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Fundamental Problems and Methods in the Study of Religion: A Reply to My Critics

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Part of theme issue (open access) on 'Religious Studies in the Netherlands: Debating the Field's Future', framed around my target article 'Theo van Baaren's Systematic Science of Religion Revisited: The Current Crisis in Dutch Study of Religion and a Way Out'. Link to entire theme issue (open access): [here](#).

Abstract: In this reply I engage with the response articles by Kocku von Stuckrad, Katja Rakow, Kees de Groot, Eric Venbrux, and Arjan Sterken. Noting where we agree, disagree, and seem to talk past each other, I clarify what I consider to be the subject matter and the fundamental problems and methods in the systematic study of religion.

Keywords: Study of religion; research problems; definition; comparison

Invitation to the systematic study of religion

Theo van Baaren distinguished between a broad, interdisciplinary field involving historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists with an interest in religion, and the systematic science of religion which he considered a discipline of its own. As an empirical description of the Dutch situation, this conceptualization of the field remains valid today. In the Netherlands, we can still distinguish between the study of religion *sensu lato* (= *religiewetenschappen* in the plural) and the study of religion *sensu stricto* (= *godsdienswetenschap* in the singular). In his response to me, Kees de Groot (p. 2) asks who I am actually addressing with my proposal for a systematic study of religion – is it everyone researching religion (*sensu lato*) or only those who already engage in comparative work and

self-identify as members of a discipline (*sensu stricto*)? I regard my proposal as an invitation to all scholars of religion – regardless of their disciplinary identities – to join the project of developing a systematic study of religion. I invite them to discuss what constitutes the fundamental problems and methods in the study of religion, and to make explicit how their own research helps solve those problems and improve our methods. Whether contributing to the systematic study of religion will also lead individuals to change their disciplinary identities interests me much less.

In what follows I will unpack my invitation to the systematic study of religion. I will clarify what I consider to be the subject matter, the fundamental problems, and the fundamental methods in the systematic study of religion, and I will explicate what I believe self-identified sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and historians of religion as well as self-identified *godsdienswetenschappers* have to offer the systematic study of religion. Along the way I will note some important points where my critics and I agree, disagree, and seem to talk past each other. I want to thank Kocku von Stuckrad, Katja Rakow, Kees de Groot, Eric Venbrux, and Arjan Sterken for their thoughtful and critical remarks on my target article.

The subject matter of the study of religion

The subject matter of the study of religion is religion in all its forms. In my conceptualization, the study of religion is not limited to the so-called world religions (as Eric Venbrux suggests; p. 3) but covers also, for example, new religions, ancient religions, and indigenous religions, and it studies lived, non-official, and non-institutional forms of religions as well as official and institutional forms. It does not matter to the study of religion whether its subject matter goes under the name ‘religion’, or under another name (such as ‘spirituality’ or ‘*dīn*’), or under no name at all.

It is because our subject matter extends beyond what people themselves label ‘religion’ that the study of religion needs a substantive definition of religion, and it is because our interests extend beyond what has been conceptualized as ‘genuine religion’ in the West, that this definition should contain no reference to forms (e.g., the presence of a canon or an institution) and functions (e.g., securing social cohesion) (see target article p. XX). Contrary to what Clifford Geertz and Kocku von Stuckrad state (p. XX), there is no opposition between defining religion and finding it. A substantive definition of religion is the best tool

we have for finding religion in unexpected places (outside of institutions and traditions), in unexpected guises (also when parading as non-religion), and in unexpected modes (such as the casual and playful). Katja Rakow (p. 5) faults me for returning to an essentialist position when I call for a shared definition of religion as a cornerstone for cooperative, comparative work. I hope that a second look at the differences between my own definition of religion and that of Van Baaren (who, for example, contrasts religion to superstition) shows that I have not overheard the critique voiced against the Western-centrism of earlier times' definitions of religion. I am not advocating a return to 'a time when our subject matter was simply a given and not yet thoroughly deconstructed' (Rakow p. 5). Deconstructing old categories is necessary, but as Kevin Schilbrack has asked, 'after we deconstruct 'religion,' then what?'¹ I fear being quagmired by contemporary anthropology because most anthropologists of religion (but luckily not all, and more on this below) are content to leave it at deconstruction. With Schilbrack, I content that after deconstruction, theoretical reconstruction must follow.²

