Amsterdam University Press

NTT JOURNAL FOR THEOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION 79.2 (2025) 130-146
HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.5117/NTT2025.2.002.MOLE

The Heat of Change: The Study of Religion and Theology in the Netherlands (1989–2024)

Arie L. Molendijk
Professor emeritus of the History of Christianity and Philosophy, Faculty of Religion, Culture and Society, University of Groningen
a.l.molendijk@rug.nl
ORCID: 0000-0001-8576-5624

Abstract
This article discusses the transformation of theology and religious studies in the Netherlands between 1989 and 2024. Molendijk reflects on the significant changes within Dutch academia, particularly the increase in student numbers and the shift towards efficiency-driven education and research. He critiques the management style of universities ("New Public Management"), focusing on bureaucratic control and assessment procedures that prioritize measurable targets over academic freedom and quality. The article also examines the decline of theology programs due to the secularization of Dutch society and the tension between theology and religious studies. Molendijk stresses the need for cooperation within the field but remains sceptical about achieving it. Despite bureaucratic challenges, he highlights the resilience of dedicated scholars and students in maintaining academic standards.

Keywords: Theology, Religious Studies, Netherlands, research assessment, bureaucratic control, cooperation

Introduction

The theme of this contribution (my farewell speech) is both tricky and sensitive.[1] On earlier occasions when I talked and wrote about how theology

1 This article is basically the slightly reworked text of my valedictory lecture, given at my farewell symposium "Structural Change in Academic Life: Managerialism, Diversity and the

and religious studies have evolved over time in the Netherlands, I received a fair amount of criticism. Among these criticisms, my Protestant bias, my studies at the liberal faculty of theology in Leiden and a lack of familiarity with developments within Reformed and Catholic institutions of higher education, stand out. Colleagues felt that their institutions were not always fairly treated. The difficulty here may also be that institutions are changing at a pace that is hard to keep up with. However, I will make another attempt here, relying more than previously on my own experiences. I will begin with some observations about the heat of change in academia in general.

General picture

Our faculty of Religion, Culture and Society is fortunate to be part of a broad-based and renowned university, as we profit from cooperation with colleagues from other faculties. Many of the challenges faced by faculties and departments of theology and religious studies are a direct result of wider academic transformations since the 1950s and 1960s and particularly in the previous three decades. The most fundamental change over the last 75 years is probably the transformation of relatively small universities centred around professors into large institutions for mass learning and research, which are professionally managed. After the Second World War, the University of Groningen had less than 2,000 students. This number rose over 30 years to about 16,000 in the late 1970s, and the University currently has over 34,000 students.[2] Almost a quarter of them are international students from more than 130 countries.[3] To manage such large numbers of students, evidently an efficient organisation is needed, which helps students to obtain their qualifications in a timely manner. Already a long time ago, the situation had

Quest for Excellence," University of Groningen, June 21, 2024. I made only a few readjustments to address the present-day situation of higher education in the Netherlands after the severe budget cuts of the new government "Schoof" (which was sworn in on Tuesday July 2, 2024). My speech draws on material from a talk I gave in Utrecht in 2013 at the "Symposium Past Trajectories – New Directions: The Study of Religion Today," organised by Christoph Baumgartner, Christian Lange and Birgit Meyer, and on Molendijk, "The Study of Religion in the Netherlands," *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 71, no. 1 (2017): 5-18. I would like to thank Arie van der Kooij, Bob Becking, Hetty Zock, Mariya Ivanova, Kees van Deemter and the reviewers of this journal for their help and critical comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

2 Klaas van Berkel, *Universiteit van het Noorden*, vol. III: "De zakelijke Universiteit" (Hilversum: Verloren, 2022), 74-75, 405, 634.

3 University of Groningen, "Substantial increase in Dutch students at the UG," accessed March 11, 2024, https://www.rug.nl/news/2020/10/flinke-groei-nederlandse-studenten-aan-de-rug.

become untenable. For instance, in the mid-1960s, 75% of medical students at the University of Leiden completed their final examinations within 10 years; in the Faculty of Arts, only 36% received their final certificate within this period. The costs of the education system exploded. Between 1950 and 1967, higher education costs rose from 0.3% to 1.8% of the Gross National Product. As a proportion of the national expenditure, they rose sixfold from about 1% to 6,5%.[4]

