

In: *Global Phenomenologies of Religion: An Oral History in Interviews*, edited by Saboko Fujiwara, David Thurfjell & Steven Engler, Sheffield: Equinox.

- 10 -

2021

## “There Was No Dutch School of Phenomenology of Religion”

Academic Implacability and Historical Accidents  
– An Interview with Jan G. Platvoet  
(The Netherlands)

MARKUS ALTENA DAVIDSEN

**Jan G. Platvoet** was born in Oldenzaal, in the Dutch province of Overijssel, in 1935. Platvoet initially trained in Roman Catholic (Philosophy and) Theology at the Major Seminary of the Society for African Missions (*Societas Missionum ad Afros*, SMA) from 1954 to 1961, after which he was ordained to the priesthood. From 1961 to 1966 he worked as a missionary in Ghana, and then returned to the Netherlands to study missiology and anthropology of religion at the Roman Catholic University at Nijmegen. In 1969, he was granted dispensation from celibacy and married An Mercx, a midwife and nurse whom he had met in Ghana. The same year, Platvoet was offered the post of Assistant Professor in the Science of Religion at the Roman Catholic University College of Theology at Utrecht where he worked closely together with the staff of the Section for the Science of Religion at (the public) Utrecht University. He defended his PhD thesis, “Comparing Religions: A Limitative Approach: An Analysis of Akan, Para-Creole, and Ifo-Sananda Rites and Prayers”, in 1982 at Utrecht University, and was appointed Associate Professor at Leiden University in 1991 where he taught until his retirement in 2000. Platvoet was instrumental in the foundation of the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR). He was appointed IAHR Life Honorary Member in 2013.

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Keywords: phenomenology of religion, history of the study of religion, comparison, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Theo van Baaren, the Netherlands

## Introduction

This chapter contains an interview with Jan G. Platvoet, a retired Associate Professor from Leiden University, about the rise and fall of the phenomenology of religion (PoR) in the Netherlands (c.1877–1973). Reviewing the complex history from Tiele and Chantepie de la Saussaye through Van der Leeuw to Bleeker and Waardenburg, Platvoet points out several overlooked facts of crucial importance for the history of the study of religion. As a corrective to Anglophone scholarship Platvoet stresses that Dutch PoR developed independently of and prior to Husserl's philosophical phenomenology, and he points out that Van der Leeuw only reluctantly accepted the title *Phänomenologie der Religion* for the German translation of his first introduction to the history of religion. More surprising, perhaps, is the fact that there was very little interaction among the Dutch phenomenologists of religion, and that both Van der Leeuw and Waardenburg, despite their international fame, were academically isolated figures in the Netherlands where they had little influence and no academic heirs. The absence of a "Dutch school" made possible the rapid collapse of Dutch PoR during the 1970s. Platvoet never practised PoR himself, but joined the anthropologically inspired assault on this approach that was launched by Theo van Baaren and others in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Within his own generation, Platvoet has been the one to most passionately promote a new, strictly secular and methodologically agnostic comparative science of religion(s) in the Netherlands.

The interview took place in English in Jan Platvoet's home in Bunnik on 20 June 2018.

### **Platvoet at Utrecht: A Young Scholar Witnesses the Demise of Dutch Phenomenology of Religion**

**Markus Altena Davidsen:** Perhaps it would be good to start this interview by clarifying your own position as a scholar of religion in relation to PoR. Are you a phenomenologist of religion yourself? And if not, how does your own approach compare to PoR?

**Jan G. Platvoet:** I never considered myself a phenomenologist of religion. I regard PoR a part of the history of the Dutch study of religions – an important and remarkable part – but I have never practised it myself, nor taught it to students other than as a part of the history of Dutch science of

religions.<sup>1</sup> Rather, I played, belatedly, a small part in its demise and dissuaded students actively from practising it. The type of science of religion that I have practised myself and which I have trained my students to practise, is of the anthropological and methodologically agnostic kind that was introduced in the Netherlands by Theo van Baaren (1912–1989), among others, in direct opposition to PoR.<sup>2</sup>

**So you are an anti-phenomenologist! Did you revolt against phenomenological teachers of your own, just as Van Baaren revolted against Gerardus van der Leeuw, or were you trained in what had already become a post-phenomenological climate?**

Neither. It might surprise those who cherish the Dutch contribution to the international PoR, but I myself was not introduced at all to PoR during my studies at Nijmegen in the late 1960s. This was not, however, because PoR had disappeared in the Netherlands by then. The towering figure of Dutch PoR, Gerardus van der Leeuw, had died in 1950, but phenomenologists of religion continued to hold professorships, most importantly C. Jouco Bleeker in Amsterdam.<sup>3</sup> The fact that I remained ignorant about PoR had everything to do with the “pillarized” (i.e. segregated) past of the Dutch university system.<sup>4</sup> Right from the time of Cornelis Petrus Tiele (1830–1902; Leiden), Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848–1920; Amsterdam, later Leiden) and William Brede Kristensen (1867–1953; Leiden), via Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950; Groningen) and until its fizzling out in the 1960s and 1970s, PoR was practised only at the four public universities in the Netherlands (Leiden, Groningen, Utrecht and Amsterdam) which were neutral in name but Protestant in practice.<sup>5</sup> PoR taught at these universities was a science of

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1. Platvoet prefers the term “science of religion(s)”, the direct translation of Dutch *godsdienstwetenschap* (cf. German *Religionswissenschaft*) which signals disciplinary coherence and explanatory ambition, to the vaguer “study of religion(s)”. Throughout the interview, however, both terms were used interchangeably by both interviewer and interviewee.
  2. Van Baaren was Van der Leeuw’s successor in Groningen, where he was Professor of Science of Religion from 1952 to 1980. He was also one of Platvoet’s two PhD supervisors and the one who most strongly influenced Platvoet’s own methodological position.
  3. Bleeker (1898–1983) was Professor of History of Religion and PoR at the University of Amsterdam from 1946 to 1969. He served as general secretary of the IAHR from 1950 to 1970 and as editor of *Numen* from 1960 to 1975.
  4. On the pillarized nature of the early Dutch science of religion, see Platvoet (2002).
  5. From 1876 to 2007, theology at the state universities in Leiden, Groningen and Utrecht and at the municipal University of Amsterdam was organized according to the so-called *duplex ordo* system. This system entailed that the state-appointed professors of theology responsible for teaching such subjects as exegesis, church

religions seen through a Protestant lens that recognized the other religions as fellow religions but insisted on the superiority of the Christian faith.

But I did not study at one of these universities. I had been trained and ordained as a Roman Catholic priest and had worked in Ghana where I had fallen in love with a Dutch nurse, An, whom I would later marry. When we returned from Ghana in mid-1966, my superiors requested that I enrol in the graduate programme in missiology at the Roman Catholic University at Nijmegen. There, as well as at the Free University at Amsterdam – the other Dutch church-affiliated confessional university – the Faculty of Theology was organized after the *simplex ordo*, dogmatic and pastoral theology being its heart and not removed to its margin, as they were in the *duplex ordo* faculties of theology. Until the 1950s, Christianity had in the two confessional universities been regarded as the one true faith – and all other religions as superstitions – following the orthodox *vera/falsa religio* dichotomy. Missiology, therefore, held a central place in these universities, with science of religions, and especially anthropology of religion, as its handmaids. By the mid-1960s, however, the traditional view of other religions as ways of perdition had been replaced at Nijmegen, with full formal approval of Vatican II (1962–1965), by a liberal *theologia religionum* that accepted other religions as co-religions and aimed at developing a “dialogue” with them.

