout moderne” (11). According to van der Leeuw, the study of religious phenomena leads inevitably to the study of religious man.

**33** See the phenomenological part of Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte*, 2 Vols. Freiburg im Breisgau: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1887–1889, Vol. I, 48–170; Edvard Lehmann, “Erscheinungswelt der Religion (Phänomenologie der Religion).” *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Vol. 2. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1910, 497–578; cf. Molendijk, *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands*, 113–122.

**34** I have modified Sharpe’s translation slightly; Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion. A History*. London: Duckworth, 1975, 1986, 231.

**35** In this context van der Leeuw referred to the German edition and the English and French translation of his *Great Phenomenology*, and to the *Einführung in die Phänomenologie der Religion*, which was based on his *Inleiding tot de Godsdienstgeschiedenis* (Haarlem: Bohn, 1924). A revised edition appeared under the new title *Inleiding tot de Phaenomenologie van den Godsdienst* (Haarlem: Bohn, 1948). The original edition was also explicitly “phenomenological” in character.

## 6 Anthropology

Although the areas of phenomenology and anthropology are closely related to each other (a phenomenologist will necessarily encounter issues about the nature and destiny of man),<sup>36</sup> they should not be confused with each other. That is the reason van der Leeuw published separate studies in the field of anthropology. His monograph *Der Mensch und die Religion* from 1941 stands out in this respect. Van der Leeuw considered the book to be an attempt to trace back ethnographical and psychological questions to their basic anthropological substance.<sup>37</sup> It is what we would call a specimen of philosophical – or even theological – anthropology,<sup>38</sup> whereas van der Leeuw's studies on primitive mentality have a more empirical character. Here van der Leeuw has been inspired by the work of the French philosopher and cultural anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, to whom he has dedicated his own monograph on primitive man and religion.<sup>39</sup>

Extremely important to van der Leeuw is Lévy-Bruhl's concept of the "need to participate" (*le besoin de participation*), which is characteristic of the primitive mentality. Primitive man connects immediately to the outer world, experiences to be part of things, whereas modern man "reduces" the world to a great extent: the world becomes the object of experiments.<sup>40</sup> The modern mentality – also referred to as an anthropological structure or form of life – is defined by its capacity for abstraction. The path from the primitive to the modern form of life, van der Leeuw writes, enlarges the distance between subject and object. Reality is slowly abstracted from, till it becomes a conception of the knowing subject, who is more and more detached from reality.<sup>41</sup> Primitive mentality however is not, as van der Leeuw stresses time and again, a thing from past. Certainly it is wrong to see primitive mentality as confined to primitive people, children or the mentally ill. It is still part and parcel of modern human beings.

The dialectics – if this term is permitted (it was not used by van der Leeuw) – between subject and object is according to him fundamental for religions. What else is myth, if not the awakening of a sense of self opposed to other beings such

<sup>36</sup> For historical reasons I did not replace the term "man" by "humans" or a similar word.

<sup>37</sup> Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Der Mensch und die Religion*. Basel: Haus zum Falken, 1941, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Der Mensch und die Religion*, 45, where van der Leeuw claims that basically there is only an anthropology of reborn man, i. e. reborn Christians.

<sup>39</sup> Gerardus van der Leeuw, *De primitieve mensch en de religie*. Groningen: Wolters, 1937, 1952, trans. as *L'Homme primitif et la religion*. Paris: Alcan, 1940; cf. id., *La structure de la mentalité primitive*. Strasbourg 1928.

<sup>40</sup> Van der Leeuw, *De primitieve mens en de religie*, 67.

