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Institutional Histories, Identity Work, and Critical Theory

A Response to Markus Davidsen

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Abstract

In a response to Markus Davidsen's article 'Theo van Baaren's Systematic Science of Religion Revisited: The Current Crisis in Dutch Study of Religion and a Way Out', this contribution first reviews Davidsen's claim of a crisis in the study of religion in the Netherlands, as compared to what he calls the 'systematic mentality' of the 'Nordic countries'. It then turns to the prescribed cure for the alleged ailment that Davidsen develops as an identity work for the study of religion. Over against Davidsen's attack on postcolonial and gender studies, this article argues for the necessity of critical theory and self-reflection in the academic study of religion. Attempts at uniting the study of religion under one conceptual umbrella are an indication of hegemonic processes that critical theory has rendered untenable. This article concludes that the academic study of religion should be embedded in an interdisciplinary frame of cultural studies.

Keywords: academic study of religion, institutional history, Netherlands, Scandinavia, critical theory, gender studies, postcolonial studies, cultural studies

In his article 'Theo van Baaren's Systematic Science of Religion Revisited: The Current Crisis in Dutch Study of Religion and a Way Out', Markus Davidsen combines a diagnosis of the state of the art of the academic study of religion in the Netherlands with a prescription that would lead us out of the crisis that Davidsen perceives. The article provides many valuable insights into national and international developments, and I am honored by

the invitation to respond to Dr. Davidsen. In my comments, I will follow his order of argumentation and look at the diagnostic part first, before turning to his claims about how we should ‘rebuild’ the academic study of religion.

The study of religion in the Netherlands: The long shadow of *duplex ordo*

Since the institutionalization of the study of religion at European universities at the end of the nineteenth century, the organization of this academic discipline has taken a particular direction in the Netherlands. The Netherlands were the first to establish chairs for the study of religion, from 1876 onward. As part of reforming of the education of clergy, the state terminated the link between the Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*) and the theological faculties of the state universities. While the motion to change the names of these faculties to ‘religious studies’ did not gain a majority in parliament, ‘religious studies’ subsequently became one of the five theological subdisciplines. From then on, these five fields of study were no longer defined by the church’s examination regulations. This decision was not motivated by any kind of Dutch hostility against the church; rather, it was in line with the opinions of liberal theologians who thought that a more scientific understanding of religion would show the superiority of Protestantism.¹ This understanding of a so-called *duplex ordo* – the differentiation between ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ fields of study at Dutch faculties of theology, legally introduced in 1876 – differed from the arrangements in other European countries; it led to a further diversification of the study of religion at theological faculties in the Netherlands (some of which were renamed as ‘Faculty of Theology and the Study of Religion’). When the other Dutch universities, often with a clear religious heritage (such as Free University Amsterdam and Radboud University Nijmegen), joined the group of public universities, the idea of *duplex ordo* was given a new form, but it still influences political and educational discourses in the Netherlands.

1 A.L. Molendijk, ‘Transforming Theology: The Institutionalization of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands’, in A.L. Molendijk, P. Pels (ed.), *Religion in the Making: The Emergence of the Sciences of Religion*, Leiden 1998, 67-95. See also H.G. Kippenberg, K. von Stuckrad, *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft: Gegenstände und Begriffe*, Munich 2003, 17-18.

As we know from the history of knowledge systems, the establishment of societal opinions in institutionalized disciplines further stabilizes these very orders of knowledge. Kurt Danziger aptly summarizes this for the discipline of psychology:

There is an intimate relationship between the general forms of presuppositions, knowledge goals, and investigative practices and their specific embodiment. As the community of knowledge producers grows it develops internal norms and values that reflect its external alliances. Its professional project is directed at carving out and filling a particular set of niches in the professional ecosystem of its society, and its internal norms reflect the conditions for the success of this project. These norms tend to govern both the production of knowledge and the production of the producers of knowledge through appropriate training programs.²

The same mechanism has been at work in the Dutch set-up of professional knowledge about religion. The *duplex ordo* system supported the training of 'secular' professionals in the study of religion; at the same time, it enhanced an understanding of the academic study of religion as a subfield of theology.