The focus on efficiency and measurable targets is understandable, but it can lead to the abandonment of entire programmes. The study of Frisian language and culture may ultimately be preserved in Groningen through an intervention of the former minister of education and sciences. However, the Netherlands no longer has a full bachelor's or master's programme in Portuguese. The closure of educational programmes is not confined to rare speciality subjects (*Orchideenfächer*). For instance, the Dutch learning programme at the Free University of Amsterdam was recently closed. The tendency to focus exclusively on enrolments and on input and output becomes difficult to digest when it threatens the autonomy of the professionals who do the actual work of educating and whose efforts ultimately guarantee the quality of teaching programmes. Empty formalism cannot replace the discernment of experienced faculty. All the "quality assurance" processes tell us nothing of the value of what actually happens in a classroom; they merely tell us that the processes of assurance have been complied with. Although overrated, students' evaluations may to some extent be an exception.[5]

The enormous increase in numbers of students also meant that study programmes were streamlined and adapted according to the wishes and capacities of the students. The staff realised that some improvements had to be made and that professors could not keep presenting the same lecture notes year after year. More interactive forms of education were needed. This trajectory culminated in the current situation in which we have course manuals, which detail the objectives, means, reading material (quantifying how many pages the student should and could read in one hour) and the desired outcomes for each lecture. A further requirement was to include the outcome of feedback received from students who had completed the

4 Pieter Slaman, *De Glazen Toren. De Leidse Universiteit, 1970-2020* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2021), 60-61.

5 Stefan Collini, *What are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012), 107-109; Daryl Close, "Why Student Ratings of Faculty are Unethical," *Journal of Academic Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2024): doi: 10.1007/s10805-024-09562-3; Mark Reid, "Iedereen weet dat evaluaties niet deugen (maar toch blijven ze bestaan)," accessed April 22, 2024, https://www.mareonline.nl/nieuws/waarom-evaluaties-niet-deugen/.

previous course and measures taken to address their concerns in the next course manual. Consequently, our courses improve every year. Feedback by way of institutional audits is also much appreciated. At a mid-term review, colleagues from the faculty of philosophy thought it surprising that in the programme of our research master, we included a course with "history" in its title. This suggested to them that the course was not "cutting-edge" to use a favourite bureaucratic phrase.

The emphasis on students' experience points to a tension between what I refer to as consumerism for the sake of convenience and the idea of education, which entails confronting worlds previously unknown. In my view, it is not advisable to approach students as clients who pay for a product and are basically entitled to get a master's degree just by following the study programme. One of my early experiences as a junior teacher who gave many students low and unsatisfactory grades was the following admonishment by the dean: "Dear Arie, good teaching leads to good results." You do not need to have taken a course in logic to understand the corollary of this statement. The whole system tends to reinforce a culture of complaint, resulting in remarks such as "couldn't Sigmund Freud have expressed himself more clearly?" My point here, of course, is not that Freud is beyond criticism; it is that the present-day academic climate may lead to a form of complacency among students who do not want to be genuinely challenged by their teachers.

These developments in the field of teaching and the growing numbers of students— together with the pressure to publish, preferably in high-ranking journals—lead to more pressure on the teaching staff. This issue has finally been acknowledged by the management but has only led to limited adjustments, such as introducing new assessment procedures (the Recognition and Rewards programme which tries to do justice to the multiplicity of tasks of scholars).[6] Still the "Result & Development Interviews" continue to play a significant role. These are conducted annually by professors with managerial duties (*leidinggevende*) with employees (which is probably the best term in this case). These interviews are about past performance and especially about "smart" agreements on what will be achieved in the near future. It is important to note the language used to explain what has to be done: "Agreements are made during the interview regarding the results that have to be achieved and the personal development the employee should make." The employer thus aims to take control of the person of the staff member.

6 The Dutch Research Council (NWO), "Recognition and Rewards," accessed October 8, 2024, https://www.nwo.nl/en/recognition-and-rewards.

During these interviews, the employee's performance is evaluated using a range from "very good" to "not yet satisfactory" and even "unsatisfactory." Generally, the people involved do not look forward to these talks, but they try to make the best of it, not making it too hard for their "colleagues." Nevertheless, these interviews are a serious matter, as promotion, and, in the worst case, discharge, are decided on the basis of these talks.

To ensure that these interviews are conducted in the right way, obligatory training sessions for department chairs were organised. It was emphasised that the objective of the interviews was to establish files on all staff members. Targets that had not been met had to be filed. *Dossier opbouwen* (as it was informally called) did not sound very reassuring to me. This impression got stronger as the Faculty Board convened more training sessions to clarify what was expected. On one occasion, a coach was hired, who brought a professional actor to help us to practice and improve our interview techniques. How should an employee who had been ill be dealt with? One of our colleagues said that he would start the interview by addressing his colleague's health issues. The coach reacted immediately, saying that this was the wrong approach, as first and foremost, the targets listed in the previous interview had to be addressed.

