HENDRIK M. VROOM: IN MEMORIAM

Henk Vroom and the Religious Virtuoso

Introduction

In memory of Henk Vroom I would like to share some thoughts on this religious virtuoso. As a Roman Catholic lecturer in philosophy of religion, I had regular contact with Henk in a study group of the Dutch academic theological organizations Stegon and Noster between 1980 and 2000. At these meetings Henk took his tasks very seriously, both as an organizer (often as the chairman) and in presenting fresh topics. I switched jobs after 2000, and the frequency of our contact decreased, but I continued to read his new books. I remained impressed by his kindness (in short messages and so on), the range of subjects he was acquainted with and his factual knowledge, his worldwide network, the production of his texts and the editing of those of other authors, and finally by his optimism—or is it a kind of idealism?

Starting with this last impression, I would like to reflect on the concept of the religious virtuoso with respect to a main text Henk Vroom wrote. He wrote often about mystics, religious leaders, and great theologians. In his typology of the views of human beings, the world, and transcendence, he even seemed to reserve a special type for their attitude: the acosmic view. But I never came across, in his publications, the classical category of the religious virtuoso that Durkheim, Weber, and James described so often. Is the reason for this that, in Calvinism, each Christian has to eventually become a religious virtuoso? Or was it because Henk himself was a natural religious virtuoso? Or should we, in our more or less democratic and egalitarian society, just eliminate the category of the religious virtuoso?

Mystics and the Acosmic View

In the years after 1990 Henk Vroom developed a typology of worldviews and religions, with the intention of comparing these carefully (Vroom 2006). It is a way to start a dialogue: study the main texts and authors of the diverse religious and secular traditions and compare their points of view on specific moral, social, or transcendent topics. The purpose of the comparison is not to conclude who is right or which arguments are true but to discover the basic ideas and experiences that lead to such diverse views. All believers—and non-believers—can learn from such studies; they can comprehend others and themselves better, and develop ways of collaboration for a good society as well (Vroom 2006: 41-62, 271-301).

In this typology, two types, the theistic and the cosmic, are more or less obvious. The theistic approach sees humans and their world as a creation by a transcendent God or gods. In the cosmic experience, the divine coincides in one way or another with our world and humanity. For theistic believers such as
Christians, Jews, and Muslims, salvation should be obtained through a truthful and righteous life, although the completion is expected to be somewhere beyond this world. For cosmic believers, such as many Buddhists and naturalists, salvation is to be found within our world; this attitude could also be called holistic (Vroom 2006: 134-51, 242-47).

The third type, the acosmic view, identifies the divine as the true reality, whereas the ordinary world, including our bodies, is experienced as less real or only as appearance. Salvation lies outside this world, in being absorbed by the divine (Vroom 2006: 119-34, 243-44). Many Christian mystics testify to this acosmic view—Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, the medieval author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Meister Eckhart—but Plato does as well, as do authors like Shankara from the Hindu Advaita Vedanta school. For Vroom, this type is clearly different from the theist and the cosmic views, not only because of deviating expectations but mainly because of a proper basic experience of absolute transcendence. But I wonder if the mystics of this type are not some radical versions of the other types, or religious virtuosos, as the classic authors of religious studies would call them.

My own reflection on these types was caused by my research on contemporary Western spiritual practices, especially popular practices such as Paganism, esoteric societies, human potential therapies and training courses, divination practices, healing sessions, holistic rules of life, and wellness offers that all consider themselves to be spiritual. By analyzing their practices, I came to distinguish three types of worldviews among them: the theistic, the holistic, and the secular. Within each type, however, I made a division between the popular and the virtuoso position (Jespers 2014: 209-11). This difference from Vroom’s typology brings me to the questions I posed.

**Religious Virtuosos**

Both sociologists of religion like Emile Durkheim and Max Weber and psychologists like Sigmund Freud and William James reflected on the position of the religious radical: the founder, the saint, the ascetic, the mystic, the charismatic. These authors are not so much interested in the religious organizer, the traditional leader but are fascinated by the saint, the ascetic who isolates himself from ordinary life and shows unorthodox devotions or ideas because this person seems to be absorbed by the divine while at the same time is often very influential among the lay people as a healer, preacher, etc. In spite of the big difference between their religious way of life and that of ordinary believers, their basic position is only different in degree rather than kind from that of laypeople: all of them long for salvation, but some have higher ambitions than most believers.

Religious virtuosos use more or less extreme means to acquire salvation. They seek, for instance, poverty and dirt, pain and privation, homelessness and lon-
liness, humiliation and social contempt, sexual abstinence and sleep deprivation, malnourishment and self-denial (Riesebrodt 2010: 122). In many religions, special communities like monasteries are the schools and accommodations for such ascetics. But even among them are radicals who go their own way as solitary hermits and often clash with the ruling clergy because of their deviating devotions and ideas. Sometimes, this even leads to persecution.