Rather than to PoR, I was introduced, during my two-and-a-half-year graduate study in missiology, to social anthropology, particularly to the study of the preliterate indigenous religions of pre-colonial and colonial sub-Saharan Africa. It was for that reason that I was offered the post as Junior Lecturer in the Science of Religions in 1969 here at Utrecht<sup>6</sup> at the newly founded Katholieke Theologische Hogeschool (at) Utrecht (KThU; Roman Catholic University College of Theology at Utrecht), because the KThU was entering into a close alliance with the (Protestant) Faculty of Theology of Utrecht University (UU), the two planning to merge all teaching and research other than in dogmatic and pastoral theology. The KThU therefore needed research and teaching complementing that of the Section for the Science of Religion

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history and history of religions were situated in the universities' faculties of theology, whereas the professors appointed by the Dutch Reformed Church to teach dogmatic and pastoral theology were located in an adjunct department outside the theological faculties, and so were teaching *at*, but not *in* them. In practice, however, until the 1950s the state-appointed professors were themselves members of, and loyal to, the Dutch Reformed Church (C. P. Tiele, an Arminian, was an exception). On the *duplex ordo* system, see Platvoet (1998a).

6. Jan Platvoet's home in Bunnik, where the interview took place, is situated just on the outskirts of Utrecht. The Uithof, the out-of-town campus of Utrecht University, where the KThU and the Utrecht Faculty of Theology were relocated in 1969, was visible from his garden, beyond cornfields and a line of tall trees.

(*vakgroep godsdienstwetenschap*) of the UU Faculty of Theology, to which I was seconded with the task of developing research and teaching in preliterate religions, particularly those of sub-Saharan Africa. The section at the UU consisted of two full professors: the Indologist Prof. Dirk Jan Hoens (1920–2003; Prof. 1964–1982) and the Egyptologist Prof. Jan Zandee (1914–1991; Prof. 1968–1982), and a Senior Lecturer, the Islamologist with a special interest in PoR, Dr Jacques Waardenburg (1930–2015; Senior Lecturer 1968–1975; Lector 1975–1980; Prof. of Islam and PoR 1980–1987).

Koos Waardenburg<sup>7</sup> had just come back from the United States a year before and wanted to propagate a new form of PoR.<sup>8</sup> To this end, and to prepare a series of publications on the history of Dutch PoR (Waardenburg 1972, 1973–1974), Waardenburg organized a graduate seminar, together with Hoens, and I was invited to participate. Throughout the years 1969 and 1970 we had papers on all major Dutch phenomenologists. There were five papers on Van der Leeuw, and one each on P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, W. Brede Kristensen, K. A. H. Hidding,<sup>9</sup> C. Jouco Bleeker and Theo van Baaren. The latter three were invited to come and to comment on the paper on their work and to discuss it with us. By then, Van Baaren already had the reputation as the one who was destroying Van der Leeuw's work and position. He had just published, a year before, an article in German on *systematische Religionswissenschaft* (systematic science of religion) which he proposed as the replacement for PoR (Van Baaren 1969).<sup>10</sup>

**You say that Van Baaren was a crucial figure for the demise of PoR in the Netherlands. But you also just said that he was one of the living phenomenologists attending Waardenburg's graduate seminar. So was he a phenomenologist or not?**

Van Baaren went through a long process of emancipating himself from the PoR that he had been trained in by H. W. Obbink at Utrecht University.<sup>11</sup> Like many other Dutch scholars of religion specializing in ancient religions,

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7. In Dutch, Waardenburg's first name, Jacobus, can be colloquially abbreviated to Koos.
  8. We return to Waardenburg's neo-phenomenology later in the interview.
  9. Hidding (1902–1986) was Professor of History of Religion and PoR at Leiden University between 1948 and 1972.
  10. A few years later, Van Baaren laid out his position in more detail in Van Baaren (1973). We discuss Van Baaren's programme later in the interview.
  11. Hendrik Willem Obbink (1898–1979) was Professor of General History of Religion and Egyptian Language and Literature at the Utrecht Faculty of Theology from 1939 to 1968. Van Baaren enrolled in the Utrecht Faculty in 1938. As a "lapsed" Roman Catholic and an agnostic, Van Baaren did not study in the conservative Utrecht Faculty of Theology with the aim of becoming a minister, but with the ambition to embark on an academic career in science of religion and Egyptology. After

Van Baaren was trained as an Egyptologist, but among his many publications was only one (popularizing) book on Egyptian religion, *Mensen tussen Nijl en zon* (Van Baaren 1963). Increasingly, he became interested instead in the religions of what was then referred to as “the primitives”, and as a result it was the anthropology of religion, including the works of Evans-Pritchard and Geertz, that delivered him his tools for analysis. In his famous, programmatic book *Wij mensen: religie en wereldbeschouwing bij schriftloze volken* (1960, e.g. 9–22), Van Baaren criticized Van der Leeuw’s notion of primitive religion and introduced instead the more neutral term “religion of illiterate societies”. This was part of his attack on Van der Leeuw’s essentializing and normative idea that there exist two distinctly different mentalities, the primitive mentality and the modern mentality, of which all humans have some combination.

Van Baaren was strongly opposed to what he saw as prejudices within Van der Leeuw’s system. He attacked not only Van der Leeuw’s notion of a primitive mentality, but also, for example, his emphasis on dynamism – the idea that the experience of an impersonal, divine power is the core and origin of religion – and the idea that therefore God was a *Spätling* – a latecomer – in the history of religions. Van Baaren went through a long process during the 1950s and 1960s in which he abandoned his phenomenological training and re-invented himself as an anthropologist of religion. And moreover, Van Baaren was, from his youth onwards, an agnostic, and therefore took from the outset a completely different outlook on the world of human religions than Van der Leeuw. Van der Leeuw was a theologian, and he was interested in developing PoR in such a way that it fitted into the training that he had to give students in the Faculty of Theology.

### **The Rise of the Phenomenology of Religion at Leiden University: C. P. Tiele’s Evolutionism and Chantepie de la Saussaye’s Typological Phenomenology**

We are already discussing the decline of PoR in the Netherlands. We need to do that, but perhaps we should first take a step back and look at the emergence of PoR in the Netherlands, around such figures as Chantepie de la Saussaye. If we then go through the history of PoR in the Netherlands we will get to Van der Leeuw and Van Baaren’s revolt against him.

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graduating in 1945, Van Baaren became Obbink’s research assistant, which enabled him to prepare his PhD thesis.

The Dutch phenomenologists of religion – beginning with Chantepie and including Van der Leeuw himself and later Bleeker and Hidding – were professors of the history of religions who needed, in addition to their historical work, some comparative mode of studying religions. It was to this end that Chantepie included, in the first volume of his famous *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte*, a section called “Phänomenologischer Teil” (1887, 48–170).<sup>12</sup> What he here offers is no more than a system of categories that were understandable for theologians. Look here [Platvoet points to the table of contents].

**I see such categories as magic, sacrifice and prayer that theologians would be familiar with. These categories are either part of the Christian tradition (such as prayer) or of the form of Judaism that Christianity reacted against (such as sacrifice).**

Exactly. Chantepie took these Christian terms and turned them into comparative categories that helped identify similar elements in other religions. Later phenomenologists, whenever they encountered something that did not fit in the established system, simply added new categories, such as taboo and mana. The idea was that when the outside world, studied by anthropologists of religion, taught us new things, we might add a few new categories, but mostly the phenomenological system worked with categories that were intuitive and useful for modern theologians for comparing Christianity to other religions.

**So Chantepie’s phenomenology was a tool for comparison?**

It was a tool for comparison and no more than that. But it is important to stress that Chantepie developed his typological phenomenology in opposition to Tiele. Tiele also compared, but his strategy was genetic, ordering religions from lowest to highest, the latter being adoration of God – his own idea of the ultimate, supreme religion, to which the history of mankind would necessarily develop, by laws discovered by him. As a result, all humans would ultimately, at some time in the future, adhere to this supreme religion.

**So in Tiele’s view we have not only comparison, but also an evolutionary – even a teleological – aspect which is given a normative interpretation, with Christianity – and in particular his own liberal Christianity – as the highest and best?**

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12. For a long time this book, which was also translated into English and French, was an international standard work for teaching history of religions within the new discipline (Stausberg 2007, 309–310).

Absolutely. And for Tiele, this evolutionarily inspired history of religions was so natural that he thought that it might replace dogmatic theology, and that his own science of religion would eventually incorporate even practical theology (cf. Platvoet 1998a, 120). But all the “seminary things” that could not be incorporated into his new system – apologetics, polemics and dogmatic theology – would have to be thrown out of the university.