These discursive arrangements have been very powerful in the Netherlands. They have led to the flourishing of the study of religion within theological faculties at the level of state universities (and other universities that subsequently joined this league). But these arrangements are also one of the reasons why – as a kind of unintentional 'collateral damage' – the academic study of religion was severely impacted at the state universities of Amsterdam, Utrecht, and Leiden when these universities closed down their theological faculties over the past decades. It is no accident that the strongest and most successful Dutch programs for the academic study of religion today are hosted by universities that retain a 'faculty of religion' (particularly at Radboud University Nijmegen and at the last remaining state university with such a faculty in Groningen). While in other countries the academic study of religion was established in philosophical faculties (or in humanities faculties), such an organization of knowledge about religion goes against the institutional tradition in the Netherlands.

2 K. Danziger, *Constructing the Subject: Historical Origins of Psychological Research*, Cambridge 1990, 182.

This institutional history is the reason for what Davidsen calls the ‘particularist paradigm’ and the difficulty of developing an independent study of religion without theological overtones. When I started working in the Netherlands in 2003 (first at the University of Amsterdam, and since 2009 at the University of Groningen), I was, just like Davidsen, struck by the fact that most of my colleagues defined themselves as anthropologists, historians, sociologists, or psychologists who study religion (many of them had a background in theology, as well). Even today, at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Groningen, only three (!) of my more than 50 academic colleagues have a background in the academic study of religion. And yet, they are able to run a Graduate School of religion with more than 60 doctoral students, a Research Master’s program in the study of religion, and several internationally recognized Bachelor’s and Master’s programs.

As in all countries, the academic study of religion in the Netherlands is a small discipline that has to fight for public attention.³ Given that context, and despite the particularist approach that dominates the Dutch field, the situation looks better to me than Davidsen describes it, certainly if we do not limit our attention to the four state universities (which is an outdated perception in Dutch politics and culture). In several places, the critical study of religion is manifest in high-level teaching programs,⁴ and several research groups and individuals have published contributions to conceptual work in the study of religion that Davidsen tends to ignore.⁵

3 At the same time, the situation differs from one country to another. In Germany, for instance, the number of full professors in the academic study of religion has doubled since 1997, with 41 chairs at 20 universities as of 2020; see the useful (though not fully reliable) overview at https://www.kleinefaecher.de/kartierung/kleine-faecher-von-a-z.html?tx_dmd_b_monitoring%5BdisciplineTaxonomy%5D=103&cHash=5bc049c13b549a7728cd03bccab7a71d, accessed 15 May 2020. In the Netherlands there has not been a comparable rise in the number of chairs over the past twenty years. It would be interesting to compare these developments to other countries in Europe, and particularly to Scandinavia, given Davidsen’s claims about the prospering situation there.

4 It is not correct that the ‘core courses’ at Leiden University, which introduce students to the discipline and consistent methodological frames of the study of religion, do not have ‘a counterpart anywhere else in the Netherlands’ (Davidsen, 239 note 76). In Groningen (hence, at a ‘state university’), the course units ‘Philosophy of Science in the Study of Religion and Culture’ and ‘Theories of Religion and Culture’ are among the core modules for the Research Master’s program, and the ‘Concepts and Methods for the Study of Religion 1 and 2’ are basic introductory classes on the Bachelor’s level. The same is true for the Master’s degree programs at Radboud University Nijmegen, as well as at other places in the Netherlands.

5 Let me just mention the work I am involved in myself. The Department of Comparative Study of Religion in Groningen – in a way the successor of the ‘working-group’ that

Given this ongoing research by many scholars in the Netherlands, it is hard to understand why Davidsen claims that ‘none of them is involved in constructing a coherent research paradigm for a systematic science of religion’ (p. 226).

