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Introduction

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Introduction: Religion, Health and Wellbeing

Christoph Jedan and Eric Venbrux

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The present thematic issue on religion, health and wellbeing opens the 75th volume of *NTT – Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion*. To have been invited to usher in this jubilee is a great privilege for us as guest editors, and we wish to record our gratitude to the journal's editorial board. At the same time this is, for more reasons than one, an occasion for (anxious) reflection.¹

The journal was established in 1946 under the title *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* (hence, *NTT*) by a small team of academics from the four theological faculties at the public universities of Leiden, Groningen, Utrecht and Amsterdam, with a key role played by church historian Jan Nicolaas Bakhuizen van den Brink – who also founded the Dutch association of church historians, *Kerkhistorisch Gezelschap* in the same year.² The journal aspired to attract the readership of an earlier Dutch theological journal, *Nieuwe Theologische Studiën* [New Theological Studies] that had existed for 25 years but was discontinued during the war. The first issue of *NTT* appeared in the autumn of 1946. It is noteworthy that, right from its first issue, the new journal was international in outlook: it sought to

1 On the occasion of the journal's 60th anniversary in 2006, Arie Molendijk published an analysis of the journal's archives, throwing light on editorial processes and decisions; see A.L. Molendijk, 'Vruchten van wetenschappelijke studie: 60 jaar *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift*', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 60 (2006), 1–21.

2 More generally, the years after WWII were a fertile period for the (re)foundation of Dutch academic 'infrastructure': in 1947 Gerardus van der Leeuw initiated the *Nederlands Genootschap van Godsdiensthistorici* (NGG) [Dutch Association for Historians of Religion], which continues to this day and is (with a slightly modified name) the oldest national organization for the study of religion, see <http://www.godsdienstwetenschap.nl/>.

(re)connect the Dutch theological scene to international developments. The inaugural issue contained an article in English, written during a stay at Manchester University by the professor of New Testament studies at Leiden, Johannes de Zwaan.³ *NTT* managed to attract leading authors who are still well-known and read today. For instance, Gerardus van der Leeuw published in the first volume on the relationship between Roman Catholic and Reformed worldviews, and Hendrikus Berkhof wrote in the second volume on the apostolic character of the church.⁴ Since then, the journal has become even more international, with increasing numbers of articles written in other European languages. In addition, the journal has gradually extended its reach to encompass religious studies in addition to theology.

Throughout its history, *NTT* has managed to ‘punch above its weight’: well-regarded as a platform for original studies, the journal is present in university libraries all over the world. This is no small feat for a generalist journal in theology and religion originating from a small European country, and it has been possible only through the continued support of our subscribers, private and institutional, as well as of the leading scholars who have published, and continue to publish, with *NTT*. To all of them we send our heartfelt thanks.

The context in which we have edited this special issue will very likely endure until you, the readers, first see it: another wave of the Covid-19 pandemic will continue to threaten many certainties in our lives.

In this situation, it is especially helpful to take inspiration from the authors of the first issue of *NTT* in 1946. The difficulties they faced back then would arguably have dwarfed the ones we face today. The Netherlands had only recently been liberated from German occupation. Shortages were still a daily problem, and yet the country was trying to hold on, irresponsibly, to its pre-war colonial power over Indonesia by military means that amounted to open warfare in all but the name. Among all of those dark clouds it is uplifting to see how energetic and generous were those authors of the first volume, daring to ask fundamental questions that had relevance beyond their immediate context. A good example of this attitude is the fact that experiences during the Nazi occupation were glossed over or made light of. For instance, Berkhof had been forced to go into hiding, but this is

3 J. de Zwaan, ‘Another Approach to the Idea of the *ecclesia* in the New Testament’, *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 1 (1946/47), 15-26.

4 G. van der Leeuw, ‘Anthropologie en de verhouding Rooms-Katholiek – Hervormd’, *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 1 (1946/47), 204-211; H. Berkhof, ‘De Apostoliciteit der Kerk’, *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 2 (1947/48), 146-60, 193-201.

Figure 1 Cover of the inaugural issue of *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* (1946), reproduced by kind permission of the Protestant Theological University Library, Groningen (Photo: CJ)

only mentioned in passing: in his review of Berkhof's book *De Kerk en de Keizer* [The Church and the Emperor], Johannes Lindeboom judged that

circumstances had enabled Berkhof to come up with an excellent as well as timely book.⁵ The authors tended to look forwards rather than backwards; only the occasional remark that a publication exhibits too many unwanted ‘Germanisms’ revealed that authors must still have felt raw about their war-time experiences.