Fundamental problems in the study of religion

As Kees de Groot points out, 'scientific progress is brought about by the formation of schools of thought with a clear programme for empirical research' (p. 3). I believe that a systematic study of religion can only succeed if the scholarly community can agree on a set of fundamental research problems worth investigating together. Such research problems should identify questions about theoretical objects that can be explored through the empirical study of relevant subject matter. The difference between subject matter, as a set of empirical phenomena, and the theoretical object, understood as the category, process, or mechanism that one seeks to understand, is Jonathan Z. Smith's.³ The ultimate theoretical object of the study of religion is 'religion', but most research problems will construct theoretical objects on

¹ K. Schilbrack, 'After We Deconstruct 'Religion,' Then What? A Case for Critical Realism', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 25 (2013), 107-112.

² Responding to Schilbrack's rhetorical question – after we deconstruct 'religion' then what? – Wouter Hanegraaff has, in parallel with me, suggested a way to reconstruct the category religion. See W.J. Hanegraaff, 'Reconstructing "Religion" from the Bottom Up', *Numen* 63 (2016), 576-605. Hanegraaff and I agree on the principles through which a definition of religion should be constructed, and I believe our concrete definition proposals can be synthesized.

³ See J.Z. Smith, 'A Twice-told Tale: The History of the History of Religions' History', *Numen* 48 (2001), 131-146, 142-143.

a smaller scale.⁴ For the systematic study of religion, the following four fundamental problems are in my view particularly promising:

1. *Which universal cognitive mechanisms underpin and promote various aspects of religious thought and behaviour?* This is the central question in the cognitive study of religion and one that also interests many theologians. I agree with Arjan Sterken (p. 2) that historians and anthropologists of religion are needed to anchor research into this issue more strongly in empirical expertise on religion in the past and outside the West.
2. *What is the power of religious texts, or how/when/to what extent/under which conditions can authoritative religious texts determine the thought and behaviour of religious individuals and the social organization of religious traditions?* This question is geared to find a middle ground in polarized debates such as the one on whether the Quran proscribes a particular (violent) ideology or whether it is open to any interpretation its readers see fit. This issue is of interest to both scholars of religion, theologians, and political scientists – and it allows for deep historical work and comparison. I see obvious connection points between this line of research and the discursive study of religion developed by Kocku von Stuckrad and others (p. 3n5).
3. *How do the various building-blocks of religious traditions (e.g., authoritative texts, rituals, beliefs, experiences, material objects) interact with each other within religious traditions, and which differences can be observed between (types of) religious traditions, and between religions and non-religious cultural phenomena such as political ideologies and non-religious worldviews?* This is probably the most under-theorized question in the study of religion. My hunch is that anthropological theories of culture and sociological theories of knowledge and expertise can be of great help. Venbrux (p. 3), Rakow (p. 5), and De Groot (p. 3) call for the inclusion of non-religious worldviews; non-religion and new atheism; and ritual expressions of fear for COVID-19 (among other things) respectively, and I am willing to take all of this on board. I just have to insist that none of this is religion and that all of it, while important for the socio-cultural study of Western society today, is marginal to a study of religion that is concerned with religion (or even worldviews) across the globe throughout all of history.

⁴ Some possible theoretical objects could be Bible interpretation in UFO religions (category); religious radicalization (process); or the means through which religious discourse can become persuasive (mechanism).

4. *Which patterns can be observed in the cultural evolution of religion from the Paleolithic till the digital age, and what can we, given this knowledge, predict about the future of religion, both in the developed world and the developing world?* To reconstruct the history of religion in the singular, historians of religions specializing in different traditions and time periods must work together. Also scholars of religion focussing on the present should be interested in the cultural evolution of religion, for it is a necessary background for understanding our current (post)-secular age and for dealing with the question whether the rest of the world will follow in the secularizing footsteps of the West. The groups of scholars that need to be confronted with each other here are sociologists of the West and scholars of religion with an expertise on the non-Western world.

The problems presented above are *fundamental* problems for the study of religion. They can be confronted only through comparative, empirically grounded work on multiple cases, and they allow for the formation of theories that, while perhaps not amounting to a single ‘catch-all’ theory of religion, could constitute a set of more or less coherent theories, each explaining core aspects of religion at different ontological levels. My four problems far from exhaust the list of fundamental problems in the study religion and my point is not that all of us should research these particular problems. It is far more important for me that we discuss together, perhaps at conferences hosted by the Dutch Association for the Study of Religion (NGG) or the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER), what constitutes those fundamental problems in the study of religion that we consider worth scrutinizing together.