Tiele, by the way, was one of the architects of the university law of 1876 that established the *duplex ordo* system into the Dutch faculties of theology (cf. Platvoet 1998a, 115–126). During the 1860s and 1870s, Dutch politicians were debating heatedly how to structure the theological faculties, and most of the influential figures were rich Arminians, including Van Heemskerck.<sup>13</sup>

### **The minister of education who saw the law of 1876 through Parliament?**

Yes. Ultimately, Tiele’s radical ideas were not accepted and there was a compromise. Practical and dogmatic theology [the “seminary stuff”] were given a place at separate divinity schools adjoined to the faculties of theology, thus installing the *duplex ordo* system. And then a new discipline was introduced with the 1876 law, namely the general history of religions (*de Geschiedenis der Godsdiensten in het algemeen*), which included both the historical and comparative study of religions.

### **Of all the non-Christian religions?**

Yes, but in the service of the Christian religion.<sup>14</sup> And also philosophy of religion was introduced as a new subject, as the *duplex ordo* replacement of dogmatic theology – formerly called *doctrina de deo* and natural theology. Now a new kind of trinity was introduced with history of religions, the comparative study of religion, and philosophy of religion. But mind you that the comparative study of religion did not yet go under the name PoR.

Chantepie developed his systematic form of comparison against Tiele’s evolutionary type of comparison. Originally, Chantepie, after having earned his doctorate at Utrecht University had been appointed Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Amsterdam. Contrary to the old state

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13. The Arminians (*Remonstrantse Broederschap*) constitute a small, liberal Protestant church, whose members have been very influential in Dutch religious, cultural and political life. The Arminian ministers were trained at the Arminian Seminary, which in 1873 moved from the University of Amsterdam back to Leiden University from which Arminian theologians had been expelled in 1619. From 1877, Tiele held a double appointment as professor at both Leiden University and the Arminian Seminary.

14. This is most visible in the case of Judaism: Old Testament Israelite religion and Hellenistic Judaism were carefully studied, but Rabbinic Judaism was in practice excluded from the new discipline.

universities in Leiden, Utrecht and Groningen, the University of Amsterdam had been a so-called *Athenaeum Illustre*, an academic institution without the right to grant academic degrees, and had only very recently, in 1877, become a (municipality) university itself with the right to grant the doctorate degree. Therefore, when the chair in Ethics became vacant in Leiden in 1899, Chantepie gave up his chair in Amsterdam and moved to the more prestigious Leiden University where he became a direct competitor of Tiele who held the chair in the History of Religions there.

**Just to get it straight: when we compare Tiele and Chantepie you say that only Tiele operated with an evolutionary scheme in addition to the typological approach of Chantepie. But that is not to say that Chantepie was less normative. Would you even say that Chantepie was more normative in the way that he saw Christianity as more true than the other religions?**

Absolutely. You see, the phenomenologist Chantepie (Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye) was the son of another famous Chantepie (Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye) who had briefly – 1872–1874 – been a professor of theology in Groningen where he had been the front man of a new theological modality in Dutch reformed theology, the so-called ethical-irenic modality. The modalities in the Dutch Reformed Church began to form around this time, and all the professors of the *duplex ordo* faculties of theology were linked to one of the modalities. They had to train ministers for a particular modality, for in the early twentieth century the modalities had become so strong that you could not obtain a ministry unless you were a member of the association of the ministers of the modality to which a particular congregation belonged. The ethical-irenic modality was one of several reactions to the liberal or modern theology of the likes of Tiele, Abraham Kuenen (1828–1891), and others, that reigned in Leiden. Utrecht was dominated by the right-of-centre confessional modality, and Groningen had the middle-of-the road ethical theology which was open to comparative science of religion, but against what they called the rationalism of modern theology (see Platvoet 2002, 85–86). Chantepie brought this middle-of-the road theology to Leiden, and when Van der Leeuw studied in Leiden, from 1908 to 1913, he had two mentors, namely Kristensen who supervised his dissertation<sup>15</sup> and Chantepie who formed his theological views.

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15. Like Kristensen and Van Baaren, Van der Leeuw was an Egyptologist. He defended his dissertation, “Godsvoorstellingen in de oud-Aegyptische pyramidetexten” [“Conceptions of God in Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts”], in 1916.

## Gerardus van der Leeuw in his Dutch Context

To what extent did Chantepie's ethical theology influence Van der Leeuw?

To a very large extent. As I said, Groningen was the centre of the ethical modality and when Van der Leeuw obtained the chair for History of Religions at Groningen in 1918, he came there not only as a historian of religion and as a phenomenologist, but also as the new front man of ethical theology. Van der Leeuw even became the president, in the same year, of the association for ministers of the ethical modality, and was later president of the Ethical Association (*Ethische Vereniging*). Willem Hofstee (1997, 46) tells this story in his biography of Van der Leeuw.

So we have arrived now at Van der Leeuw, whom most scholars of religion probably consider the most influential figure in the Dutch PoR. You have written on Van der Leeuw's work and a couple of things struck me reading that. You emphasize Van der Leeuw's tendency to reconfessionalize PoR and to stress that Christianity is more true and pure than the other religions. Furthermore, and related to this, you identify two additional axioms in his work, namely that man is religious by nature, and that God or the divine or *das Ganz Andere* exists and that religion is the human response to that postulated unseen "reality" (e.g. Platvoet 1998a, 130–133). What I am wondering now is whether these two axioms were already present, either explicitly or implicitly, in the work of Tiele and Chantepie. Or whether they were additions of Van der Leeuw.

I do not think they were additions. Certainly Tiele developed a view of religious evolution that necessarily had to end in the type of religion that he himself confessed. So Tiele was, contrary to what Donald Wiebe (1991) has claimed, just as inspired by his own theology as were Chantepie and Van der Leeuw (see Platvoet 1998a, 144n55). Even those phenomenologists of religion who were not trained as theologians – Kristensen and Hidding – were still inspired by their personal theological views and considered Christianity the supreme religion.<sup>16</sup>

It has often been pointed out that Van der Leeuw's PoR introduced two Husserlian concepts, that of *epoché* and that of eidetic vision or eidetic intuition. That is true, but for Van der Leeuw *epoché* was merely jargon that meant nothing else than "try to be objective" and describe religions as the believers practise and live them without condemning them. And then, after

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16. Kristensen studied history of ancient religions; Hidding studied Oriental philology. Even so, Hidding (but not the Lutheran Kristensen) occasionally functioned as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church.

you have done this historical work, move on to comparison, either in the evolutionary way (as Tiele did, and Hidding does this again)<sup>17</sup> or in a more systematic way (like Chantepie) that uncovers an intuition – an *eidōs* – or a structure or essence as Van der Leeuw calls it – of a phenomenon that can be further worked on by the philosopher of religion – philosophy of religion here becomes the *duplex ordo* variety of dogmatic theology – or by the theologian. Both Kristensen and Van der Leeuw still accepted this tri-unity of history of religions, the comparative (or phenomenological) study of religion, and the philosophy of religion. With the law of 1876 these three disciplines were tied closely together at Leiden University – and the University of Groningen – with both Tiele and later Kristensen being appointed at Leiden to teach all three.<sup>18</sup>

Van der Leeuw, however, effectively replaced philosophy of religion with his own ethical theology within this tri-unity, and he did that explicitly already in his inaugural lecture in 1918 (cf. Platvoet 1998a, 130–133).<sup>19</sup> So throughout his academic career as an Egyptologist and historian of religion at Groningen, Van der Leeuw joined history of religion, PoR and his own ethical theology together.

I should add that some decades after Van der Leeuw's appointment in Groningen, the ethical modality started to crumble. Van der Leeuw remained a theologian, and developed a very personal, Christocentric theology in reaction to the huge problems in European politics that he witnessed – Hitler, the Second World War and so on. It was this personal theology that influenced his history of religion and PoR.

**Would you say that it was Van der Leeuw's theology that delivered the ontological axioms for his PoR, such as the religious nature of man, the reality of *das ganz Andere*, and the superiority of Christianity?**

Yes.