<sup>41</sup> Van der Leeuw, *De primitieve mens en de religie*, 144.

as gods? Van der Leeuw saw the background of religion in the original identity between subject and object, the union between God and man, which is often envisioned as the ultimate goal as well. To become human implies becoming aware of oneself. In the language of religion this means that human beings become aware of their sins (in front of God). On the one hand, the Christian religion is characterized by a breach caused by sin, which has to be healed, but, on the other hand, it presupposes for van der Leeuw an “undivided life in the hand of God” in notions such as incarnation and the sacraments.<sup>42</sup>

Van der Leeuw personally opted ultimately for an anthropology of the reborn Christian, as he called it. It is impossible, he wrote, to reach man as he is born, because at this very moment he is lost in the world, in the realm of death. Such statements are not easy to ascertain.<sup>43</sup> It comes not as a surprise that colleagues could not always appreciate the work of van der Leeuw. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga asked for more precise notions.<sup>44</sup> In the last resort van der Leeuw’s worldview has a Christian character. In this sense the study of anthropology leads him to the field of theology, which thematizes the last (eschatological) horizon of all knowledge. Ultimately human knowledge and understanding is touched in his view by revelation, by the Logos. It is no coincidence that one of his last substantial monographs was a theology of the sacraments, as the intersections between the divine and the human were crucial for van der Leeuw.<sup>45</sup>

## 7 What is Gerardus van der Leeuw’s phenomenology really about?

Without any doubt Gerardus van der Leeuw attached great importance to the phenomenological approach (of religion), but what exactly does it involve? It

<sup>42</sup> Van der Leeuw, *De primitieve mens en de religie*, 94.

<sup>43</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Der Mensch und die Religion*, 45: “Es ist unmöglich, an den geborenen Menschen heranzukommen. Denn er wird zur Welt geboren; im Augenblick, wo geboren wird, verliert er sich an die Welt, d.h.: an den Tod. Indem wir ihn suchen, indem er sich sucht, finden wir, findet er die Welt, den Tod. Indem wir uns selbst anzufassen meinen, greifen wir unsere Kleider und halten statt uns selbst nur den Mantel in der Hand. Wir können nur an den wiedergeborenen Menschen herankommen. Es gibt weder eine Anthropologie des geborenen (Natur-), noch des gemachten (Kultur-)menschen. Es gibt eine Anthropologie nur des wiedergeborenen Menschen”. An evocative passage indeed, but hard to swallow.

<sup>44</sup> Huizinga to van der Leeuw, letter of 17 January 1941. In Johan Huizinga, *Briefwisseling, Vol. III: 1934–1945*. Utrecht, Antwerpen: Veen – Tjeenk Willink, 1991, 315 f.

<sup>45</sup> Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Sacramentstheologie*. Nijkerk: Callenbach 1949.

is not the term in itself that is crucial here, as other terms were used as well,<sup>46</sup> but a specific way of looking at and dealing with phenomena. In his inaugural address which he held at the University of Groningen in 1918, he did not give a full account of what phenomenology is about, but evidently it has a strong psychological dimension. By comparing and looking for resemblances “in a psychological, and not in a historical sense”, the phenomenological approach attempts to reach a better and more intimate understanding of its object.<sup>47</sup> In this view religion cannot and should not be reduced to something else; in other words it has an independent status and should be treated in its own right. The envisioned comparison involves all religions, including Judaism and Christianity, and the attempt should be made to understand religious phenomena with which one is not acquainted by relating them to their own religious experience. This type of psychological approach is – as we have seen above – not to be confused with reductionist and positivist forms of psychology and is, therefore, better named phenomenology.<sup>48</sup>

Van der Leeuw’s aversion to reductionism and even “rationalism” is key to understand his point of view. As far as the first issue is concerned, phenomena have to be seen according to van der Leeuw in their wholeness and not be parcelled out in pieces. A purely analytical approach does not do justice to the phenomena.<sup>49</sup> It is remarkable that van der Leeuw described the development of the sciences and scholarship in general as a process of slimming and reducing, of disenchantment and abstraction.<sup>50</sup> This may be an irreversible development,

**46** Vgl. van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 638, note 1; id., *Religion*, 674, note 1: “What I myself understand by the phenomenology is called by [Heinrich] Hackmann General History of Religions (*Allgemeine Religionsgeschichte*)” and by Hermann Usener the Principles of the Forms of Religious Ideas (*Formenlehre der religiösen Vorstellungen*); cf. van der Leeuw *Inleiding tot de godsdienstgeschiedenis*, 6.