Davidsen’s somewhat selective perception may have to do with his normative assumptions about the ‘proper’ way of studying religion. I will turn to those assumptions in the next section. But before doing so, let us have a brief look at the situation in ‘the Nordic countries’, which Davidsen presents as an antidote to the fragmented study of religion in the Netherlands, where it now has come ‘under the yoke of area studies and anthropology’ (p. 238). It seems to me that Davidsen overstates the alleged consistent theoretical frame of the study of religion in Scandinavia, and that he neglects the significant differences between Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. As for the theoretical frame, Davidsen presents as shining examples mainly those scholars who locate themselves in the field of cognitive ‘science’ of religion, while he does not mention Scandinavian colleagues who disagree with those academic approaches.⁶ As for the differences between the Scandinavian countries, let me just point out that the economic situation of the universities differ strongly (Finland just went through a disastrous phase of budget cuts in higher education, while research budgets in Norway are much more robust); what is more, as can be derived from the 2017 evaluation of the humanities by the Research Council of Norway, the organization of the field of the academic study of religion and theology reveals very similar features to other countries in Europe, and the elements that are characteristic of Norway cannot be generalized across the ‘Nordic’

Davidsen mentions as an example of unsuccessful conceptual work – is critically engaged in theoretical work; see, for instance, P. Berger, M. Buitelaar, K. Knibbe (ed.), *Religion as Relation: Studying Religion in Context*, Sheffield 2020 (forthcoming). Furthermore, the two chairs for the study of religion at the University of Groningen and at Radboud University Nijmegen collaborate in discourse research, which has led to a number of publications; see, for example, F. Wijzen, K. von Stuckrad (ed.), *Making Religion: Theory and Practice in the Discursive Study of Religion*, Leiden/Boston 2016; J. Johnston, K. von Stuckrad (ed.), *Discourse Research and Religion: Disciplinary Use and Interdisciplinary Dialogues*, Berlin/Boston 2020 (forthcoming); see also the special issue in *Religion* that Frans Wijzen (Nijmegen) edited; see F. Wijzen, ‘Editorial: Discourse Analysis in Religious Studies’, *Religion* 43 (2013), 1-3. This list could be easily extended by adding the publications of Birgit Meyer, Joram Tarusarira, Stefania Travagnin, and many others.

6 Davidsen excludes from his account several internationally well-known scholars – such as Marion Grau, Siv Ellen Kraft, or Titus Hjelm, to name a few – probably because they do not fit his theoretical preferences; they work in Gender Studies, Indigenous Religions, Discourse Research, and other areas.

countries.⁷ For these (and other) reasons, speaking of a “systematic mentality” among scholars of religion in the Nordic countries’ (p. 228) is problematic in my view.

Critical theory in the academic study of religion

After presenting the systematic approach to religion that Van Baaren developed over against a more phenomenologically oriented approach, Davidsen makes a number of sweeping claims: ‘We need to commit to religion as our shared object of study and hence to a shared disciplinary identity as scholars of religion; retain the ambition to compare; seek to explain the patterns we find; and base our explanations on the principle of methodological naturalism’ (p. 215). Davidsen evokes the impression that these claims are tied to one another in a logical line of argumentation. They are not. For instance, the practice of comparison does not require a definition of religion or an explanation in terms of methodological naturalism.

There are further considerations that trouble Davidsen’s assumptions and claims: While many of his ideas about a systematic search for hermeneutical tools of analysis in the study of religion will probably be shared by most scholars in the field today, I find his attack on critical theory, his normative assumptions about the ‘proper’ way of setting up the study of religion, and his doomsday rhetoric quite misleading. The following passage is indicative of all three features:

Today’s threat comes from area studies and anthropology where postmodernist, postcolonialist, and feminist critiques have spawned an opposition towards the comparative, theoretical, and systematic study of religion. This situation leaves us with a choice. Either we stay particularistic and allow ourselves to be slowly swallowed by other disciplines. Or we regroup and consolidate ourselves as scholars of religion with a shared disciplinary identity and a shared research agenda. I believe that the study of religion in the Netherlands can only survive, let alone thrive, if we choose the path of the systematic study of religion. (p. 238)

7 The report of Panel 7 ‘Religion and Theology’ (which I had the honor to chair) is available online at <https://www.forskningssradet.no/en/about-the-research-council/publications/2017/evaluation-of-the-humanities-in-norway---panel-7/>, accessed 13th of May 2020.