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17. We return to Hidding's evolutionary PoR later in the interview.

18. Tiele's initial appointment to teach general history of religions required him to teach both the history of the individual religions and comparative science of religion. In addition, he was charged, from 1891, with teaching philosophy of religion (actually, the "history of the doctrine about God"). Tiele's successor, Kristensen, had a similar appointment, but ignored the philosophy of religion and was formally relieved from it in 1925 when he was given a new commission to teach history of religions and PoR ("*De Geschiedenis der Godsdiensten en de Phaenomenologie van den Godsdienst*"). Cf. Molendijk (2005, 34–35).

19. Curiously, and in contrast to Kristensen, Van der Leeuw's formal appointment did not mention PoR. His initial commission (which was identical to and probably inspired by Tiele's) was to teach history of religions and the history of the doctrine about god (1918), and this was supplemented with encyclopedia of divinity (from 1922) and Egyptology (from 1926) (Hofstee 1997, 42–43).

**Was it also an additional aim for Van der Leeuw, as it was for the Danish phenomenologist of religion Edvard Lehmann (1862–1930), to separate the gold from the dross in the inferior, non-Christian religions (as Lehmann put it)?**

Yes. Lehmann was one of the phenomenologists of religion that inspired Van der Leeuw.

Because his theology later in his life was not tied to any of the major currents in Dutch theology, Van der Leeuw had very few students and was, academically, and certainly as a theologian, quite a lonely figure. He of course wrote a great deal, and in 1940 he became also a confessional, church-appointed professor of liturgy and played an important role in the liturgical renewal in the Dutch Reformed Church. Also in other ways, he played a role in the management of the church, and he became minister of education after the Second World War (1945–1946) for the Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*). But his PoR did not have any real effect in the Netherlands outside Groningen, and even there he had very few students. It contributed to his academic isolation that the church in 1923 appointed [Theodorus Lambertus] Haitjema (1888–1972), a Barthian, as Professor of Dogmatics in Groningen, and that Hendrik Kraemer (1888–1965), also a Barthian and a missiologist, succeeded Kristensen in 1937 as Professor of History of Religion in Leiden. Karl Barth became *the* great source of inspiration for the church-appointed Dutch dogmatic theologians in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, and therefore the PoR which Van der Leeuw developed, and the theology by which it was inspired, remained a minor affair in a remote corner in the Dutch theological world. Van der Leeuw's PoR did not find any resonance in the Netherlands.

**Was that because Van der Leeuw's PoR, with its emphasis on experience, focused on the human response to the divine, whereas Barth and the Barthians focused on God's revelation that comes "*Senkrecht von Oben*" ["vertically from above"]?**

Yes. And Van der Leeuw explicitly excludes that element, revelation, from his phenomenology as something the phenomenologist cannot say anything about.

### **Van der Leeuw's Limited Influence on the Next Generation**

**So perhaps Van der Leeuw's influence was stronger outside of the Netherlands than within?**

Absolutely.

Even so: is it really the case that Van der Leeuw had so little impact in the Netherlands? You say that he was a lonely figure in Groningen. But surely he was not the last phenomenologist of religion in the Netherlands. You have mentioned Bleeker (in Amsterdam) and Hidding (in Leiden) who both belong to the generation of phenomenologists after Van der Leeuw (and who had formal appointments as phenomenologists of religion). Did Van der Leeuw not influence these scholars?

Hardly, though the teleology that Van der Leeuw formulated, for the general course of the religious history of humankind, was found also in the work of Bleeker who talks of the *entelecheia* of religion: the energy inherent in religions that drives them to their final and full destiny. Bleeker here comes into problems with the principle of *epoché* [to which he explicitly adhered but here seems not to follow] because he tries to discern the historical logic through which imperfect and impure forms of religion necessarily develop into the perfect religion (e.g. Bleeker 1970, cf. Waardenburg 1972, 183–190 and Cox 2006, 126–136).

The same goes for Hidding. Hidding was the only one in Dutch PoR who seriously tried to develop a philosophical anthropology as a substrate for his PoR. Also for him, the evolution of religion necessarily leads up to the religion of love, which is Christianity (cf. Waardenburg 1972, 190–196).

Both Bleeker and Hidding were influenced by Van der Leeuw, but they were not his students. The one student that he did have, Fokke Sierksma (1917–1977), rebelled against him. Sierksma was considered too radical in his criticism of his phenomenological upbringing to succeed Van der Leeuw – and he was even rumoured to be an atheist, although he was not one in my view (cf. Platvoet 1998b, 334–338).

**In an article, you describe Sierksma as a “post-Christian believer.”**

Yes. And then there is Van Baaren, who eventually succeeded Van der Leeuw in Groningen [in 1952]. He started his rebellion against Van der Leeuw by writing his dissertation (Van Baaren 1951), which he defended here in Utrecht, on the topic of revelation – a topic that Van der Leeuw considered beyond the bounds of the study of religion.

**Did Van der Leeuw’s PoR at least not influence Bleeker?**

No. Bleeker was formed by Kristensen and was a modern or liberal minister [where Van der Leeuw was ethical/mainstream] in the Achterhoek [the easternmost part of the province Gelderland]. There he started to write little booklets on PoR, but developed a system completely independent of that of Van der Leeuw. He of course knew Van der Leeuw, and he must have read Van der Leeuw. But you see, there was virtually no interaction or

correspondence between the two. So in the Netherlands there were important individual phenomenologists, but there was no Dutch school of PoR.

**Even if there was no single school, does it not go too far to say that there was no institutionalization of PoR at all? Were there perhaps more than one Dutch school of PoR?**

No. Kristensen's teaching on PoR, as later translated into English by Carman (Kristensen 1960), is more of a deconstructive phenomenology than a constructive one like Van der Leeuw's. When Kristensen looks at categories used for comparison, he deconstructs them in order to show that whatever we think to be true of some category in general, does not hold up in lots of individual cases in the history of ancient Mediterranean religions – which was his main area of expertise. He asks us to be acutely aware of all the historical differences. So Kristensen remains a deconstructionist historian of religion in his phenomenology.

**Would you say that Kristensen is more empirical then?**

He is much more empirical.

**But he is still a phenomenologist in so far that he finds it useful – necessary – to have certain comparative concepts, even if they mainly help us highlight differences between similar historical cases?**

Yes, but Kristensen limited himself exclusively to ancient religions. He could not do anything with primitive religions, he said, for that material was so far removed from his expertise that he could not understand it. And he did not trust at all the reliability of whatever data had been collected about them.

**For good reasons!**

For good reasons, yes. But Van der Leeuw, by contrast, used this material uncritically to build his own dynamistic system around notions of mana or the power, this impersonal divine force that Van der Leeuw considered the primitive starting point of "religion" in the evolution of religious history. Kristensen restricted himself to the researchable religions, on which he had what he called secure data.

Van der Leeuw founded the NGG, the *Nederlands Genootschap van Godsdiensthistorici* (now *Nederlands Genootschap voor Godsdienstwetenschap*; the Dutch Association for the Study of Religion) in 1947. The association still cherishes his memory and every other year hands out the Gerardus van der Leeuw Dissertation Award. Of course the NGG was founded only three years before Van der Leeuw's death in 1950, but I still wonder whether the association played any role as a platform for PoR.

Not as far as I am aware of. Van der Leeuw's limited influence on his Dutch colleagues is perhaps also due to the fact that he was quite content with his relative isolation in Groningen. He refused all offers for positions elsewhere. In fact, he was happy not to have many students; happy that he only needed to teach a little bit and could write a lot.

### **“Phänomenologie der Religion was a Historical Accident”**

But there is another thing that we have not yet touched upon, and that is that the very term *Phänomenologie der Religion* was a historical accident.

