

Dynamics of Religious Diversity. The Study of Different Religions and Religious Difference in Postcolonial Configurations

Utrecht University, 19-20 October 2017

Conference Venue: Boothstraat 7, 3512 BT Utrecht, The Netherlands

Abstracts Plenary Contributions:

1. Opening Panel: Key Figures in the Study of Religion from Postcolonial Perspectives

Ernst van den Hemel (Meertens Institute Amsterdam)

Abraham Kuyper and the Janus face of Dutch pluralism

The figure of Abraham Kuyper is truly a towering figure in the fields of Dutch religious and political history. Generally acknowledged as one of the chief architects of the modern Dutch political system, the impact of Kuyper on famed Dutch pluralism is well-documented and often repeated.

However, due to relative isolation -and sometimes hagiographic tendencies- of Kuyper expertise on the one hand, and a lack of knowledge of religious history in social scientific publications on the other, Kuyper is virtually absent from recent academic efforts to critically revisit the nature and limits of Dutch pluralism. The result is that in times of polarizing debates on pluralism and its concomitant practices of in,- and exclusion, critical insight into one of the foundational figures of the Netherlands is underdeveloped.

By discussing postcolonial critiques of Dutch pluralism and contrasting these with existing scholarship on Kuyper's views on colonialism, this paper outlines some of the benefits that might be reaped when this divide is bridged. The paper argues that the case of Kuyper is an example of the need to innovate and combine expertise in contemporary Dutch academia. Kuyper is of central importance for understanding the roots of what I propose to call the Janus face of Dutch pluralism: not pluralism *or* exclusion but rather pluralism *and* exclusion.

Arie L. Molendijk (University of Groningen)

Friedrich Max Müller and the Sacred Books of the East

In my talk I shall discuss one of the most ambitious editorial projects of late Victorian Britain: the edition of the fifty substantial volumes of the *Sacred Books of the East* (1879-1910). The series was edited and conceptualized by Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), a world-famous German-born philologist, orientalist, and religious scholar. Müller and his influential Oxford colleagues secured financial support from the India Office of the British Empire and from Oxford University Press. The series of the *Sacred Books of the East* contributed significantly to the Western perception of the 'religious' or even 'mystic' East, which was textually represented in English translations. The series was a token of the rise of 'big science' and textualized the East, by selecting their 'sacred books' and bringing them under the power of western scholarship.

Johan Strijdom (Department of Religious Studies and Arabic, University of South Africa)

Gerardus van der Leeuw at the Voortrekker Monument: A postcolonial critique of his concept of sacred space

This paper offers a postcolonial critique of Gerardus van der Leeuw's phenomenological concept of sacred space, by problematizing the message that he delivered at the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, South Africa, on 16 December

1949. On this most sacred day in the calendar of Afrikaner nationalists celebrating the victory of the Voortrekkers over the Zulu king Dingaan a bit more than a century earlier, Van der Leeuw shared the podium with prime minister DF Malan, whose National Party had come to power in 1948 introducing a history of more than four decades of apartheid in South Africa, and delivered a message from the Dutch people to Afrikaner nationalists. What did Van der Leeuw make of that inauguration? How should we understand the message that he conveyed? In searching for an answer, his speech will be analysed by relating it to an extensive report that he had written after his 11 week visit to South Africa in 1947, when the Smuts government was still in power, as well as pertinent concepts in his phenomenology of religion, particularly his phenomenological concept of sacred space. By comparing and contrasting Van der Leeuw's concept of sacred space with David Chidester's critical concept of sacred space, focusing on the Voortrekker Monument as case study, I will offer a critique of Van der Leeuw's concept of sacred space from a postcolonial perspective and South African location.

Amr Ryad (University of Leuven)

"The Double-Role of an Islam Expert:" A Fierce Debate on Snouck Hurgronje and his Position in Dutch Orientalism in 1980s.