**47** Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Plaats en taak van de godsdienstgeschiedenis in de theologische wetenschap*. Groningen, Den Haag: Wolters, 1918, 7.

**48** Gerardus van der Leeuw, “Strukturpsychologie und Theologie”, 322: “die so verstandene psychologische Methode (man könnte besser ‘phänomenologische’ sagen, wenn man diesem Terminus die umfassendere Bedeutung gibt, die er z. B. bei P. Hofmann und Jaspers hat)”.

**49** Van der Leeuw, “Strukturpsychologie und Theologie”, 322: “Die Richtlinien [...] können wir [...] kurz zusammenfassen wie folgt: sie ist zunächst ein Versuch, eine Ganzheit als solche nachzuerleben, sich in einen Gegenstand als organisches Ganzes hineinzusetzen. Diese *Einführung* kann nur stattfinden durch *phänomenologische* Analyse. Der Gegenstand wird von dieser Analyse nicht erfaßt und in seine Teile zerlegt, sondern in seinem Wesen geschaut [...]. Nicht der kausale Zusammenhang ist hier der Zweck, sondern der Strukturzusammenhang: es gilt nicht kausale Bande zu knüpfen, sondern verständliche Beziehungen aufzufinden”.

**50** Gerardus van der Leeuw, “Het vermageringsproces in de wetenschap” (1941). In id., *Levensvormen*. Amsterdam: H. J. Paris, 1948, 85–99.

but van der Leeuw’s ambivalence about it is palpable. “The sciences become more and more a refined instrument that evades reality”.<sup>51</sup> Phenomenology counters this tendency, by trying to understand what something means, and thus provides a much more concrete and meaningful access to reality.

Van der Leeuw also warned against rationalism. Religious phenomena should not be interpreted solely in rational terms, as if religion provides foremost an explanation of how the world functions. The Logos can never completely take the place of the Mythos. In this respect modern man may learn something from primitive man. One of van der Leeuw’s favourite quotations is the following one by G. K. Chesterton: “When the professor is told by the barbarian that once there was nothing except a great feathered serpent, unless the learned man feels a thrill and a half temptation to wish it were true, he is no judge of such things at all”.<sup>52</sup> The scholar has to be able to experience this sensation, otherwise he or she is no good.

Phenomenology was for Gerardus van der Leeuw more than just a scholarly method. He refers to great artists who have the gift to penetrate into the essence of things. Understanding is *au fond* more an art than a science. “It is in fact the primal and deeply human art of the actor which is indispensable to all arts, but to the sciences of the mind (*Geisteswissenschaften*) as well.”<sup>53</sup> This quotation – taken from the methodological “epilegomena” of van der Leeuw’s *Great Phaeno* – shows that the act of understanding is based on a profound human capacity to bridge the distance between ourselves and the other. The next statement is very explicit in this respect:

“Phenomenology [...] is not a method that has been reflectively elaborated, but is man’s true vital activity, consisting in losing himself neither in things nor in the *ego*, neither in hovering above objects like a god nor dealing with them like an animal, but in doing what is given to neither animal nor god: comprehendingly standing aside and contemplating what appears (*verstehend zur Seite stehen und schauen, was sich zeigt*).”<sup>54</sup>

Here phenomenology is not taken in a strict methodological, but more in an anthropological sense. It almost seems to be – to use the Heideggerian term – an *Existential*.

I am aware of the fact that the quotation above is followed by an explanation of how phenomenology works: it clarifies, it looks for intelligible relations, and

<sup>51</sup> Van der Leeuw, “Het vermageringsproces”, 93.

<sup>52</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 639; id., *Religion*, 675; Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925, 116.

<sup>53</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 639; id., *Religion*, 675 (translation slightly adapted).