#### **What do you mean?**

See, Van der Leeuw had published a booklet in Dutch in 1924 called *Inleiding tot de Godsdienstgeschiedenis* – in English *Introduction to the History of Religion*. This was Van der Leeuw's first introduction to the science of religion. But everyone knows this book only in its second edition from 1948 where it is called *Inleiding tot de phaenomenologie van den godsdienst – Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*. It was Van der Leeuw's German publisher, Ernst Reinach, and his editor, Friedrich Heiler, who persuaded Van der Leeuw to use the title *Einführung in die Phänomenologie der Religion* for the first German edition in 1925. This German translation was the first academic publication to carry the title “Phenomenology of Religion”. And Heiler wrote a preface in which he did two things. He says first that the book is appearing in a new series edited by him (on “*Christentum und Fremdreigionen*”; “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions”) aiming to enhance the *Frömmigkeit* (piety) of the readers, and he points out, second, that the Dutch professor Gerardus van der Leeuw ends his book with a confession of his belief in Jesus Christ. Heiler really overdid it. He continues to cite, at the end of his preface, the entire credo in Latin. He really turns his preface into a laudation of the Christian inspiration of PoR by Van der Leeuw.

#### **But is that unfair? Is that not the position which Van der Leeuw himself takes in the book?**

It is, it is. You can find it in several places. But Van der Leeuw brought with him from his *duplex ordo* theology that he must be restrained. He confesses his own Christian belief therefore only guardedly. He would never confess it as explicitly, as exuberantly, as Heiler did it for him. It would be helpful to compare the different editions and translations of this book and see how they differ and how explicitly Van der Leeuw's theological inspiration is presented in them.

But the other thing that is important in this booklet is that Heiler added a footnote to his preface, stating explicitly that Van der Leeuw had made him add that the title, "Phenomenology of religion", did not imply any Husserlian inspiration. His work was inspired rather by Dutch comparative science of religion. He even mentions Tiele here and says that the book is an introduction to Dutch science of religion (*godsdienswetenschap*) in the way Tiele, Chantepie, Kristensen and he himself practised it.<sup>20</sup>

If there was an influence from philosophical phenomenology at all on the PoR of Van der Leeuw it was not through Husserl directly, but through Heidegger and Scheler and other pupils of Husserl. Even in Van der Leeuw's *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933), a book well over 600 pages, Van der Leeuw mentions Husserl's name only once and does not refer to any publication by him. Furthermore, Van der Leeuw only developed a (minor) interest in philosophical phenomenology after 1925.

**Only after it had been suggested by Heiler to call his approach phenomenological?**

Yes, only then did he begin to study Husserlian phenomenology.

**So the term phenomenology is an add-on to an already established Dutch tradition of comparative science of religion?**

Yes, exactly. Van der Leeuw stands in the Chantepie tradition, except that he replaces philosophy of religion with his own theology, and adds an evolutionary aspect that Chantepie and Kristensen avoided, but which he takes from Tiele. Non-Dutch scholars, such as Jim Cox, can hardly be aware of this curious history and therefore tend to over-emphasize the Husserlian influence on Van der Leeuw, for all publications that enable one to understand Van der Leeuw's theological position and context, were published in Dutch.<sup>21</sup> Also Wim Hofstee's biography of Van der Leeuw is in Dutch. The only published book that discusses Van der Leeuw's theological context and which is available

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20. The crucial footnote reads in its entirety: "Zum rechten Verständnis des Titels sei beigefügt, daß der Verfasser dieses Buches das Wort "Phänomenologie" nicht in Sinne der Philosophie von Husserl und Scheler gebraucht, sondern im Sinn der vergleichenden Religionshistoriker wie Tiele, Chantepie de la Saussaye, Edvard Lehmann, die darunter die systematische Darstellung der religiösen Einzelphänomene wie des Gebets, des Opfers, der Zauberei, Askese usw. verstehen" (Van der Leeuw 1925, n.p.).

21. Platvoet is here thinking of Chapter 4, "The Decisive Role of Dutch Phenomenology in the New Science of Religion", in Cox (2006, esp. 118–125, 128, 135–136). A similar critique could be directed at Jonathan Tuckett (2016) who sees Van der Leeuw as a Husserlian because he bases his analysis only on *Phänomenologie der Religion/Religion in Essence and Manifestation* without taking into account *Inleiding tot de Godsdiensgeschiedenis/Einführung in die Phänomenologie der Religion*.

to non-Dutch scholars is *Religionswissenschaft und Kulturkritik* (Kippenberg and Luchesi 1991), based on a conference in Groningen.<sup>22</sup> Fortunately, Richard Plantinga's unpublished doctoral dissertation on Van der Leeuw (Plantinga 1990) is now available on the Internet. Plantinga is an American, but of Dutch descent, and he reads Dutch as well as German and French, the three languages in which Van der Leeuw published. So, he has been able to study Van der Leeuw in his theological context. His dissertation gives a very good introduction to the theology of Van der Leeuw's phenomenology.

**So that is an important corrective to Jim Cox's history of PoR.**

And to others as well. It was Eric Sharpe (1975) who first claimed that Van der Leeuw was a Husserlian, and perhaps this is where Cox gets the idea from. But let me stress again: Van der Leeuw drew on Husserlian phenomenology only because it was intellectually fashionable, and he did so only superficially. For Van der Leeuw, *epoché* and eidetic vision were merely Husserlian jargon for things comparative historians of religion did anyway. I mean, *epoché* is the restraint to try not to bring any prejudices into one's work. For Van der Leeuw this meant (only) restraint from *confessional* theology. It did not prevent him from bringing in the one, big unprovable assumption that all religious people share, namely that there is a transcendent power and that one *must* respond to it and therefore *must* be religious.

**So Van der Leeuw did not consider the existence of a transcendent power to be a problematic assumption?**

No, he was too much persuaded of its for him obvious truth.

Also the notion of eidetic vision was mere jargon. What the phenomenologists wanted to do was to systematize the wide array of historical data in such a way that it could be fitted into the philosophy of religion or into their own theology.

## **The Development of a New Methodologically Agnostic Mainstream in the Dutch Science of Religion**

This is perhaps a good time to return to what I would consider a core development in Dutch science of religion, namely that from the 1950s you begin to get a new type of scholars appointed to the chairs in history of religion at the *duplex ordo* universities. Until then, almost all professors of history

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22. Hans Kippenberg had been Van Baaren's successor in Groningen, but had moved to Bremen (and been succeeded by Jan Bremmer) by the time this conference was organized.

of religion, with the exception of Kristensen and Hidding and a few others, had first worked as ministers in a parish (*gemeente*) of the Dutch Reformed Church before becoming professors, and even as professors they remained connected to the church and were set on developing their science of religion in such a way that it served the training of ministers of a particular modality of the Dutch Reformed Church. From the 1950s onwards, however, you have Sierksma, Van Baaren, Waardenburg and later myself, who all studied theology to pursue an academic career as historians of religion. In this group you also have the first post-Christian scholars of religion, Sierksma and Van Baaren. These are the first signs of change, signalling the replacement of PoR by a new, methodologically agnostic approach to the science of religion in the 1960s and 1970s.

As I describe it in my article "From Consonance to Autonomy", there were several important stages in this development. First there was the confrontation between Sierksma and Van der Leeuw. Sierksma was working on a dissertation on Greek religion, hoping to become the successor of Van der Leeuw. But he increasingly came to doubt the phenomenological framework of his teacher and voiced his critique in a series of letters to Van der Leeuw, written in 1948, that were later published together with Van der Leeuw's replies (cf. Platvoet 1998b, 336–339). Following this methodological clash, Sierksma changed the topic of his dissertation to a methodological one proposing depth psychology as *the* future instrument for the study of religion, both historical and comparative, to replace the phenomenology of Van der Leeuw (Sierksma 1950).