Furthermore, the coach explained what we could gain by establishing a leaner way of working. "Quick and dirty" methods (his words) were recommended to solve our time management problems. To make his point, he referred to Ryan Air, which had skipped all kinds of services and was much more efficient and cheaper than traditional airlines such as KLM or Lufthansa. This may sound like a rather extreme example, but our Faculty Board thought it fruitful to have another follow-up session with this coach.[7] My point is not that staff members who do not function appropriately should not be held accountable; rather, it is that the system that is put into place to ensure this objective may be counterproductive and create distrust.[8] For this reason and others reasons, several companies have abolished the "Result & Development Interviews."

In a certain sense, the comparison with Ryan Air makes sense, as modern staff are indeed servants of the automated systems used by the universities. Self-service is apparently deemed a good tool in an organisation that aims for excellence. These self-service systems aim to facilitate a wide range of

7 https://beoordelingstraining.nl/.

8 Jason Dana, "The Utter Uselessness of Job Interviews," *The New York Times*, April 8, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/08/opinion/sunday/the-utter-uselessness-of-job-interviews.html.

bureaucratic processes. In case you forget to comply with their demands, they kindly send you messages such as: "Dear Arie, you have tasks waiting to be processed in Shared Services. Could you please check and complete these tasks?" It is always nice to delve deeper into the automated systems to see what is expected from you. Unfortunately, this can take some time. The burden of administrative work has been transferred to the academic staff, whereas at the other hand many new non-academic positions have been created. Time management courses and health programmes offered by the University and even a *verzuimcoach* (an individual tasked with helping to reduce absenteeism) may be useful. But surely a much simpler and better idea would be to reduce the bureaucratic workload of the staff?

The changing field of theology and religious studies

Having outlined how universities have changed in a relatively short time, I now come to the main subject of this contribution: the field of theology and religious studies. Their development must not only be seen against the background sketched above; influential changes in the Dutch religious landscape since the 1960s must also be considered. From being one of the most religious countries with a high degree of church attendance, the Netherlands became one of Europe's most secularised nations. A decline in the number of theology students was the logical consequence of the decline of the major Dutch churches. Our Faculty at the University of Groningen, now with 200 to 250 students, constitutes only a small fraction of the student population of this large university. Even our religious studies programme, which was initiated in the 1980s, does not attract as many students as one might expect, given the focus on current societal topics.

This development is true for the entire field of theology and religious studies in the Netherlands. Numbers went down from around 3,000 students in total in the mid-eighties to around 2,000 students in 2013. This figure includes over 450 students from the University of Humanistic Studies (UvH, founded in 1989, practically established in 1991),[9] which does not focus exclusively on religion.[10] So, over three decades, the numbers were halved,

9 University of Humanistic Studies, "History," accessed March 19, 2024, https://www.uvh.nl/university-of-humanistic-studies/about-our-university/background-traditions-and-history/history.

10 Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, *Klaar om te wenden… De academische bestudering van religie in Nederland. Een verkenning* (Amsterdam: KNAW, 2015), abbreviated: KNAW 2015, 15. The report is in Dutch and includes an English summary on pages 9, 11, 13, 15 and

not counting the students in Humanistic Studies. A downward trend is therefore apparent. Numbers of students at the universities of Leiden, Utrecht and Amsterdam significantly declined after their theology programmes were withdrawn. These programmes served students who wanted to work in the church. However, the job prospects of students graduating from religious studies programmes are more diverse and therefore less obvious.

Let us now turn to another structural change in academic management: the introduction of audits or reviews. A key event in our field is the report of the Theology Review Committee (or "Smits-Oberman" report, as it was informally called) issued in 1989. Their conclusions shocked the theological establishment in the Netherlands. Famously, the Committee's most prominent member, Heiko Oberman, was chased by a reporter at Schiphol Airport on his way to Arizona, where he held a professorship in church history at the time. On national television Oberman lamented the state of Dutch academic theology. There were too many faculties, some of which were of rather poor quality. The recommendation was to close and merge several faculties, (prominent among these was the theological faculty of the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and one Catholic institution: Heerlen), and to implement quality control standards. The report, which provided a wealth of quantitative data, such as several rankings, concluded that no institution met international research standards.[11] A discussion immediately ensued about how the Committee had computed the numbers, excluding, for instance, popular publications and dissertations. The absolute norm of five scholarly articles and one book in five years was also disputed, but the method of measuring quality remained unquestioned.[12] The report was assessed by the Advisory Council for Science Policy (1966–1991), whose members were impressed by the vast amount of statistical data presented. They concluded that there was indeed a significant gap between the five

