

The Emergence of the Science of
Religion in the Netherlands

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The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands

by
Arie L. Molendijk



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In Memory of my Father Adrianus Dirk Molendijk
(1925–2004)

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PREFACE

“The Science of Religion is a new science which has assumed an independent existence during the last decades only”. This is the opening line of Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye’s influential manual on the history of religions of 1887. The early practitioners of the field were firmly convinced that they had started something entirely new. In their view, the old surveys of religions were antiquated because they lacked critical acumen, treated foreign religions as mere curiosities, and were without scientific rigour. Therefore, scholars such as Max Müller, Cornelis Petrus Tiele and Chantepie de la Saussaye wanted to put the study of religion on a new, solid footing. This also explains why the term “science (in the broad sense of *Wissenschaft*) of religion” was often preferred when referring to the “comparative historical study of religions” (Tiele). The new field covered historical as well as theoretical (“philosophical”) approaches, and was by many contemporaries divided into the history of religions and the philosophy of religion.

This book explores the emergence of the science of religion in the Netherlands in the second half of the nineteenth century. Although many historians have stressed the importance of early Dutch science of religion, a full treatment of this subject has until now been missing. This monograph is intended to fill that gap. Various topics and questions will be addressed: How and where did the institutionalization of the study of religion take place? What characterized the new discourse on religion? How did different disciplines arrive at a comparative approach to religion? What interests were at stake in these developments? What (international) networks of scholars existed at the time? I start with some remarks on the rise of the scientific study of religion in general, and a critical discussion of the historiography of the field (Chapter I). In the second chapter the *communis opinio* concerning the reputation of Dutch science of religion is examined. Most historians see the Higher Education Act of 1876, by which the history of religions and the philosophy of religion were introduced into the curriculum of the Dutch faculties of theology, as a milestone in the establishment of an autonomous science of religion. Next, the process of institutionalization—inside as well as outside

academia—is addressed (Chapter III), followed by a discussion of the views held by Tiele and Chantepie de la Saussaye, these two men being the towering Dutch scholars in this new field (Chapter IV). Chapters V & VI offer analyses of Tiele’s concepts of religion and religious development, which form the foundation of his science of religion. Chapter VII sketches the broader, scholarly—especially ethnological—study of religion in the Netherlands at the time. To put the emerging field of ethnology and the study of religion in general further into perspective, Chapter VIII focuses on one particular example of religious representation, viz. the Amsterdam Colonial and Export Trade Exhibition of 1883. By introducing Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia I show that in this case at least the study of religion has to be an integral part of the study of culture. Finally, the last chapter suggests some explanations of the success of the Dutch study of religion within an international context.

Not being a historian of religion by training myself, it struck me that the historiography of the field to a large extent seems to take place within the categories provided by the *current* scientific practices of history of religions. Scholars are still very much intent on separating the new field from its old arch-enemy theology. Did Tiele argue for a clear line of demarcation between the science of religion on the one hand and religion and theology on the other, or was he driven by theological purposes? Either way, one overlooks the fact that, basically, Tiele wanted to transform theology into science of religion, and that the opposition construed by present-day scholarship would not have been very meaningful to him. Of course, one can ask these questions, but is this the best way to understand what early scholars of religion were aiming at? Stefan Collini, Donald Winch and John Burrow commented on teleological interpretations as follows: “Past authors are inducted into the canon of the discipline as precursors or forebears, and passed in review as though by a general distributing medals—and sometimes reprimands—at the end of a successful campaign, with the useful implied corollary that if medals can be distributed the campaign must have been brought to a satisfactory conclusion and the discipline duly established”.¹ By way of multiple contextualizations I try to avoid this type of “disci-

¹ Stefan Collini, Donald Winch & John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics. A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History*, Cambridge 1983, p. 4.

pline history". The present book highlights processes of institutionalization, professionalization, and internationalization, together with discussions about methods and conceptualization in the emerging field.

This book has taken quite some time to materialize. My appointment in 1999 as a professor in the History of Christianity at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Groningen brought new obligations, and I was happy that in the autumn of 2003 I was able to finish the first draft of the book. I started to work on this subject in 1996–1997, as a Research Fellow at the Faculty of Theology in Leiden. The project was funded by the Stimuleringsfonds of the Leiden University. A generous grant of the Vera Gottschalk-Frank Foundation (The Hague) permitted the appointment of a research assistant, Tessel Jonquière, who studied the letters and manuscripts in the C.P. Tiele Collection of the Leiden University Library. I am deeply indebted to all institutions and people who facilitated my work, especially the Leiden and Groningen Theological Faculties, which funded various research trips and the revision of my English. I also had the opportunity to present my views to various audiences and to publish papers on my research. Many of these articles have been used for this book in some form or another (a list is included below). I wish to thank the colleagues and friends who read, commented upon, and in other ways aided this project: Han Adriaanse, Nikolaj Bijleveld, Jan N. Bremmer, Peter Broekema, Frits Broeyer, Michel Despland, Udo Doedens, Aza Goudriaan, Julia Harvey, Sigurd Hjelde, Tessel Jonquière, Hans G. Kippenberg, Arie van der Kooij, Mattie Kuiper, Saskia van Lier, Peter Pels, Dan Powers, Peter van Rooden, Petruschka Schaafsma, Ineke Smit, Ivan Strenski, Jan Vellekoop, Ernestine van der Wall and Hetty Zock. I dedicate this book to the memory of my father, Adrianus Dirk Molendijk (1925–2004), who always warmly supported me along the sometimes winding roads of my academic career.

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At the Cross-Roads. Early Dutch Science of Religion in International

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- “Tweede-hands werk”. Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye als godsdiensthistoricus, in: P.J. Knegtman & P. van Rooden (eds), *Theologen in ondertal. Godgeleerdheid, godsdienstwetenschap, het Athenaeum Illustre en de Universiteit van Amsterdam*, Zoetermeer 2003, pp. 141–157 (Chapter IV).
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Abbreviations

- BLGNP *Biografisch Lexicon voor de Geschiedenis van het Nederlandse Protestantisme*, 5 vols [thus far], Kampen: Kok, 1978–2002.
- NNBW *Nieuw Nederlandsch Biografisch Woordenboek*, ed. by P.C. Molhuysen, P.J. Blok (& K.H. Kossmann), 10 vols, Leiden: Sijthoff, 1911–1937.