Christian Snouck Hurgronje is no doubt one of the most influential pioneers in the study of Islam in The Netherlands in the colonial times. As part of the wider debate on Orientalism in the wake of decolonization, Snouck's role in Dutch orientalism was put into question because of his obvious strong ties with Dutch colonial politics in the East Indies and the Muslim world. In late 1979, the Dutch scholar of Islam Sjoerd van Koningsveld gave a lecture on Snouck's scholarly legacy in which he harshly questioned his role in the Dutch colonial and academic knowledge of Islam by depicting his as a "hawk". His argument triggered a polemical controversy at Leiden University around Snouck's role in western domination, the motives to visit to Mecca, his real or fake conversion to Islam, his misuse of the trust of his Muslim network of associates, etc. By focusing on Van Koningsveld's arguments and his interlocutors, we shall see how post-colonial studies of Islam look back at the accumulation of knowledge and representations of Islam that were inherited from previous colonial regimes.

2. Keynote Lectures

Kim Knibbe (University of Groningen)

Conceptualizing Religious Diversity in a Post-Colonial Europe

In recent years, the sociological and anthropological study of religion in Europe has moved well beyond the notion that religion is inevitably declining. There are several flourishing subfields that study religion in the public sphere, transnational and migrant religion, the spiritual turn, and also, religion in relation to secularity.

Each of these fields offers interesting conceptualizations and insights, but there are also wide gaps that may lead one to wonder whether they are talking about the same geographical area and whether it is possible to say anything very useful about 'religion in Europe'. Former 'comprehensive theories' on this topic have tended to focus only on Europe as a collection of discrete nation states, where religion has become privatized and spiritualized, and whatever religion one finds is in fact 'migrant religion', carried by 'alien bodies' that will either secularize or remain 'alien'. In addition, as Manuel Vasquez has argued, religion quite often remains the epistemological 'other' of sociology.¹ How then can we develop concepts and epistemologies that reconfigure the sociological relationship to religion? Recent discussions have turned again to the notion that the modernity of Europe needs to be analyzed also in terms of its coloniality. If we conceive of Europe as a geographical area marked by a long history of colonialism, giving rise to different notions of modernity marked by coloniality, how can this help us to make sense of religious diversity and the epistemological, or as some would say, 'ontological' challenges of religion? Through discussing ethnographic material, usually located within different subfields, I will explore these questions.

¹ Manuel Vásquez, "Grappling with the Legacy of Modernity: Implications for the Sociology of Religion," ed. Courtney Bender et al., *Religion on the Edge: De-Centering and Re-Centering the Sociology of Religion*, 2012, 23-42.

Eva Spies (University of Bayreuth)

Being in relation. A perspective on multiplicity in the field of religion

This paper takes a look at the dynamics of religious diversity with the help of a relational perspective. Starting from the assumption that religious traditions continuously constitute and transform through their interrelations, the study of diversity should focus on relations and practices of relating rather than on given entities (religious traditions) that come into contact, and mix or repel each other. Thus, I propose a praxeological approach to studying such processes of coming into being in and through practices of relating. My example revolves around a Pentecostal pastor and his wife who are trying to establish a branch of their church in a Malagasy town and "to win the place for Jesus". Looking at their ways of 'doing religion' shows that actors, places, practices as well as religious communities constitute relationally. Moreover, the ways of doing religion (again) point to the fact that the field of religious studies is not restricted to "religion" only, but includes all kinds of temporary entities and relations. Understood this way, diversity does not refer to the many sub-forms of the one (religion) or the parts of a whole. We may rather conceptualize it as multiplicity, i.e. as historically and culturally located, temporary effects of relations that in turn afford multiple new relations and ways of relating.

Peter van der Veer (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen)

What is 'Comparison' in Comparative Religion?

This paper deals with the use of comparison in understanding religious phenomena across the world. It offers a critical examination of the location of comparative religion in the social sciences and humanities. Considering the fact that religion is of huge political concern the question is why comparative religion as a discipline is so marginal. The paper tries to answer this question by looking at the changing political context of comparative religion, at the construction of its object and at its methods. It also examines the use of comparison in other relevant disciplines in order to develop a perspective on making comparative religion a more critically important discipline.