17 (alongside the Dutch summary), 113. A.H. Smits et al., *Rapport van de Verkenningscommissie Godgeleerdheid*, vol. 2 (Appendices) (The Hague: Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, March 1989), 173, 179, 184; A.H. Smits, "Scholing en Opleiding" (chapter 34), in *Handboek Godsdienst in Nederland*, ed. Hein Schaeffer (Amersfoort: De Horstink, 1992), 552-564, 555 (with somewhat higher numbers). Between 1977 and 1991, there was a significant drop in the number of theology students from 3,651 to 2,737.

11 *Rapport van de Verkenningscommissie Godgeleerdheid* (1989), 19. *Advies inzake het rapport van de Verkenningscommissie Godgeleerdheid*, Serie publikaties van de Raad van Advies voor het Wetenschapsbeleid, 63 (The Hague: Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, (juli) 1989), 14, note 4. The chair of the committee later noted that only a few faculties worldwide meet its (international) publication standards.

12 *Verslag van STEGON-Symposium over het Verkenningsrapport Godgeleerdheid*, May 19, 1989 (The Hague: STEGON, 1989), esp. 5 and 18.

leading faculties (Leiden, Groningen, Utrecht, the Free University [VU] and Nijmegen) and the rest.[13]

Since 1989, assessments of research and higher education have become common practice and have—as far as I can judge—generally led to improvements in the quality of the staff, the research and the teaching programmes in theology and religious studies. Faculty who have not completed their PhDs are now a rarity; scholars are increasingly publishing in English, and in high-ranking journals; teaching methods are more varied; and courses are generally better structured. The introduction of training programmes for staff members may have given impetus to efforts to improve the quality of academic education as well. Some training programmes—including the feedback provided by experts and colleagues—do help, but whether or not completing the exam for the University Teaching Qualification (UTQ, in Dutch: *Basiskwalificatie Onderwijs* (BKO), literally: 'Basic Teaching Qualification'), comprising mainly paperwork, has improved the teaching of staff with 20 years or more of experience remains an open question.[14] Of course, it can be argued that basic standards are being implemented, the *studeerbaarheid* (study feasibility) has been improved, et cetera. But again, should education be primarily geared to the perceptions and experiences of students? To rephrase this in more personal terms, when I was a student in the late 1970s and I did not understand something, it was my problem; now, if my students do not understand me, it is still my problem.

Since the publication of the Theology Assessment in 1989, the process of change has accelerated. The latest more or less comparative Research Assessment of Theology and Religious Studies was published in 2012.[15] Nowadays, institutions independently organise their research reviews, which makes comparison very difficult. Even in 2012, four institutions did not participate in this research assessment.[16] In my view, stand-alone

13 *Advies inzake het rapport van de Verkenningscommissie Godgeleerdheid*, 5 and 13.

14 The UTQ/BKO precedes the so-called Senior Teaching Qualification (STQ), in Dutch: *Senior Kwalificatie Onderwijs* (SKO).

15 *Research Review Theology & Religious Studies 2012*, QANU 2013 (Q 354). http://www.rug.nl/news-and-events/news/archief2013/nieuwsberichten/theology-religious-studies-2013.pdf. "Taken as a whole, the University of Groningen, where the two excellent programmes (P17 and P18) are located, has obtained the best scores and presents excellent provisions for the future, closely followed by Utrecht University where the new research group (P14) has made a quick and very promising start, and by most of the research units at the VU-University" (7). The report is quoted in the main text, referring to page numbers only.

16 "The University of Amsterdam, its sister institutions at Leiden and Nijmegen, and the University of Humanistics [Humanistic Studies, ALM] at Utrecht have not joined the procedure." *Research Review Theology & Religious Studies 2012*, 7.

research reviews have less value and may lead to inflated assessments. But let us turn to the Committee's general remarks in 2012. Apart from "a lack of reflection on the conceptual foundations of the disciplines under review, and on the scope and definition of the research fields concerned" (8), the Review Committee addressed the issue of change.