<sup>54</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 640 f.; id., *Religion*, 676.

the phenomenological work has to be corrected by the “most conscientious philological and archaeological research”.<sup>55</sup> But how this is to be done, is not clear. It amounts to a somewhat esoteric view of scholarship, which has allegedly one sole desire: to testify to what is shown to the phenomenological eye.<sup>56</sup> The section of the epilegomena on “religion” is hard to summarize, but key is the attempt to outline the limitations of phenomenological understanding. Van der Leeuw states that we cannot understand (in a scholarly sense of the word) God’s revelation, only our human answer to it. Then the argument switches to the perspective of the *homo religiosus*, who “knows quite definitely” that something meets him on the road, a power beyond him, “the numinous” (to use Rudolf Otto’s phrase), or the “Wholly Other”.<sup>57</sup> Van der Leeuw seems to have no fear at all to move beyond scholarly discourse – even in the methodological part of his *opus magnum*.

At this point – van der Leeuw goes on – we find the limits of human power and the beginning of divine power which together point to the ultimate goal of religion: salvation (*Heil*). This leads him to another question: how do we understand, what, in principle, eludes our understanding? The answer to this question is that understanding in the very last resort is being understood.<sup>58</sup> All understanding, irrespective of its object, is in this view ultimately religious.<sup>59</sup> The *epoché* thus is not the attitude of the cold-blooded spectator, but involves the loving eye on the beloved object. All love is an answer to the love that was bestowed upon us. “This is the Platonic, as well as the Christian, experience”.<sup>60</sup> Is this not theology? Van der Leeuw suggested that there is only a very thin line between phenomenology and theology, and he ends with a saying of the Catholic theologian Erich Przywara that “evidence” means essentially to be prepared for revelation.<sup>61</sup> Such ideas and quotations testify doubtless to van der Leeuw’s *esprit synthétique*, but are confused and confusing for everyday readers and

<sup>55</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 642; id., *Religion*, 677.

<sup>56</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 643; id., *Religion*, 677 f.

<sup>57</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 645 f.; id., *Religion*, 681.

<sup>58</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 647: “Je tiefer das Verständnis in ein Geschehen eindringt, je besser es ‘versteht’, um so klarer wird dem Verstehenden deutlich, daß der letzte Grund des Verstehens nicht in ihm selber, sondern in einem Andern, das ihn, von jenseits der Grenze her, versteht”; id., *Religion*, 683 f.: “the more deeply comprehension penetrates any event, and the better it ‘understands’ it, the clearer it becomes to the understanding mind that the ultimate ground of comprehension lies not within itself, but in some ‘other’ by which it is comprehended from beyond the frontier”.

<sup>59</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 648; id., *Religion*, 684.

<sup>60</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 648; id., *Religion*, 684.

<sup>61</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 648; id., *Religion*, 684.

many – if not most – of his colleagues. I do not think that a detailed discussion of sometimes obscure passages in van der Leeuw’s work will bring more clarity in these matters. Whether this is theology or not, the conclusion must simply be that according to Gerardus van der Leeuw human understanding finds its last ground in God’s love.

## 8 Tua res agitur

What has so far been learnt? Van der Leeuw’s phenomenological approach categorizes phenomena and tries to understand their essence. This type of understanding presupposes that the knowing subject is somehow existentially related to the object it researches. This mentality is more than just a scholarly method, it is *au fond* a way of *in-der-Welt-sein*. You could call this special way of relating to the world a basic anthropological structure. The phenomenological attitude again points in van der Leeuw’s view to a boundary, where human understanding is transformed into being understood (by God). This dialectics is again thematized in religions. In Gerardus van der Leeuw’s language: becoming human (becoming aware of other things and human beings) is grounded in Christ’s becoming human, that is in the incarnation.