Van Baaren went through a similar development. He was an agnostic from the 1930s onwards, and he moved away increasingly from the Egyptology in which he had been trained to the study of preliterate religions, especially their art, and especially in Papua New Guinea. In addition, Van Baaren became inspired by the methodological discussion within the anthropology of religion involving scholars such as Evans-Pritchard, Geertz and Spiro, and he used that as a stepping-stone for breaking down the huge statue of his predecessor, Van der Leeuw. It began with his dissertation on revelation (defended in 1951) – a topic you could not touch in Van der Leeuw's opinion – and he continued in his inaugural address on magic (in 1952) – where he stated that he, as a Roman Catholic, experienced an enormous amount of Protestant prejudice against himself, against Roman Catholics and against the religions of illiterate peoples. In a series of later publications, Van Baaren further developed his criticism of Van der Leeuw. In 1957, he published an article (Van Baaren 1957) on the ethnological basis of Van der Leeuw's phenomenology in reaction to the appearance, in 1956, of the third edition of *Phänomenologie der Religion*. In this article, Van Baaren laid bare how weak and prejudiced Van der Leeuw's use of ethnological data really was. A decade later, in 1969, Van

Baaren published the article on “Systematische Religionswissenschaft” that we talked about earlier, and founded the Groningen Working-Group for the Study of Fundamental Problems and Methods of Science of Religion.

A collection of papers from the meetings of this working group was published in 1973 (Van Baaren and Drijvers 1973) and this book very clearly demonstrates the shift taking place in Dutch science of religion. Van Baaren, and most other contributors, such as Han Drijvers (1934–2002; then Lector and from 1976 Professor of Semitic Languages), here take a definitive turn towards regarding religion as a part of human culture and history. Not every participant in the group shared this view, though. The philosopher of religion in Groningen, Hubertus Hubbeling (1925–1986), took part in the discussions, and in his contribution to the 1973 collection, he argues that philosophy of religion is science of religion *plus* the question of truth. But Van Baaren says in his article: no, we do not touch the truth question at all. We make the *epoché* permanent.<sup>23</sup> Van Baaren’s article in this collection marks the end of Dutch religiously inspired PoR.

**So this 1973 book by the Groningen group is more important than the long article that Waardenburg published on Dutch PoR in 1972 in *Numen*, based on the discussions of the Utrecht working group that you participated in?**

Yes, this is the methodological revolution – the change of paradigm. Waardenburg’s article is a piece of research history. It does not present a new alternative.

**I see. So the 1973 book is also where the breakthroughs by Evans-Pritchard, Geertz and Spiro are first taken into full account and are used to deliver the final blow to PoR?**

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23. Van Baaren writes: “Van der Leeuw uses this term [*epoché*] to indicate a modest suspension of judgment. The scientific validity of theological statements is kept fully intact; it is only for the time being put in brackets (*eingeklammert*) [...]. The point of view defended here is not that theological pronouncements concerning the truth or untruth of a religion should be put between brackets for the time being, but that they should be crossed out definitively from the language of science of religion as irrelevant” (Van Baaren 1973, 48). Already in his PhD dissertation from 1951, Van Baaren had banned questions of the truth or falsehood of revelations from the province of science of religion: “Phenomenologically seen, each religion starts with a revelation. The decision whether this revelation is true or untrue is outside phenomenology’s province. It must be left to either theology and faith, or to philosophy of religion, because God as he is can never be an object of science of religion which is concerned only with God as humans experience him” (Van Baaren 1951, 11). On Van Baaren’s dismantling of Van der Leeuw’s PoR in general, cf. Platvoet (1998b, 339–343).

To deliver the final blow, yes, and to establish a new, agnostic paradigm: religion as culture, religion as part of human history. This paradigm considers religious claims to be postulations, that is, claims that can be neither verified nor falsified. They may be true; they may not be true. As scholars of religion we have no instruments to discern whether religion is true or false, and therefore we must take an agnostic position as scholars of religion, whatever our own personal position might be.

And another crucial difference between the phenomenological and agnostic approaches is their mode of comparison. Phenomenologists compare everything and believe that their intuition helps them cut through the bewildering amount of data, but the result is that their work becomes unreliable. By contrast, in my PhD dissertation (Platvoet 1982), I propose that we severely reduce comparison to enhance its reliability. I therefore compared only three place- and time-bound case histories, each of which was first minutely researched historically and contextually.

### **The Demise of the Phenomenology of Religion in the Netherlands and Waardenburg's Unsuccessful Attempt at a Phenomenological Revival**

**You have told me that in the Netherlands PoR collapsed around 1970. Why did it happen so abruptly?**

Only the methodological collapse was abrupt. After 1973, PoR simply became obsolete. It had no influence anymore on younger scholars and students, although it lingered on nominally in the title of courses and professorial chairs for some time. This was because the old phenomenologists did not convert to agnosticism, but continued as phenomenologists until they retired. Here in Utrecht, for example, Hoens and Zandee disappeared as professors of religion only in 1982 and that left me, Koos Waardenburg and Ria Kloppenborg (1945–2003) as the new generation. And I was the only one of this new generation who explicitly propagated the new paradigm. Koos Waardenburg kept quiet about it, and Ria Kloppenborg, as a Buddhologist, was not interested in these issues. But when she came to England in 1993 and was invited to give a BASR lecture there on Buddhism and witnessed the discussions among phenomenologists and agnostics she remarked "Oh, but we have solved this twenty years ago, over here in the Netherlands." So she was in complete agreement with the new paradigm, but felt no need to actively teach it.

In Groningen, Van Baaren was succeeded by Hans Kippenberg who developed a discursive science of religion that was, as far as I can see, also a neutral, agnostic form of science of religion.

Lammert Leertouwer (1932–) came from Groningen to Leiden in 1978 when in 1977 all of a sudden the unhappy Sierksma had died. When he had been passed over for the Groningen chair that Van Baaren got in 1952, Sierksma had been appointed *wetenschappelijk hoofdambtenaar* (Senior Research Fellow) in Leiden without a teaching commission. The position of Sierksma in Leiden had always been a very problematic one, because his psychoanalytic approach to the study of religion was strongly resisted by other members of the Leiden Faculty of Theology. So he went actually into a form of academic exile, though he could read and write and publish as he wanted and could conduct seminars for older students. He was given a lectureship only in 1972 and a full professorship in 1973, but he then died prematurely in 1977.

So it depends on the change in personnel when a new paradigm actually begins to be taught to students. It takes time. And this paradigm change was never carried out in Nijmegen or at the Free University – though [Dick] Mulder (1919–2014) came close.<sup>24</sup>

Even Koos Waardenburg was a kind of neo-phenomenologist. But as an Islamologist he was also very much focused on facilitating and participating in the dialogue between religions. And whenever you are into religious dialogue, you are close to a religionist position. But I see hardly any influence of any form of Waardenburg's neo-phenomenology on the wider discipline of Dutch science of religion, just as Van der Leeuw's phenomenology did not have much influence on it.

I am surprised that Waardenburg did not have more success with his attempt at a phenomenological revival. Like Van der Leeuw, Waardenburg was an internationally esteemed scholar. But then again, my own teacher in Leiden, Ab de Jong, who studied under you and Waardenburg in Utrecht, has told me that whereas Waardenburg invested enormously in achieving international fame – he received almost two bags of mail every week, and for a while he had no mail slot, for none was large enough – he did not invest much time in his students. In that light it may not be surprising that he had no academic heirs.

But what about Waardenburg's international connections? You told me earlier that he had worked in the United States and that he had actively propagated a new form of PoR after his return to the Netherlands. Had he gone to the United States to work with the phenomenologists of religion there?

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24. Dick Mulder was Professor of History and Phenomenology of the Non-Christian Religions at the Free University Amsterdam from 1965 to 1984. Though a Professor of PoR, Mulder too only taught about, but never practised, phenomenology as a specific approach to the comparative study of religions.

Waardenburg first started studying Law at the University of Amsterdam in 1949, but switched to Theology in 1950. Having graduated, with majors in PoR with Bleeker and, I think, in Philosophy of Religion sometime in the mid-1950s, he undertook further studies in Islam and Arabic at Amsterdam, Leiden, and with Louis Massignon at Paris. He obtained his PhD on 7 July 1961, at the University of Amsterdam by defending his thesis *L'Islam dans le miroir de l'Occident*, supervised by Bleeker. After a UN commission to produce a two volume survey of the universities in the Arab world, he moved to McGill University, in Montréal, Québec, Canada, as a research assistant to Wilfred Cantwell Smith from 1962 until 1963, and then, until 1968, to a teaching post at the University of California at Los Angeles. In 1965, he and the Utrecht professors of science of religion Hoens and Zandee met during the IAHR congress at Claremont. This encounter eventually resulted in Waardenburg being appointed at Utrecht University in 1968 to teach Islam and PoR.