We all know that modernity or late modernity, or whatever you wish to call the period we live in, is characterised by "change" and, even more importantly, by the idea that change is necessary and a good thing per se. If you do not accept the imperative of permanent change and object, for instance, to the wonderful new things introduced by the management, you run a big risk of being called "old-fashioned" and not being up to the new challenges your company or university is facing. However, the imperative to change can have some downsides as well. The Review Committee of 2012 addressed the harm caused by repeated institutional changes 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 counterproductive.[17]

The Committee noted that individual scholars were reluctant to speak about these problems because of their loyalty to their institution, but added the following comment:

> At many moments the Committee decidedly got the feeling that the repeated institutional changes encroach too much on their research time, and that some of these institutional changes result in harmful redistributions of research potential, occasionally even in personal tragedies. The apparent absence of coherence on a broad, inter-university managerial level has brought about some disastrous merger problems.[18]

It is a pity that the Committee was not more specific regarding this point, but the lack of cooperation between the institutions of various universities is evident. The report concluded that "tranquillity" was clearly needed.

17 *Research Review Theology & Religious Studies 2012*, 7.
18 Ibid.

No doubt, this recommendation made 13 years ago is reasonable, but the desired state of tranquillity evidently did not materialise. A more detailed analysis would be needed to explain the development of the field in recent decades. However, let me point to two more general reasons why the process of change continues. As indicated in my general introduction, the *first* and probably most important reason is the style of management. It is not so much that there are "bad" managers, who can be blamed; rather, the problem lies with the system. The key problem relates to the management style, often called "new public managerialism", which has public institutions, including universities, in its grip. An economically conditioned, instrumental and administrative rationality that is mainly or even only interested in measurable targets and financial costs has taken over in the universities. If targets are not met, the management asks for (rapid) change and improvement. This type of rationality and management leads to resistance and even cynicism among academics who had, and still have, other standards of education and commitment.[19]

An additional source of discomfort is, of course, the gap between the higher management and the academic community as such. The recent open letter of the *rectores magnifici* of 15 Dutch universities about the situation in Israel and Gaza is again a good illustration of this issue. It is not so much the standpoint they take, but the way they argue that is causing worries. For the rectors the view of the national government is leading in their decision-making, thereby ignoring a common responsibility of the scientific community, which they are representing and are formally part of.[20] The lack of democratic legitimacy of the higher management is evident.

19 Chris Lorenz, "De universiteiten en het New Public Management," in *If you're so smart, why aren't you rich? Universiteit, Markt en Management,*" ed. Chris Lorenz (Amsterdam: Boom, 2008), 165-196; cf. Jürgen Habermas, "Die Moderne – ein unvollendetes Projekt" (1981), in *Zeitdiagnosen. Zwölf Essays 1980-2001* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), 14: "Die vielfältigen Anlässe des Unbehagens und des Protestes entstehen überall dort, wo eine einseitige, an Maßstäben der ökonomischen und der administrativen Rationalität ausgerichtete Modernisierung in Lebensbereiche eindringt, die um Aufgaben der kulturellen Überlieferung, der sozialen Integration und der Erziehung zentriert und daher auf *andere* Maßstäbe, nämlich auf die einer kommunikativen Rationalität angelegt sind."

20 Open letter 15 rectores: "Universiteiten: 'Wij willen Israëlische wetenschappers niet isoleren'," *Trouw*, June 7, 2024, https://www.trouw.nl/opinie/universiteiten-wij-willen-israelische-wetenschappers-niet-isoleren~bacod374/: "Sowieso zullen wij nooit banden met een heel land verbreken. Dit overwegen wij enkel als de Rijksoverheid ons dit dwingend oplegt of adviseert, zoals bij Rusland het geval was"; Marc van Oostendorp, "Rectoren beknotten academische vrijheid," *NRC*, June 11, 2024, p. 18, https://neerlandistiek.nl/2024/06/universitair-bestuur-wat-de-rijksoverheid-oplegt-of-adviseert/.

The *second* reason for ongoing change that I would like to highlight is the difficult situation of theology and religious studies departments in the Netherlands. We have to compete for students in a shrinking market. This is especially true for theology, as the main churches are becoming increasingly marginalised in the Netherlands, and an ecclesiastical career is not tempting for most prospective students.[21] Although there is considerable public interest in religion, spirituality and meaning-making in general, this has not led to a substantial growth of students who enrol in religious studies programmes. Furthermore, in addition to having to compete for students, we have to compete for funding. Although we are not doing badly in terms of raising external funds, my impression is that this process is becoming increasingly difficult.[22] This is true for the humanities in general and for religious studies and theology in particular. The less we succeed in this respect, the greater the pressure will be to adapt ourselves better to the changing climate of academic funding.

