

Call for Papers

Conference on *Dynamics of Religious Diversity: The Study of Different Religions and Religious Difference in Postcolonial Configurations*

Conference of the Dutch Association for the Study of Religion

Utrecht University, 19-20 October 2017

Hosted by the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University

Academic convenors: Christoph Baumgartner and Birgit Meyer

Keynotes: David Chidester (University of Cape Town), Kim Knibbe (University of Groningen), Eva Spies (University of Bayreuth), Peter van der Veer (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen).

We invite proposals for papers and panel sessions that aim to explore research avenues related to the study of dynamics of religious diversity as outlined below.

Individual papers: Please send us a proposal (about 300 words) for a 20-minute presentation, including title of the paper and name and full contact details of the speaker.

Proposals for *panel sessions* should include the title of the session, an abstract of its content and purpose (max. 500 words), and the names of speakers and titles of the papers.

Deadline for submissions: 19 May, 2017.

All proposals should be sent to Suzanne van Vliet: s.vanvliet@uu.nl

Conference Website: <http://religiousdiversity.sites.uu.nl/>

Outline of the Conference Theme

In 2017, the *Nederlands Genootschap voor Godsdienstwetenschap* NGG (Dutch Association for the Study of Religion) will celebrate its 70th anniversary. This is an apt occasion to look back and ahead from our present moment.

The NGG was founded as the *Nederlands Genootschap voor Godsdienstgeschiedenis* upon the instigation of Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950) with the aim to develop the academic study of religion as an interdisciplinary field outside of Christian theology. Comparing the historical moment in which the NGG was established – in a world in turmoil right after the end of the Second World War – with our present conflict ridden time in which religion has become a major bone of contention, striking differences with regard to the role and place of religion in society and its study appear. Then the Dutch study of religion was still positioned in a majority Christian nation with overseas colonies whose inhabitants professed other non-Christian (Islamic, Buddhist, indigenous) beliefs. Nowadays scholars of religion

face the rise of a highly diverse and dynamic religious field as well as the decline of mainstream Christianity and the rise of atheism and agnosticism.

The change of the broader social-political configurations has also influenced the epistemological, theoretical and methodological orientations of the study of religion. Seventy years ago, the central focus of research on the part of scholars involved in the NGG and similar associations were non-Western religions outside of Europe and in the distant (European) past. Today the study of religion is situated in an entirely different field: The old colonial frontier areas where researchers encountered non-Christian religions have dissolved, and people from “there” got ever more on the move to “here.” Contemporary cities in the Netherlands, and Europe at large, form the new frontier areas where various forms of religious expression coexist with each other and amid strong secularist and atheist positions.

The current postcolonial configuration in which the study of religion is situated poses substantial challenges for the future orientation of our research, but also evokes important questions with regard to the past. Challenges and questions concern the study of co-existence and mutual interaction of highly divergent forms of religion in urban space, such as various forms of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Neopaganism, and unaffiliated spiritualities, to name only a few. Which concepts, theories and methods are needed to understand the dynamics of this complex field and analyze this co-existence as a whole? How to engage in categorization and comparison so as to grasp this new diversity? How to spot and circumvent repercussions of resilient colonial formats – in scholarship, policy and public debate – in studying religiously plural settings?

Answers to such questions, and future approaches of religious studies that are able to address the intricacies of religious diversity in current postcolonial configurations, depend on a critical examination of the epistemologies, concepts and approaches that have been transmitted from the past study of religion into our scholarly thinking. This is the basic proposition that informs this symposium.

The need for such an examination pertains especially to the theorization of religious difference and diversity. Over the past twenty years, the concepts developed in the study of religion since its formation as an academic field have been subject to sustained critique, involving a fundamental questioning of the notion of religion itself, the concept of world religion, the tendency of privileging text above other religious forms of expression, and the tracing of a post-enlightenment “Protestant bias” within the modern study of religion. In this critical endeavor, the possibility to speak about religion in general terms (that is to say across its diverse manifestations in past and present) has been challenged. In this context, approaches such as the phenomenology of religion as deployed by Van der Leeuw and others that long offered a backbone for the study of religion have been subject to fundamental critique. And yet, notwithstanding constant calls to foreground specificity, particularity and historicity, the issue of comparative approaches to religion, which on the one hand seem to presuppose certain generalizations, and on the other hand make it possible to speak in general terms, across difference and diversity, is ever more pertinent in the face of the current highly plural religious field.

The central aim of this conference is to discuss the possibility of generalizing concepts and methods, including comparison, for the future study of religion in the light of past, and now heavily critiqued models for generalization.

On the one hand, we call for an exploration of how towering figures as Van der Leeuw and others approached non-Western, non-Christian religions in the context of the colonial worlds in which they lived and wrote. The central question here is how the study of a diverse set of religions across a colonial world was incorporated into a general understanding of religion (e.g. as a human phenomenon). What level of abstraction from lived religion and politics of regulating religious expressions was required to make generalization across diversity at all possible? Which hierarchies informed the categorization and valuation of non-Christian and non-western religious traditions? What were the “costs” involved in establishing generalization within, e.g., the phenomenology of religion? In how far did the colonial configuration in which the study of religion was situated impinge on its modes of generalizing?

On the other hand, we call for conceptual reflections about the (im)possibility and (un)desirability to generalize and engage in comparison from the standpoint of the current postcolonial nexus of religion and society. In how far does this new configuration require, and possibly open up possibilities to develop modes, ways and means – even if pragmatic – to speak about religion in general terms? How and where do current moves in the study of religion that emphasize the corporeality and materiality of religion, for instance, overlap with, but also differ from earlier approaches such as the phenomenology of religion? What difference does it make to conceptualize and study religion (and religions) in a postcolonial configuration?

Taking the 70th anniversary of the NGG as an occasion to reflect about these issues, the symposium will not be confined to the situation of religious studies in the Netherlands. The central question, as outlined, is to explore past and present theories and modes of generalization and comparison with regard to highly diverse and hierarchized religious fields.