Fundamental methods in the study of religion

Definition, comparison, explanation, and theory formation are the methodological operations needed to tackle fundamental research problems. I have already argued for the necessity of definition. In this section I will clarify my position on comparison and theory formation, and relate my own views to current debates in anthropology

I did not discuss Peter van der Veer’s book *The Value of Comparison* in my target article because Van der Veer does not self-define as a scholar of religion (but as an anthropologist), and because I find the range of comparative operations he considers

legitimate to be unnecessarily limited.⁵ Katja Rakow may have sensed that my disappointment with much of contemporary anthropology is caused by the likes of Van der Veer, for she pitches his view on comparison against mine (p. 3–4). For this reason, and because Rakow endorses Van der Veer’s position, I think it worthwhile to clarify my own position of analytical theorizing over against Van der Veer’s interpretivism. Van der Veer makes two main points in his book which Rakow cites and supports: (1) the ideal method of anthropology is ‘holism’; and (2) generalizations are unacceptable and impossible. Holism is the ‘conceptual engagement with a fragment (of a society or culture; MAD) that allows us to interpret another conceptual universe’ at the local, national, or global level.⁶ Rakow mentions that Van der Veer considers the interpretive leap from fragment to whole to be ‘theory-laden’ (p. 4) but she does not quote Van der Veer’s definition of theory as ‘observing and contemplating’.⁷ Of course, Van der Veer is free to return to the original Greek meaning of *θεωρία*, but in ordinary, contemporary terms he is stating here that anthropology should limit itself to description and interpretation and not engage in explanation and theory formation.

Van der Veer’s aversion against generalization is directed at some of those anthropologists who have contributed most to the systematic study of religion in the past (such as Clifford Geertz, Pierre Bourdieu, and Roy Rappaport) or who do so in the present (Pascal Boyer, Harvey Whitehouse, and Tanya M. Luhmann).⁸ Van der Veer’s list of villains is my list of heroes. I am not saying that there is nothing to criticize in the theories advanced by these anthropologists, but I cannot share Van der Veer’s conclusion that because these scholars may be wrong, anthropology should give up theorizing altogether. As far as I can see, Van der Veer’s distaste for generalization, and for comparison as a means to achieve generalization, rests on a misrepresentation of what generalization entails in the humanities and social sciences. ‘Generalizations’, for us, are not propositions about what is true always, but propositions about what is true most of the time. In my target article I use the term ‘generalization’ only once, and the example I offer is that ‘religions with a human founder *tend to deify him/her*’ (p. 24; emphasis added). In the rest of the article I talk not about generalizations but about ‘patterns’.

As I see it, the goal of comparison is to look for patterns in our subject matter, i.e. (1) to figure out which elements are recurrent over a set of comparable cases but also to identify

⁵ P. van der Veer, *The Value of Comparison*, Durham 2016.

⁶ Van der Veer, *The Value of Comparison*, 27.

⁷ Van der Veer, *The Value of Comparison*, 27.

⁸ Van der Veer, *The Value of Comparison*, 2-10, 27, 43-46.

those cases that do not conform, and (2) to figure out whether some cases are sufficiently similar to each other and sufficiently dissimilar to other cases to be clustered together as a type within a taxonomy. Against this background, I was somewhat surprised to read in Rakow's response article that 'Davidsen's ideal outcome of comparative work [is] generalizations about the category religion or related subcategories' (p. 4). I think her own comparative work on the religio-therapeutic practices of contemporary Western Buddhists and Evangelicals (pp. 7–8) shows that we share more than Rakow seems to think. Moving her far beyond mere description, comparison allows Rakow to draw conclusions about a subcategory of religion (religio-therapeutic practices in the contemporary West) and to challenge the self-understanding of her interlocutors (religio-therapeutic practices today are not restricted to Buddhism).

This thematic issue has demonstrated that there is much still to be discussed about the constitution and future of the study of religion in the Netherlands. I would be very pleased if the NGG would host a conference on the fundamental problems and methods in the study of religion in a near future. If a publication could result from the discussions at that conference, the field would be served even better.