Personally, I do not see how a proposal in the field of dogmatic theology would have much chance of attracting support from the main Dutch and European funding associations. Even for more traditional proposals in the field of historical research, this may be true. The criterion of valorisation or societal impact does not help either if you want funding for a project on—let us say—ancient Egyptian religion. To address this issue, scholars include events and exhibitions among the deliverables in their applications. The emphasis on deliverables and innovation in funding programmes is also an issue to be considered more closely. Helmut Schwarz, a renowned expert in molecular chemistry and honorary President of the German Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, noted:

> An organisation [such as the European Research Council] with a programmatic approach that demands, across the board, that topics must per se meet the requirements of pioneering results, that proposals worth

21 This sometimes leads to harsh comments on the present-day student population and allegations that they have no real intellectual interest. E.g., Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, "Ein Gott zum Kuscheln," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 27, 2011, http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/geisteswissenschaften/gespraech-mit-friedrich-wilhelm-graf-ein-gott-zum-kuscheln-1610609.html, on the feminisation of theology and the "Muttitypen" who attend his courses.

22 KNAW 2015, 56 provides data for the period January 2009 to March 2014, during which confessional institutions rarely submitted applications. More recent data are not available. Joke Spaans has raised some doubts about whether all the grants listed here have been awarded to members of institutions for Theology and Religious Studies; cf. Joke Spaans, "Theology, Religious Studies and Church History," *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 71, no. 1 (2017): 24, n 11. Moreover, a special new NWO programme, "Religion in Modern Society," was launched in 2012–2013.

> funding must bear the label "frontier research", is in danger of ultimately succumbing to fashionable trends and shying away from approving high-risk scenarios.[23]

In the field of theology and religious studies, a still bigger danger is perhaps that funding criteria like relevance lead to a form of presentism. This means that religion is mostly viewed as a contemporary issue, and even as a problem that requires solutions.

In this respect, the *Nationale Wetenschapsagenda* (National Science Agenda), commissioned jointly by the Ministries of Education, Culture and Science and Economic Affairs, is a "sobering reality check" in the words of church historian, Joke Spaans.[24] After "extensive consultation with the Dutch general public", the report issued in 2015 concluded that the most pressing challenge was establishing the compatibility of religion and modernity. Questions about what humans can know about God and to what extent science can provide that knowledge may bother the general public, but they hardly present an interesting research agenda for scholars of religion. More generally, the *Nationale Wetenschapsagenda* "deals with topics that play an important role in society."[25] The tendency is to focus on research that brings about practical and economic benefits. The honourable desire to popularise the findings of scholarship and make science relevant for the general public has led to a reversal of roles, whereby citizens determine the research agenda of scholars to a large extent. The committee that drafted the *Nationale Wetenschapsagenda* was, of course, more than a conduit, but the recommendations in the field of religious studies reveal how counterproductive this approach may be. Thus, steering a judicious and promising course is currently a challenging task for us, as there are no easy solutions on the horizon.

Theology versus religious studies

Another challenging issue is the relationship between theology and religious studies. The variety of arrangements of the academic study of religion (including theology) in the Netherlands makes it difficult to generalise about

23 Helmut Schwarz, "Interview," *Humboldt Kosmos*, no. 100 (2013): 20.

24 Spaans, "Theology, Religious Studies and Church History," 28-29.

25 Nationale Wetenschapsagenda, "About Us," accessed October 8, 2024. https://wetenschapsagenda.nl/about-us.

this topic, but I will nevertheless make a few remarks. Notwithstanding the *rapprochement* between theology and religious studies that is sometimes observed, I would argue that generally speaking, the rift between the two fields has deepened in recent decades. The Research Assessment Report of 2012 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."[26] 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 inquire "into fundamental questions of human nature and existence" and not be "too descriptive."[27]

What the Committee observed was a process of clericalizing of (confessional) theology, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the establishment of departments of religious studies (with a strong preference for an outsider's perspective).[28] In particular, Protestant institutions have distanced themselves from the major universities and founded universities of their own, which are essentially seminaries. In 2007, the main Protestant church of the Netherlands founded its own university, which has recently moved to Utrecht. This Protestant Theological University has chosen a "more pronounced Christian and ecclesial profile," which may not bode well for its academic status.[29] Like the church it is serving, this university is in danger of becoming a marginal, inward-looking institution.