Van der Leeuw has always stressed the importance of an inner connection between subject and object. In this sense the primitive mentality, which is not a thing of the past, but still present in modern culture, is crucial for real understanding. If we don’t succeed in putting things in an intelligible relationship to us, we are left with abstractions and deadly factuality.<sup>62</sup> The phenomenological approach is not without its dangers, but if one does not risk it, one gets only statistics and chronicles. “[Then] one remains outside reality. One wants to be strictly scientific, but one remains only strict, not scientific any more”.<sup>63</sup> Applying a strict scholarly empirical approach implies according to van der Leeuw that you overlook real religious phenomena, which from his point of view is unscientific. Phenomenology is thus a necessary correction of the prevailing tendency towards scientific abstraction. Participating in the object of research and relating it to your own experience is the return of the primitive mentality (*besoin de la participation*) at a scholarly level. The practice of phenomenology learns us that knowing is fundamentally loving. Van der Leeuw’s works wants

<sup>62</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Inleiding tot de godsdienstgeschiedenis*, 9.

<sup>63</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Inleiding tot de godsdienstgeschiedenis*, 10. This is a rather free rendering of the original. Here “scientific” has a broader meaning, and includes approaches within the humanities.

to be an eye-opener for that what is foreign, which somewhere is deep-down in ourselves. Our cause is at stake here, as van der Leeuw’s life motto runs: tua res agitur.<sup>64</sup>

## 9 The Return of the Repressed

Gerardus van der Leeuw’s phenomenology (of religion) may be seen as the return of the repressed. It stands for a more direct way of connecting with the world, brushing aside the tiresome world of abstraction and “just” telling the facts. Phenomenology thus is a necessary correction of the prevailing tendency towards scientific abstraction. It represents an entirely new model of scholarship, which reverses the old one, that allegedly sticks to the surface, whereas the phenomenologist goes at the bottom (*au fond*) of things. The need to participate, to be involved in the objects, to see their essence, is an expression of the wish to reform scholarship completely. It implies a paradigm shift, as primitive mentality takes over. Primitive mentality is not any longer primarily a subject to be studied, but represents a method of understanding and research. Of course, it is a reflected primitive mentality, but still a “second naïveté” is miles away from old school scholarship.

Scholars have to understand according to van der Leeuw what phenomena mean, and logically this implies that they have to relate meaningfully to reality. Notwithstanding utterances that suggest that it is just a new form of scholarship, phenomenology is a radical new way of looking at things that implies a groundbreaking critique of common scholarly practice. It is basically anti-historical, as the phenomenological subject may relate immediately (in a psychological way) to what he or she experiences by reconstructing meaningful relations. Here van der Leeuw, of course, stumbles on a lot of tricky methodological issues, such as the complex relationship between immediacy and construction. He could write intelligently about these issues, synthesizing a lot of literature, but from the point of view of empirically oriented scholars the whole phenomenological approach was soft as butter. How could one be sure that its results were to be trusted?

Van der Leeuw may have been a genius and certainly there are many brilliant, evocative passages in his work, and he may have had insightful intuitions, but basically the objectivity (or intersubjectivity) of the results could not be

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<sup>64</sup> Vgl. Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Inleiding tot de theologie* (1935), second edition. Amsterdam: H. J. Paris, 1948, 149 (Horatius, *Epist.* 1, 18, 84).

guaranteed. And what was perhaps even worse, colleagues could point to severe mistakes in van der Leeuw’s writings. As his old Leiden university friend Karel Hendrik Roessingh already noticed, he was able to make the points of view of other scholars to fit what he wanted. Although he claimed that the phenomenological approach had to be kept in check by the results of empirical scholarship, he has been carried away by his own brilliance of seeing intelligible relations, which – as it turned out – could not stand the test of critical empirical research. This and the implied fundamental criticism of the prevailing (historical) approaches in the humanities including religious studies explain the growing distance between Gerardus van der Leeuw and the majority of scholars of religion in the decades after his death in 1950. For me personally this does not mean that his work does not merit attention, but it goes beyond “normal science”, and a research proposal written in this vein would have no chance at all in the present-day competition for grants.