

SUMMARY

Reason for the study

This foresight study has been prompted by wide-spread concern about the status and future of the academic study of religion in the Netherlands. Since around 1989, this field has faced a series of sweeping restructuring and austerity operations as well as the discontinuation of professorships. These measures have put its cohesion, stability and future at risk and have provoked astonishment and concern not only in the Netherlands, but also abroad. While the study of religion has a long academic tradition in the Netherlands, and while its relevance to society is as clear as ever, if not more so, it somehow fails to highlight its value and secure its own future. The contrast between societal relevance and the status of the academic field is astonishing. On the one hand, conflicts concerning secularisation and the continued presence and revival of religion in new manifestations have brought a sense of urgency and timeliness to the field. On the other hand, religious scholarship has not succeeded in playing a role of significance in this rapidly changing and tumultuous arena. There is a real risk that the study of religion will become even more fragmented than it already is, that expertise will be irrevocably lost, and that – as some believe – the very existence of the field is under threat.

The Board of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences has asked the Foresight Committee for theology and religious studies to analyse the background of this situation. It has also asked the Committee to suggest ways of safeguarding and stimulating the future of academic study in both disciplines.

The Committee began by investigating the current situation. It conducted a study of the literature, collected data, interviewed individuals, organized a series of focus groups, and presented its preliminary conclusions during a public event. This produced a history of the study of religion (Section 2) and a review of the current status of research (Section 3) and education (Section 4). The committee then formulated a problem analysis (Section 5), described a number of prerequisites for making the study of religion more vigorous and robust (Section 6), and devised a stepwise plan for achieving these aims (Section 7).

History of the study of religion

This section of the report recounts the history of theology in the Dutch academic system, the development of comparative religious studies and the study of non-western religions, the rise of religious studies programmes, and the relationship between the practice of confessional theology and the independent academic study of religion as a societal phenomenon. This history makes clear that the Netherlands was a forerunner in the modern academic study of religion. From 1876 onwards, the *duplex ordo* law made it possible for confessional theology to co-exist alongside the comparative, non-denominational study of religion. Along with Switzerland, the Netherlands were one of the first countries in western Europe to develop such an approach. Until recently, the study of religion in the Netherlands could have been described as innovative, pluralist, and of exceptional quality. The phenomenology of religion, comparative theology, and other areas of scholarship that were pioneered in the Netherlands have been an important impetus to the development of both Dutch and international religious studies. It is this Dutch tradition and its outstanding international reputation that the current trends are putting at risk.

Status of research

Dutch religious scholarship has several important strengths. International external reviews give high marks to projects and faculties that combine excellence in disciplinary scholarship with interdisciplinary research. Dutch scholars have also acquired a solid position when it comes to international research funding. The Committee mentions a number of striking examples of recent and current projects. At the same time, however, it also addresses a number of problem areas. For example, confessional theology has become isolated academically in certain respects. Although publications intended mainly for a denomination-specific audience play an important role, from an academic perspective it is crucial to know whether confessional theological scholarship contributes to the general academic discourse, and how. Confessional theologians have submitted very few funding applications to NWO, ERC or Horizon2020, and it is only in extremely rare cases that such applications are awarded funding.

There are many different university faculties and departments that study religion outside the separate disciplines of theology and religious studies. Several attempts to bring these disparate interests together have failed for financial reasons or owing to university politics, making cross-fertilisation between the independent institutes and other departments impossible. The result is a widely shared interest for the study of religion but simultaneously a loss of expertise, the absence of diversity, and an overall lack of cohesion. The academic study of religion is impossible without an expert knowledge of history, philology, literature and religious studies to give it the necessary depth and to put it into high relief.