Another concern relates to how the departments of religious studies have been organised. A report issued by the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences in 2015 complained— if this expression is allowed—about the choices made at the state universities, which have transformed their theology faculties into departments of religious studies within broader faculties of humanities. According to this report, there has been an overemphasis on religious studies as a field in its own right, leaving little or no space for the philosophy of religion and the study of the sources and history of Christianity.[30] The report argues that deans and managers have implemented an overly narrow view

26 *Research Review Theology & Religious Studies 2012*, 8.

27 *Research Review Theology & Religious Studies 2012*, 8–9.

28 Cf. KNAW 2015, 76; Arie L. 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.

29 Rick Benjamins, "Academische theologie in the knel," accessed December 9, 2024, https://liberaalchristendom.wordpress.com/academische-theologie-in-de-knel/.

30 KNAW 2015, 86.

of religious studies. Another bone of contention is whether or not the study of contemporary Islam is currently being privileged at Dutch universities.[31]

Unfortunately, the fields of theology and religious studies in the Netherlands seem to be drifting apart. Both church officials and religious studies departments are on the defensive. Given the diminishing importance and influence of institutionalised Christianity in the Netherlands, the church officials have retreated to their own confessional precincts and do not see much extra value in a theological training programme that is embedded in a university. On the other hand, departments of religious studies are unsure about how to define their field. Several questions arise. Do religious studies share a common methodology or interest, or are they simply a mixed bag of specialties? What place should the study of Christianity have?[32] Given our limited resources, what approaches and subjects should be prioritised? Ad hoc solutions will not do. Systematic reflection on the challenges that the study of religion in the Netherlands is currently facing is necessary as well as more sustained forms of cooperation, including agreements on the division of tasks.

Will this happen? Probably not. The field is rather divided at the moment. Cooperation, even between kindred theological institutions now concentrating in Utrecht, appears to be challenging. The unspoken motto here seems to be "Jeder für sich und Gott für uns alle" ("each for themselves and God for all"). Several central institutions, such as the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion, the Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies and the Dutch Association for the Study of Religion, do promote cooperation and do important work. However, basically their position is weak. These institutions depend on funds and support from participating faculties and departments for their survival. Moreover, the study of religion and of Islam are organised separately. Managers are inclined to consider other departments and faculties as competitors. It could be argued that institutional logic forces them to adopt this view, but common sense nevertheless points to the need for more cooperation within the diminishing field of theology and religious studies.

31 Christian Lange, "Religious Studies and the Study of Islam: Mutual Misperceptions, Shared Promises," *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 71, no. 1 (2017): 31-43.

32 Birgit Meyer, "Afterword: Towards Religious Studies 'New Style'," *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 71, no. 1 (2017): 96-105.

Easy criticism

Let me add a note about the general drift of this speech and a possible misunderstanding, which could arise. Listening to this speech you may think "it is easy to be critical from the sidelines. You give juicy examples of what went wrong and ignore improvements that have been made". Perhaps, but let me be clear here: I don't want to deny that improvements have been made. New assessment procedures such as *erkennen en waarderen* (recognition and rewards) and the implementation of the DORA Declaration, which emphasises the need to eliminate the use of journal-based metrics in funding, appointment, and promotion considerations,[33] are important developments. After reading a draft of this speech, a good friend of mine was so kind as to suggest that I may want to abstain from using any assessments or criteria at all and hire people on the basis of personal preferences. That is not exactly the intention behind my criticism. My thesis is that a system of checks and balances that at the start helped to improve the quality of education and research became bureaucratically exacting, which is detrimental to the autonomy of professional scholars and of universities. We are at a stage where all of these assessments and other forms of control consume an enormous amount of time and rarely result in real improvements. The ever more refined and detailed modes of assessment will not automatically lead to the selection of the best scholars or proposals. The disadvantages outweigh the advantages. Without wanting to return to the small worlds of academia, nicely captured in the novels of David Lodge, there is, in my view, a need to restore trust in the experienced evaluations of professionals, not just in universities. In view of this and other problems that presently face the academic community (especially, the severe budget cuts that the new government has imposed on higher education) we urgently need a more activist approach, including protests and strikes, as organized by WOinActie and other grassroot groups.[34]

Coda

Let me conclude by sharing one final observation about what remains appealing about working in academia: This appeal lies in dedicated colleagues and students, who are willing to go the extra mile to achieve good results. A

33 https://sfdora.org/read/.