That was exactly the spirit that we have tried to revive in presenting this special issue: we have resisted the temptation to focus on Covid-19. The pandemic is undeniably a given, but our authors tackle questions exposing underlying themes that are important not only in the Covid-emergency but also beyond it: How does religion affect health and wellbeing? What does it take to have a meaningful life in old age? Is concern for wellbeing a recent fad or a long-standing tradition dating back to the Middle Ages, and perhaps even to Greco-Roman antiquity? To what extent are inequities in health permissible in present-day public health policy? What role can spiritual caregivers play with regard to the wellbeing of the inhabitants of a region troubled by earthquakes as a result of natural gas extraction? How can we assess, from a theological point of view, the transhumanist urge for life-extension?

This anniversary issue is, we hope, a testimony to the fact that students of religion have something important to contribute to the larger field of (critical) medical humanities or health care humanities.⁶ Needless to say, however, the authors could discuss no more than a small selection of possible topics. Promising fields of inquiry are legion. For instance, there is a whole body of knowledge on healing practices of a religious nature. A proper understanding of religious concerns for health and wellbeing past and present allows scholars to place these goals in a broader context. What is more, a critical study of practices related to health and wellbeing might show that many of them are part of a silent ‘spiritual revolution’ that has taken place: Mindfulness and yoga, for example, have become mainstream.⁷

5 J. Lindeboom, [‘Review of’] H. Berkhof, *De Kerk en de Keizer*, Uitg. Mij “Holland”, Amsterdam 1946, *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 1 (1946/47), 238-239: ‘A quelque chose malheur est bon – dat Dr B. in 1942 moest onderduiken stelde hem in staat zijn tijd te besteden aan het schrijven van dit werk, dat bovendien nog op andere wijze aan de tijdsomstandigheden zijn ontstaan dankt’ (French spelling from the original).

6 See e.g. Th.R. Cole, N.S. Carlin, R.A. Carson, *Medical Humanities: An Introduction*, Cambridge/New York 2015; Th. Jones, D. Wear, L.D. Friedman (ed.) *Health Humanity Reader*, New Brunswick 2014; W. Viney, F. Callard, A. Woods, ‘Critical Medical Humanities: Embracing Entanglement, Taking Risks’, *Medical Humanities* 41 (2015), 2-7.

7 P. Heelas, L. Woodhead (with B. Seel, B. Szerszynski, K. Tusting), *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Oxford 2005.

Of interest are antecedents from theosophy to Scandinavian gymnastics, as well as – in the words of Paul van der Velde – ‘our colonial view of Eastern spirituality’.⁸ Machteld Huber’s concept of positive health, which seeks to take into account the whole human being, has been inspired by anthroposophy.⁹ Healthy ageing has become an obsession. It is driven by fear of death, according to Barbara Ehrenreich, who points at the fitness rage – including mindfulness as ‘fitness for the mind’ – and its delusional aim of salvation.¹⁰ Employees are held responsible for their health and wellbeing, particularly for avoiding burn-out. This one-sided attribution of responsibilities assumes that exploitation cannot exist or cannot be a problem in advanced economies. Yet socio-economic inequality has increased, and socio-economic status affects health and life expectancy. Bruce Rogers-Vaughn warns against political naivety in theology and religious studies and a ‘relative neglect of neoliberalism’, which is detrimental to our understanding of its effects on health and wellbeing.¹¹

Even so, the articles in this special issue cover a vast historical span, ranging from a classical ‘gerontological’ text of the first century BCE, via the Middle Ages to transhumanist visions of future life-extension.¹²

Catrien Santing refers to the aforementioned concept of positive health and makes clear that the medieval striving for happiness and wellbeing is still highly recognisable from the perspective of our own time. She attributes that striving to the Anselmian emotional revolution in the twelfth

8 P. van der Velde, ‘Onze koloniale kijk op oosterse spiritualiteit’ (interview with J. Slaats, 30th of October 2020), <https://volzin.nu/onze-koloniale-kijk-op-oosterse-spiritualiteit/>; M. Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, Oxford 2010.

9 M. Huber, *Towards a New, Dynamic Concept of Health: Its Operationalisation and Use in Public Health and Health Care, and in Evaluating Health Effects of Food*, Enschede 2014 (PhD thesis Maastricht University).

10 B. Ehrenreich, *Natural Causes: An Epidemic of Wellness, the Certainty of Dying, and Killing Ourselves to Live Longer*, New York 2018.

11 B. Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*, New York 2016. See also C. Jedan, H. Jansen, H. Luthert, ‘The Invisible Frame: An Empirical Philosophical Study of the Production of Loneliness in “Responsible Capitalism”’, in P. Nehra (ed.) *Loneliness and the Crisis of Work*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne (in press).