The problem becomes plain in cases of duplication on the one hand and a loss of expertise on the other. For example, scholars at many universities are studying Islam as a societal phenomenon; at the same time, however, Arabic and other languages important for understanding the theological consistency and roots of Islam are at risk of being marginalised. In another example, the encyclopedic study of Christianity is being replaced at many public universities by a broader approach to scholarship that falls under the heading of religious studies. While this shift is broadening the field in important ways, it is also threatening to muddle the discipline's identity. Is it necessary to have a separate field that studies religion? Why can such scholarship not be carried out in departments of sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy or regional studies? Parallel to these questions is the search for the meaning of 'theology' in academia today. Does theology mean studying the dogmas of one's own religion, be that Christianity, Islam, or another faith? Or is there leeway for a non-denominational, academic form of theology? And what place does it merit within the broader academic context? These are among the questions that have arisen from the Committee's survey of the field. They require clear answers if theology and religious studies are to be fit for the future.

Status of study programmes

This section of the report surveys the various study programmes and describes where and how students can study theology or religious studies at present. Sceptics often refer to the problematically low student numbers. An overview of enrolments reveals that student numbers have indeed declined sharply in some university programmes. In a number of cases, the decline has been so dramatic that the programme's viability has been called into question. But enrolment figures can also present a distorted view of the situation. For example, despite secularisation, enrolment in confessional theology programmes is stable, and has even increased at some universities. The statistics should also be viewed in context in other respects. To estimate how many students are interested in studying religion, for example, we must consider not only students who major in theology or religious studies, but also students majoring in other disciplines who take theology or religious studies courses. When they are included, the enrolment figures look more positive. Nevertheless, there are problems. Religious studies

programmes are not very popular among students. At first, the move to replace confessional theology by a broader study of religion appeared to increase student numbers. The most recent figures, however, indicate that this trend may be reversing.

Both theology and religious studies programmes must adapt to the changing labour market and society. The Committee has viewed this subject in a broader context by considering a number of allied areas. One of these is the theology programme in higher professional education that – thanks to a well-developed consultation structure – takes the changing demands of the labour market very much into account. The teacher training programmes are another allied area. These programmes can mainly be found within institutions affiliated with a particular religion – not surprisingly, since the subject of religion is taught mainly at denominational secondary schools. University teacher training programmes attract fewer students than programmes in higher professional education. This not only raises doubts about their viability but also about upcoming generations' knowledge of religion.

Problem analysis

The report raises a number of crucial issues. For one thing, the recommendations made in previous foresight studies and external reviews show that change is difficult to bring about. Alarm bells began going off about trends in the academic study of religion back in 1989. Practically all subsequent external reviews noted the need for reorganisation and cooperation so as to prepare for a new and perhaps even greater role in a changing society. 'Institutional inertia', 'sphere sovereignty' and 'short-term policy-making' blocked the road to change. When theology and religious studies were hit by an avalanche of budget cuts, performance-driven measures and ad hoc crisis policy-making, they were unprepared and helpless. Neither scholars nor administrators had a clear notion of the role that the study of religion should play in Dutch research and society. The discipline lacked visibility and was poorly represented.

Today, in 2015, the study of religion is a priority neither for society nor for administrators. This lack of interest can be ascribed in part to deeply-rooted but outdated opinions about secularisation that obscure the relevance of the religious dimension of current events.

However, much of the problem can also be ascribed to the inability of the academic field to respond vigorously to changing circumstances and to set its sights on the future. There is a dogged absence of coherence that cannot be explained by normal academic competition. Despite the urging of external review and foresight committees, the barriers shaped by tradition and history have persisted.

In the background is the ongoing debate about the differences between theology and religious studies. An approach that takes thinking about God as the ultimate object of academic reflection – whether that be the God of Judaism, Christianity or Islam makes no difference in terms of methods – differs crucially from an approach that

studies a broad range of religious practices and cultures. That need not be an impediment; there are research groups in which both approaches have proved productive. But in reality, there is too much distance between the two approaches, and too many prejudices that play a role.

The fourth factor is that there has been much discussion of the role of both the humanities and the social sciences in a broader sense. That has had repercussions not only for theology and religious studies themselves, but also for the allied areas that are essential to both. The role of the 'minor languages' is a good illustration. As support dwindles for the study of Sumerian and Akkadian, Hittite and Aramean, as well as Hebrew, Arabic, Sanskrit and a selection of other languages, it will become much more difficult to study the source texts of many religions. This is the outcome of having few agreements about the division of responsibilities at national level.