34 https://woinactie.blogspot.com/.

former president of the University of Groningen once uttered the ominous words: "excellence is not enough". The quest for excellence is probably a self-defeating technocratic process, leading to ever more overstrained expectations, as if scholarly progress is something that can be managed. More important and widely underrated is the resilience of scholars who maintain their own professional standards of education and research in the face of an overwhelmingly bureaucratic system centred on control, output and success rates. Of course, we are sometimes generous in our grading (*genadezesjes*), but I am often impressed by the quality that is nevertheless achieved. At an institution whose aim is to strive beyond excellence, "good work" may sound somewhat underwhelming, but from my perspective, good work is the backbone of academic education and research.

Bibliography

Advies inzake het rapport van de Verkenningscommissie Godgeleerdheid. Serie publikaties van de Raad van Advies voor het Wetenschapsbeleid, 63. The Hague: Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, 1989.

Benjamins, Rick. "Academische theologie in the knel." Accessed December 9, 2024. https://liberaalchristendom.wordpress.com/academische-theologie-in-de-knel/.

Berkel, Klaas van. *Universiteit van het Noorden*, vol. III: "De zakelijke Universiteit." Hilversum: Verloren, 2022.

Close, Daryl. "Why Student Ratings of Faculty are Unethical." *Journal of Academic Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2024). Doi: 10.1007/s10805-024-09562-3.

Collini, Stefan. *What are Universities For?* London: Penguin, 2012.

Graf, Friedrich Wilhelm. "Ein Gott zum Kuscheln." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 March 2011. Accessed October 8, 2024. http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/geisteswissenschaften/gespraech-mit-friedrich-wilhelm-graf-ein-gott-zum-kuscheln-1610609.html.

Habermas, Jürgen. "Die Moderne – ein unvollendetes Projekt" (1981). In *Zeitdiagnosen. Zwölf Essays 1980-2001*, 7-26. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003.

Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen [KNAW], *Klaar om te wenden… De academische bestudering van religie in Nederland. Een verkenning*. Amsterdam: KNAW, 2015.

Lange, Christian. "Religious Studies and the Study of Islam: Mutual Misperceptions, Shared Promises." *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 71, no. 1 (2017): 31-43.

Lorenz, Chris. "De universiteiten en het New Public Management." In *If you're so smart, why aren't you rich? Universiteit, Markt en Management*, edited by Chris Lorenz, 165-196. Amsterdam: Boom, 2008.

Meyer, Birgit. "Afterword. Towards Religious Studies 'New Style'." *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 71, no.1 (2017): 96-105.

Molendijk, Arie L. "Theologie, Kerk en Academie in Protestants Nederland." *Kerk en Theologie* 58 (2007): 4-21.

———. "The Study of Religion in the Netherlands." *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 71, no.1 (2017): 5-18.

Oostendorp, Marc van. "Rectoren beknotten academische vrijheid." *NRC* 11 June 2024. Accessed June 14, 2024. https://neerlandistiek.nl/2024/06/universitair-bestuur-wat-de-rijksoverheid-oplegt-of-adviseert/.

Rectores magnifici Dutch Universities. "Universiteiten: 'Wij willen Israëlische wetenschappers niet isoleren'." *Trouw*, 7 June 2024. Accessed June 14, 2024. https://www.trouw.nl/opinie/universiteiten-wij-willen-israelische-wetenschappers-niet-isoleren~bacod374/.

Research Review Theology & Religious Studies 2012, QANU 2013 (Q 354).

http://www.rug.nl/news-and-events/news/archief2013/nieuwsberichten/theology-religious-studies-2013.pdf.

Sarot, Marcel. "Theologie en Godsdienstwetenschappen gescheiden?" *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 45 (2005): 338-347.

Schwarz, Helmut. "Interview." *Humboldt Kosmos*, no. 100 (2013): 19-21.

Slaman, Pieter. *De Glazen Toren. De Leidse Universiteit, 1970-2020*. Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2021.

Smits, A.H. *Rapport van de Verkenningscommissie Godgeleerdheid*. The Hague: Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, March 1989.

———. "Scholing en Opleiding." In *Handboek Godsdienst in Nederland*, edited by Hein Schaeffer, 552-564. Amersfoort: De Horstink, 1992.

Spaans, Joke. "Theology, Religious Studies and Church History." *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 71, no.1 (2017): 19-30.

Verslag van STEGON-Symposium over het Verkenningsrapport Godgeleerdheid, 19 May 1989. The Hague: STEGON, 1989.