### **Was Waardenburg's "new phenomenology" inspired by Eliade?**

No! It was not. Waardenburg was well aware, of course, of Eliade's contributions to the PoR. But he distanced himself from Eliade's approach and emphasized the empirical character of his own approach. In his book *Religie onder de loep* (Waardenburg 1990), for example, he discusses Eliade's programmatic *The Quest* (1969) and then goes on to distance himself firmly from the Eliadean school. But on page 215 he remarks in a footnote that even though the hermeneutical approaches of Gerardus van der Leeuw, Joachim Wach (1898–1955) and Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) may be "outdated", they "still force us to reflect [on them]".

### **What, then, was new and different about Waardenburg's neo-phenomenology as opposed to that of Eliade and Van der Leeuw? Or, what did Waardenburg think was new?**

Waardenburg distinguished sharply between "classical phenomenology" (from Chantepie to Eliade, with Van der Leeuw as paradigmatic) that aimed to uncover objective and general facts and laws about religion, and his own "new-style phenomenology", which was inspired by Wilfred Cantwell Smith and focused instead on understanding the subjective meaning that religious data, and religions, have for concrete humans. He called his "neo-phenomenology" therefore a "hermeneutic science of religion".

Waardenburg's aim of understanding the subjective meaning of religion was considered so unexceptional and unobjectionable by his Dutch colleagues in the study of religion that they failed to see the necessity of formulating a new approach dedicated to this aim. No-one therefore joined Waardenburg in developing the "new-style phenomenology of religion" he was so assiduously

propagating. Already in 1973, the Groningen Working-Group definitively parted ways with Waardenburg's new-style phenomenology by ignoring his programmatic contribution to *Religion, Culture and Methodology*. In the epilogue, Han Drijvers and Lammert Leertouwer (1973) raised six critical questions against his approach and asked whether Waardenburg's approach, concerned as it was (in their words) with "subjective meaning and ultimate sense", had really "left traditional phenomenology behind?" For Drijvers and Leertouwer, Waardenburg's research of the faith of believers by means of *Verstehen* ([experiential] understanding) and *Einfühlung* (empathy) seemed to imply a theological *parti pris* [taking sides].<sup>25</sup> They declared Waardenburg's approach one of a kind with that of Van der Leeuw.<sup>26</sup>

**You worked together with Waardenburg. Did his phenomenological inclination have any impact on how religion was taught and researched in Utrecht?**

Waardenburg and I rarely taught undergraduate classes together, so I hardly have any personal recollection from sitting in on his classes on how his phenomenology affected his teaching on religion. But it is clear from the summary in the 1982/1983 and 1983/1984 calendars of the UU Faculty of Theology, that he devoted the full, 24-hour compulsory course Introduction to Science of Religion for undergraduate students to his new-style phenomenology. However, Professors Ab de Jong (Leiden) and Wouter Hanegraaff (Amsterdam) both attended that course at Utrecht in September/October 1984 when less than half the classes were taught by Waardenburg and the remainder by me. During the symposium for my 80th birthday at Leiden University on 8 June 2015, both drew attention to the significant difference between Waardenburg's classes and mine.<sup>27</sup> Whereas those of Waardenburg

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25. As they put it, Waardenburg's approach, moreover, reduced the cultural context of religion to such an extent that it "no longer admits of regarding religion as a cultural variable" (as did the Groningen Working-Group) (Drijvers and Leertouwer 1973, 167).

26. As Drijvers and Leertouwer (1973, 168) point out, Van der Leeuw regards religion "as the human answer to a power revealing itself", whereas Waardenburg views it as "human self-expression answering [ultimate] questions after life and reality." The difference in wording reflects theological developments of the decades that separate the two, but they remain equally theological.

27. Wouter Hanegraaff (1961-) has since 1999 been Professor of the History of the Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam. Ab de Jong (1966-) has since 2009 been Professor of Comparative Science of Religion at Leiden University. Hanegraaff and De Jong are among the most influential Dutch scholars of religion today, and their methodology is strongly influenced by Platvoet. The seminar that Platvoet refers to was organized by Ab de Jong, Corey Williams and myself.

on his new-style PoR were quite consonant with the views of the theologians at the Utrecht Faculty of Theology, De Jong and Hanegraaff felt that my approach was empirical, agnostic and anthropological, with religions being investigated as non-verifiable/non-falsifiable postulations that were to be researched exclusively as parts of the cultures and cultural histories of human societies.

However, I did witness Waardenburg as organizer and lecturer in the graduate seminar on the history of Dutch Science of Religion in 1969–1970, and in the one or two other MA seminars we conducted together in the 1980s. In one of these, I challenged Waardenburg's notion that "religion" necessarily requires, not only a trans-empirical "transcendent" reference (cf. Waardenburg 1973, 122), but that any and all religions must also always have absolute truth or value for believers.<sup>28</sup> Waardenburg was upset when I pointed out that by far the greater number of the religions of humankind – preliterate, folk and recent – did not claim such an absolute validity, but were adoptive and adaptive and pragmatically promoted plural religious allegiance. I added that it was therefore incorrect in terms of empirical evidence to extrapolate the special cases of Christianity and Islam, as religions with universal aspirations, to the very definition of "religion" and through it to require "absolute validity" from all religions. Waardenburg, however, never dropped "absolute validity" from his definition of "religion".<sup>29</sup>

**You said earlier that Waardenburg mostly kept silent about methodology. But we have also discussed his not very silent methodological clash with the Groningen Working-Group. Does that mean that Waardenburg admitted defeat and gave up promoting his neo-phenomenology?**

Waardenburg actively promoted his methodology among Dutch colleagues in science of religion until 1974, for example by organizing two national symposia at Utrecht: in 1973 on "Science of Religion in the Netherlands"; and in 1974 on "Dialogue with Islam". From 1975 onwards, however, he no longer organized any such nation-wide initiatives to gather Dutch scholars of religions at Utrecht in order to provide Utrecht, and himself, with a leadership position in Dutch science of religion. It is my educated guess, in retrospect, that the reception of his contribution to *Religion, Culture and Methodology* in the epilogue was crucial in causing him to abandon any ambition and hope

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28. Cf. Waardenburg (1973): Religion has "absolute justification, foundation" (ibid., 130) and "supreme truth and value" (ibid., 132) for its believers.

29. Cf. Waardenburg (1990, 32): "a cultural element may be qualified as religious when it has – as judged by the researcher – 'ultimate' meaning and an 'absolute' validity for the humans in question" (cf. also ibid., 36, 241, 245, 251, 252).

that he might become the new Van der Leeuw.<sup>30</sup> He realized that Dutch science of religion had become hostile to any PoR, classical or "neo". This hostile climate is what he likely referred to in his 1997 article on PoR in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Waardenburg 1997).<sup>31</sup>

**Clearly PoR is passé in the Netherlands. Has it all been for nothing, or has PoR brought us something of lasting benefit?**

It has brought us the aim of trying to be objective. It has brought us, together with colonization and exploration, knowledge of other religions than Christianity. It has brought us the world. And it has forced us to confront the world and its religions, past and present. But to make sure that future ministers could handle the confrontation with the non-Christian religions, PoR insisted on the superiority of the Christian faith. It opened up to the other religions only in a religionist and Christocentric way.

**Would you then say that, at least within the Dutch context, PoR was a necessary step in the emancipation of the study of religion from theology?**

I think so, yes. Especially, from the point where professors were appointed to teach only history and PoR, and not also philosophy of religion. Tiele taught all three. Van der Leeuw taught only history and phenomenology and replaced philosophy of religion with his own theology. This made it easier for Van Baaren to explicitly exclude philosophy of religion and its truth question altogether from his systematic science of religion. So yes. PoR was a step on the road, perhaps a necessary step. But now it's merely history.