The final factor is that the representative body for theology and religious studies is outdated and irrelevant to the changing arena in which these disciplines must operate. The overarching consultative body (the DGO) was set up at a time when virtually every theology programme had its own faculty and could appoint its own dean to represent it. Now, religious studies are only a small unit within much broader humanities faculties. The new balance of power and altered relationships have undermined the effectiveness of the DGO. The Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER) is often mentioned in external reviews and foresight studies as potentially playing a broader role. In reality, however, it has been difficult for the School to embrace the broad study of religion as it now exists, in all its diversity. The Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies (NISIS) has a similar problem. The School itself focuses on a broader definition of Islam than a strictly traditional, religious concept. At the same time, however, the exceptional position that Islam has gradually come to occupy within the study of religion is problematical. Ideally, there should be scope for studying the traditions, lore, lived practices, and heritage of the various faiths based on a broad concept of religion.

Recommendations

The Committee has not only observed a pressing need for cooperation and coordination but also a growing willingness to actually cooperate throughout much of the field. In addition, the Committee has observed a demand in various quarters for expertise about spirituality, meaning, the role of religion in national and international conflicts, the status of material and immaterial heritage, the changing role of deinstitutionalised religion, the upcoming institutionalisation of new religions, the influence of the religious past on the present, and the broader social and cultural implications of religion globally in the twenty-first century. Growing tensions in society and the many conflicts around the world with a religious dimension appear to have reawakened public and administrative interest in the study of religion. Another possible factor is the greater role that religious communities are playing in society after the scaling back of the welfare state. These trends require satisfactory policy that is properly grounded in scholarship.

The Committee is hopeful. It believes that it will be possible to break through institutional inertia and take important steps towards a necessary reform of methods and content, based on shared interests.

The Committee has observed that content and institutional reform is already under way in a number of areas. However, if this is to go beyond merely consolidating resources during a crisis, it must form part of a content-driven, forwarding-looking transformation of the field.

That transformation must extend beyond academic cooperation to include an integrated vision of the study of religion also in other parts of higher education. The Committee recommends examining the extent to which trends in higher professional education – which is making explicit efforts to adapt to the changing labour market – can serve as an incentive for academic programmes in religion. The Committee also supports initiatives that aim to encourage religious education in secondary schools. It stresses the need for theologians and religious scholars to make themselves more visible in the public domain.

The Committee also sees the need to reflect on the methods and content of the overarching study of religion in the twenty-first century. Based on successful projects in the Netherlands and trends here and abroad, it proposes a collaborative programme focusing on ‘lived religion’. By way of context, the Committee suggests a shared research programme that concentrates on manifestations of religion and spirituality, both institutional and individual, as experienced and lived. This would encompass the practices of individual believers, but also the material and cultural dimensions. A programme of this kind should not restrict itself to contemporary phenomena but focus as well on the roots, sources, history, and transformations that have taken place. It is precisely this knowledge that makes it possible to link reinterpretations, adaptations, updates and critical re-readings of traditions to changing societal contexts.

To provide a firm footing for this context, a supra-institutional network is needed to develop and implement an agenda. For the 2015-2016 academic year, the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS) has been found willing to take up the placeholder role. The Committee envisages a series of meetings throughout that year to develop an agenda and think about a suitable institutional structure to implement it. The Committee considers a new Netherlands Academy of Religion (NAR) an appropriate vehicle for achieving this aim. It is important for the NAR to bring together scholars from both the independent faculties and institutes for religious studies and theology and from other faculties and institutes that study religion from their own vantage point. To start off, a number of leading scholars in the field must be invited to play a preparatory role. Following their survey, a research programme will be proposed based on an overarching vision. This would be broadly discussed with those working in the field. The NAR can then become a permanent platform for reflection, renewal and representation vis-à-vis government, the media and the arts and culture sector. Eventually, the tasks of the research schools in the area of religion can also be housed with the NAR, which would bring disciplines and researchers together who have too often worked in isolation.