12 Transhumanist visions owe much to the Russian Orthodox thinker Nikolai Fedorov, but their realization has now also become a pet project of oligarchs in Silicon Valley, see A. Bernstein, *The Future of Immortality: Remaking Life and Death in Contemporary Russia*, Princeton 2019; A. Farman, *On Not Dying: Secular Immortality in the Age of Technoscience*, Minneapolis 2020. Ordinary medicine already allows a certain measure of life-extension, without this necessarily resulting in a preservation of life quality, see S.R. Kaufman, *Ordinary Medicine: Extraordinary Treatments, Longer Lives, and Where to Draw the Line*, Durham, NC 2015.

century, when religious experience turned inwards. Santing examines *inter alia* a medieval compendium from the Low Countries, MS Sloane 345, held by the British Library and digitized two years ago. We invite our readers to take a look for themselves.¹³ Santing contextualizes the emphasis in the compendium on the human being as *imago Dei* and argues for the importance of social cohesion and mutual solidarity, thus questioning an excessively individualistic understanding of health and wellbeing.

Anieljah de Kraker-Zijlstra, Hanneke Muthert, Hetty Zock and Martin Walton consider the experiences of two spiritual caregivers trying to meet the spiritual needs of citizens in the north of the Netherlands who suffer the consequences of artificially-induced earthquakes. The article documents this pioneering work of disaster-related spiritual care in the Netherlands, involving the ongoing input of researchers, and explains how this work is situated in a broader social context, including the provision of psychosocial care.

Harrie van Toor examines theological reflections on human enhancement, especially life extension by annihilating the process of ageing. These reflections mainly concern creation, eschatology and anthropology, but Van Toor argues that those classic perspectives cannot 'offer an adequate Christian ethical response to the transhumanist project of considerable life extension'. He suggests alternatively that we embrace aging and value the completion of a life that, in his view, entails beauty and wisdom.

In his article 'Proportionate Universalism and Public Health' Christoph Jedan discusses a recent policy brief by the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR). He demonstrates that the policy brief takes a novel perspective on proportionate universalism, a recent ethical theory for the fields of social policy and public health. Situating the brief in the wider debate on proportionate universalism, he offers an ethical evaluation. Jedan makes clear that the WRR's stance falls short in three respects. Disparities attributable to socio-economic status that impact on health have been improperly reduced to educational disparities. Furthermore, the contribution of voluntary associations, including churches and faith-based sodalities, is ignored – a surprising omission, given the brief's endorsement of subsidiarity. Finally, proportionate universalism is primarily a quantitative theory that backgrounds questions about the quality of life. Yet this is an area where religious and philosophical forms of ethics focusing on 'the good life' can offer an important corrective.

¹³ http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Sloane_ms_345 (last accessed 28th of November 2020).

Nienke Fortuin discusses wellbeing in later life. She draws on findings from her empirical research, showing that older people who are most strongly committed to a belief in either the existence or the non-existence of an afterlife appear to have the least fear of death. The same holds for their attribution of meaning to the final phase of life. Fortuin advocates a narrative approach to aging that counters 'narrative foreclosure' by stressing a meaningful continuation of the life-story. Proper attention to the narrative dimension, she argues, can help to promote health and wellbeing in later life.

In the established rubric on 'key texts', Christoph Jedan revisits Cicero's *Cato the Elder on Old Age*. The text is quoted regularly in the context of today's (cultural) gerontology, but Jedan seeks to establish a new perspective on the text, taking his cue from Cicero's dedicatory preface, which makes clear that the text was intended as a consolation for old age. Jedan argues that, when analysed from this perspective, the text offers a far more realistic assessment of old age than is prevalent in the uncritical enthusiasm of slogans such as 'successful aging'. Cicero presents us, moreover, with important elements of a concept of age-adapted wellbeing.

Looking over these contributions, it is notable that jointly they underscore as well as nuance the role of religion in (research on) health and wellbeing. Religion is an important factor in both, and theology and religious studies have important things to contribute to the analysis of that role. At the same time, we need to move beyond all-too-general claims that religion *tout court* is doing this. Such exaggerated claims have been key drivers of US-American research programs on 'religion and health', aiming to demonstrate that 'religion' has positive health effects.¹⁴ The authors in this issue exhibit a different, European perspective, in which the context of religion in wider culture and the many different shapes of religion are key considerations.

We trust that you will enjoy the articles in this special issue as much as we do, and hope that we all, readers and writers as well as the Journal itself, may experience a happy and healthy old age full of wisdom.

14 See e.g. R. Stark, *America's Blessings: How Religion Benefits Everyone, Including Atheists*, West Conshohocken, PA 2012.

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