I think it is a serious misunderstanding – leading to false binary ‘choices’ – to say that ‘postmodernist, postcolonial, and feminist critiques’ have argued against comparative, theoretical, and systematic activities in the study of religion. In fact, by offering a critical reflection on what scholars in the study of religion sometimes take for granted, they are themselves a contribution to theoretical endeavors. It is thanks to gender studies and postcolonial studies that we have developed a sensibility for the hegemonic power of certain approaches and their representatives in academia, religion, culture, and politics.⁸ ‘Rational knowledge is power-sensitive conversation’, as Donna Haraway reminds us. This also means that the ‘science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned rationality’.⁹

These approaches have no intention of ‘swallowing’ the academic study of religion; they offer a critical review and help improve the standards of academic reasoning about ‘religion and its others’. They also trouble Davidsen’s assumptions about the necessarily transempirical nature of religion and the necessarily positivist and reductionist ‘explanation’ given by the scholar of religion. Adhering to the principle of methodological agnosticism does not logically imply, as Davidsen claims, ‘adopt[ing] the position of methodological naturalism or non-supernaturalism’ (p. 237).¹⁰ This alleged dichotomy between religious supernaturalism and academic naturalism is itself an expression of hegemonic forms of ordering the world, with a clearly gendered structure.¹¹ It may be, in the end, that the supernatural actually is ‘super natural’.¹² Even Åke Hultkrantz, whom Davidsen celebrates

8 From this perspective, it is noteworthy that Davidsen’s list of ‘approved scholars’ only consists of (white) men. As an important contribution to critical thinking about the link between scholarly theories and identity, see C.M. Driscoll, M.R. Miller, *Method as Identity: Manufacturing Distance in the Academic Study of Religion*, Lanham/London 2019. See also M.R. Miller (ed.), *Claiming Identity in the Study of Religion: Social and Rhetorical Techniques Examined*, Sheffield 2015.

9 D. Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988), 575–599, 590.

10 See the discussions in J.N. Blum (ed.), *The Question of Methodological Naturalism*, Leiden/Boston 2018. Davidsen refers to this volume but uses it selectively.

11 Among many others, see these two classics: G. Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in Western Philosophy*, London 1984; L. Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science*, Boston 1993.

12 This is what Jeffrey J. Kripal argues. He identifies two major features of the underlying discourse: ‘a naive understanding of mind that classifies all visionary phenomena as simple “imaginary” products of brain matter (without the slightest clue how this works)’ and ‘the public shaming of sincere and serious people, from all walks of life, who see or say otherwise’ (W. Strieber, J.J. Kripal, *The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained*, New York 2016, 11).

as a paragon of ‘strict positive research’ (p. 227), was much more betwixt and between than this portrayal suggests. In a remarkable essay, Hultkrantz reflected on his experiences with medicine men in North America, noting that during these rituals, things happened ‘that I could have never published in a scholarly journal without risking my academic reputation. Things happened that, in the framework of our current scientific value system, could not be registered as facts.’¹³ In his account of ‘what the professor has kept secret’, Hultkrantz accepts the position ‘that so-called paranormal phenomena exist, and that they are part of our reality’. The scientific theories about these phenomena, however, ‘have not yet reached the disciplines of anthropology or comparative study of religion.’¹⁴

I am not arguing that we have to adopt an ontological position that sees spirits and hidden powers as ‘real’; but in my view, methodological agnosticism includes being neutral with regard to ontological claims. It also means taking seriously what our ‘objects’ of study report about their experiences.