### **Commentary – Two Phases in the History of Dutch Science of Religion: The Phenomenological Phase (1877–1973) and the Culturalist Phase (1973–)**

As Platvoet presents it, the history of the science of religion (*godsdienstwetenschap*) in the Netherlands can be divided into two very

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30. Before abandoning this project, however, Waardenburg proposed the principles for a new-style phenomenology once more a few years later in Waardenburg (1978).

31. Waardenburg writes: "Ein Wissenschaftler, der von sich überzeugt ist und der sich in der akademischen Szene bewähren will, würde es zur Zeit kaum wagen, als Religionsphänomenologe in Erscheinung zu treten" ["A scholar [of religion] who is convinced of his own worth [as a scholar of religion] and who wishes to prove his mettle in the academic scene, would hardly dare to present himself as a phenomenologist of religion [in the Netherlands at that time]"] (Waardenburg 1997, 731; quoted in Molendijk 2005, 27n12).

distinct phases: a “phenomenological” phase and a “culturalist” phase. The phenomenological phase began with C. P. Tiele’s appointment as the first Dutch Professor of History of Religion in Leiden in 1877 and ended roughly one hundred years later, in 1973, with the publication of *Religion, Culture and Methodology* by the Groningen Working-Group for the Study of Fundamental Problems and Methods of Science of Religion led by Theo van Baaren. During the phenomenological phase, all professors commissioned to teach history of religion within the faculties of theology at the four Dutch public universities of Leiden, Groningen, Utrecht and Amsterdam, operated within a religionist and theological paradigm characterized by three main tenets. First, it was held to be self-evidently true that God exists, and that religion is the human response to this fundamental fact. Second, Christianity was recognized to be only one religion among many, but was still considered the supreme religion to which all other religions could only aspire. Third, the history of religion was considered to have two principal tasks: the historical study of individual religions, and the comparative study of religious phenomena across traditions.<sup>32</sup> The three tenets reflected both the personal convictions of the professors during the phenomenological phase and the fact that they earned their bread by educating future ministers for the Dutch Reformed Church within the *duplex ordo* system.

Within the boundaries of the phenomenological paradigm there was of course also room for individual differences. Indeed, within classical PoR we may distinguish between three approaches: (1) the strictly *typological* approach that distilled general categories (e.g. prayer, sacrifice) through comparison and which could be either bold (Chantepie) or cautious (Kristensen); (2) the *evolutionary* approach that attempted to discover the laws of religious evolution (Tiele; Hidding); and (3) the *typological-evolutionary* approach that combined the systematics of typology with the genetics of evolutionism (Van der Leeuw; Bleeker).

Waardenburg’s neo-phenomenology, which was developed when the study of religion in the Netherlands was about to transition into the culturalist phase, can be seen as half-continuous with classical phenomenology. Waardenburg no longer considered Christianity to be self-evidently the truest religion, but he retained the view that universalist and exclusive religions (= Christianity and Islam) constitute the most truly *religious*

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32. All Dutch scholars of religion during the phenomenological phase recognized this double task of the history of religion, regardless of whether their formal teaching commissions included only history of religion (Tiele, Chantepie when in Amsterdam, and Van der Leeuw), or both history and PoR (Kristensen, Hidding and Bleeker).

religions. In addition, whereas Waardenburg avoided making explicitly religionist claims by shifting emphasis from the objective truth of religions to the subjective experience of religious believers, his insistence that religion concerns – and that only religion can address – “the ultimate”, inscribes his neo-phenomenology into a theological discourse (albeit now Tillich-inspired through Cantwell Smith).

In sketching the history of the phenomenological phase of Dutch science of religion, Platvoet points to a number of curious facts that have been overlooked by previous, Anglophone scholarship. First of all, Platvoet reminds us that the first so-called “phenomenologists”, Chantepie and Tiele, were not formally commissioned to teach PoR but saw themselves as historians of religion. It is not until the mid-1920s, 45 years after Tiele’s appointment in Leiden, that the very term PoR appears in official teaching commissions (Kristensen) and book titles (Van der Leeuw). Crucially, Platvoet asserts that the introduction of the term PoR into Dutch scholarship did not change anything about how the Dutch went about studying religion: They continued to compare and look for essences, and to do this in the service of the Christian religion. Without engaging in depth with Husserlian phenomenology, Van der Leeuw employed the jargon of *epoché* and eidetic vision to claim some of Husserl’s prestige for his own work (and later Dutch phenomenologists of religion seem to have continued along this track).

Platvoet also points out that while the Netherlands was home to many famous, individual phenomenologists, there was no Dutch “school” of PoR. Even if Tiele, Chantepie, Kristensen, Van der Leeuw and Bleeker worked within a common religionist-comparativist paradigm, they operated in self-chosen isolation and did not attempt to develop a shared research agenda or to found a scholarly association for PoR or anything of that sort. When Waardenburg tried to organize a national platform to support his neo-phenomenology, his colleagues had left phenomenology behind and it was too late. The failure to develop a successful academic infrastructure for PoR (both classic and “neo”) may help explain why both Van der Leeuw and Waardenburg had few students and little impact on the study of religion in the Netherlands.

For 45 years, from 1973 till the present day, Dutch science of religion has found itself in a post-phenomenological, culturalist phase. Platvoet argues that the Groningen Working-Group not only destroyed the old paradigm, but also introduced a new paradigm, inspired by the anthropologists Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, Clifford Geertz and Melford Spiro, and that this paradigm became the new mainstream. Like the phenomenological paradigm, this new, culturalist paradigm can be characterized by three broadly shared tenets. First, it views religion as a part

of human culture and therefore as something that should not be studied in isolation (as *sui generis*), but always in relation to other aspects (Van Baaren speaks of “functions”) of culture and society, such as social order and art (Van Baaren 1973, 36–37). This principle, which we may refer to as the culturalist principle, was formulated in explicit opposition to the essentialism that characterized Van der Leeuw’s PoR. Second, the new paradigm dictates that religions should be studied as human postulations or projections – for as scholars of religion, we may never know whether culturally postulated superhuman beings really exist or not. This second principle, the principle of methodological agnosticism, was formulated in opposition to the religionism (or “methodological supernaturalism”) of PoR. Crucially, however, the culturalist paradigm shares its third principle, adherence to the comparative method, with the phenomenological paradigm. Even the iconoclastic methodologists of the Groningen Working-Group recognized the value of the phenomenological ambition of understanding and theorizing religion in general, and Van Baaren therefore did not want to replace PoR merely with historical and ethnographic studies of individual religions, but called for a *systematic* science of religion aiming to study religion as such (1969, 1973). In essence, the ambition of Van Baaren and the Groningen Working-Group was to salvage Chantepie’s typological phenomenology, free it from any religionist and theological biases, and develop and refine it, for example by taking into account the reliable data on the religions of illiterate peoples that were now becoming available but had not (to be fair) been available to Van der Leeuw. In Van Baaren’s own words, “science of religion as a systematic discipline is based on the material collected by history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc., and tries to classify these materials systematically, to understand and to explain them” (1973, 45).

In reality, however, the mode of comparison actually practised by the members of the Groningen Working-Group was of a less systematic and more cautious kind, reminiscent rather of Kristensen than of Chantepie. It was also this cautious form of comparison that Platvoet practised, and which he theorized as “limitative comparison” (Platvoet 1982) and taught to his students. Dutch study of religion can still be characterized as culturalist, agnostic and cautious. Reviewing Dutch scholarship on religion from the 1970s till today, one finds a culturalist-agnostic methodology applied (mostly) to historical and ethnographic studies of single cases and (occasionally) to comparative projects of a limitative character. A systematic science of religion *à la* Van Baaren, involving large-scale comparison and the ambition to explain religion, still has to be developed in the Netherlands (cf. Davidsen 2020).

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## Acknowledgements

The interviewer wants to thank Jan Platvoet warmly for his constructive comments on the edited text and his generous suggestions for the note apparatus. Both of us also want to express our gratitude to Ole Davidsen and Ab de Jong who provided valuable feedback on an earlier version of the text.

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