Thus, critical self-reflection, as it is exercised by postcolonial and gender studies, is part and parcel of a modern study of religion – not its enemy. Definitions and theories of religion always come from a specific position, and they materialize in societal, economic, and political realities. In a response to my argument that scholars of religion can be seen as ‘accomplices to power’, Laurie L. Patton even goes a step further, claiming that

no theory of religion in the twenty-first century should exist without an accompanying theory of the university that produces such theories. How is one’s university or seminary or college or non-profit an “accomplice to power”? What other roles might one’s institution play – including as a resister of established power? How does one’s own institutional location either stabilize or de-stabilize social orders of knowledge about religion?

Neither, Patton adds, ‘should a theory of religion exist without a theory of the public spheres in which these theories are relevant and have impact.’¹⁵

13 Åke Hultkrantz, ‘Ritual und Geheimnis: Über die Kunst der Medizinmänner, oder: Was der Professor verschwie’, in H.P. Duerr (ed.), *Der Wissenschaftler [sic!] und das Irrationale*, 4 vols., Frankfurt am Main 1985, vol. 1, 71-95, 72 (my translation).

14 Hultkrantz, ‘Ritual und Geheimnis’, 92, 91 (my translation).

15 L.L. Patton, ‘A Reply to Kocku von Stuckrad’, in A.W. Hughes, R.T. McCutcheon (ed.), *“Religion is ...”: Debating the Academic Study of Religion*, New York 2020 (forthcoming), quoted from manuscript. The same argument is made in L.L. Patton, *Who Owns Religion? Scholars and Their Late Twentieth Century Publics*, Chicago 2019, 16.

These claims are in marked contrast to Davidsen's call to arms. They take seriously critical responses to the study of religion that come from inside our field, as well as from outside.

Among the contributions from outside the confines of our discipline, I regard the input from cultural studies as particularly important. While Davidsen does not mention cultural studies in his article, in my view, this disciplinary context is precisely what we need for a flourishing, up-to-date study of religion. As Susan L. Mizruchi summarizes, cultural study of religion has 'three distinct but related premises. First, religion is understood as nonuniversal in practice and in theory. (...) Second, no religion is pure and unique unto itself (...). Third, the methods that are most suitable to the conceptualization of this particularity and diversity are multidisciplinary as well as interdisciplinary'.¹⁶ The identity work that Davidsen prescribes will lead us further away from a conceptual and theoretical understanding of the processuality of religion and culture. In my view, it will lead to further isolation of the discipline – an isolation that has been noted by colleagues from cultural studies, who feel that they have to develop their own theoretical framework because

of a shared dissatisfaction with the terminological and conceptual offers of current research in the study of religion and the history of religion. (...) All of us have repeatedly noted that we were offered concepts that were linked to grand narratives, which did not match our observations. We were engaging with concepts that suggested substantial definitions of religion, only to find out that this hindered a perspective of our objects that would be historical and process-oriented.¹⁷

From my point of view, and in conclusion, what Davidsen describes as an ailment is not a serious problem, but in fact a necessary exercise in self-reflection. And what he prescribes as a cure to this perceived ailment looks to me like an attempt to simply ignore critical theory and re-establish hegemonic systems of definition. Yes, the study of religion is a huge mess. But

16 S.L. Mizruchi, 'Introduction', in S.L. Mizruchi (ed.), *Religion and Cultural Studies*, Princeton 2001, ix-xxv, ix-x. See also the chapter 'Religionswissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft' in Kippenberg, von Stuckrad, *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft*, 11-16.

17 R. Schlögl, 'Zur Einführung', in T.G. Kirsch, R. Schlögl, D. Weltecke (ed.), *Religion als Prozess: Kulturwissenschaftliche Wege der Religionsforschung*, Paderborn 2015, 7-8, 7 (my translation).

this mess is our habitat, and 'staying with the trouble' is better than pretending that a return to outdated positions can clean it up for us.¹⁸

About the author



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¹⁸ D.J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham/London 2016.