The virtuosos employ a severe discipline for approaching the sacred. They try to leave this world and even their body behind by rejecting it. Eventually, they may reach a state of salvation. But this state often produces a transformation of the self into a powerful person: a holy spirit (saint) within a strong body who can have a great social and psychological influence. They have acquired charisma, superhuman power, with which they can perform miracles or mediate between humans and gods (Riesebrodt 2010: 127-28). Although such ways and practices are diverse in many religions, this position of the virtuosos shows the same basic features. Their authority does not rest on a deviating basic experience but on a radical or extreme experience of the same type that ordinary believers can have.

Noticing Radicals or a Separate Type

When we look at the examples that Henk Vroom presents for his acosmic type of religious view, the first difference with the other types is that he mainly refers to individuals, whereas for the other types he refers to complete religious traditions. Actually, he unfolds the ideas of Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, the author of The Cloud, and Meister Eckhart, who remain Christians and theists in their religious practice anyway. The next example, Plato, seems to have been a doubting (poly-)theist. Finally, Shankara lived as an exceptional Hindu sanyassin and guru. Thus, all of them can be considered as radicals of the theistic type.

I am not sure about my distinctions; I am simply trying out some arguments. Furthermore, the distinction between Henk’s typology and mine probably has to do with our different approaches. Henk continues to be the theologian and philosopher, who reflects primarily on religious texts and is looking for basic experiences and views. I myself, as a scholar of comparative religion, prefer to start from the analysis of religious practices, of “lived religion.” This may be the reason for our divergent typologies.

Another explanation may be that Henk, through his own religious tradition of Calvinism, has been predisposed to neglect religious virtuosos. In a sense, each Protestant is urged to live as an ascetic, to reject the world and the body, and to attain an intimate relation with God. Each true Protestant has to become a religious virtuoso. But they must avoid extremes like mysticism or sainthood. Calvinism is rather egalitarian, also with respect to the religious way of life.
Thus, they can accept radicalism as more or less normal, but the extremists form a separate type (with Henk: the acosmic view).

Yet a third explanation for not noticing the religious virtuosos is a more personal one and may be that Henk himself was one, so that for him this category was just ordinary, not different. I am sure he had a kind of religious enthusiasm, a vocation as a theologian and Christian philosopher as well, and a devotion to his fellow believers, liturgy, and the church. But I did not observe strong ascetic or mystic tendencies with him, although he must have sacrificed a great deal to produce the oeuvre he did. As modest as he was, he never would have called himself a religious virtuoso, but I suggest that in some sense he really was.

Conclusion
As theologians and philosophers we tend to admire our great colleagues of the past and to place them on a pedestal or even in a separate category of religious views and basic experiences. We should probably admit that they are eventually “just” the radicals, the virtuosos among the believers—which does not alter their greatness, nor the necessity to identify them as virtuosos.

LITERATURE


Frans Jespers
Nijmegen

Henk Vroom: In Grateful Remembrance

It was only towards the end of my time in Europe, before I returned to Australia in 2010, that I came to know Henk Vroom and to be involved in some of his projects, notably a memorable conference on Evil in Amsterdam (2005). I soon came to see that he was a genuine innovator and—in the very best sense of the term—an academic entrepreneur. He was a Reformed theologian, who kindly helped us out at the Irish School of Ecumenics by consenting to be external examiner for a thesis by a Moravian, but in the light of the way some other theologians in the Calvinist tradition—notably Hendrik Kraemer—have resisted interreligious dialogue it was all the more remarkable that Henk was a pioneer in precisely this field.
Two projects stand out for me as being particularly significant. The first is the journal *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*. I still remember the thrill I felt when I first discovered it. Interreligious dialogue has had difficulty establishing itself, for very different reasons, in both theological circles and in religious studies. For theologians, it smacked of relativism because it seemed to demand that one had to make concessions in central areas of belief in order to accommodate those of other faiths with their equally sincere convictions. In the field of religious studies the opposite objection was raised: engaging in dialogue seemed to make concessions to religious absolutism, inviting the Trojan horse of exclusive standpoints into the purportedly objective field of studies in religion, and its methodological basis was therefore dubious. Nevertheless, interreligious dialogue was gaining ground internationally, spurred on by events such as the Second Vatican Council with its landmark document on the church and non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate*, and Hans Küng’s influential book *Projekt Weltehos*, while in religious studies scholars were beginning to “out” themselves as convinced and practising Buddhists, Muslims, Christians etc. A journal dedicated to discussing all these questions and raising new ones was just what was called for, and at precisely the right time SID arrived. For me, its importance was comparable to that of Leonard Swidler’s *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, which gave an enormous boost to ecumenism in the widest sense in the post-conciliar period.

The second initiative for which I think we owe Henk an immense debt of gratitude is the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (ESITIS). I had the good fortune to be one of a small group he convened, using all his formidable powers of persuasion, to discuss the formation of a society dedicated to two areas that had been central to my thinking for a long time. Twenty years earlier, I had been an early participant in a remarkable project initiated by my friends and colleagues in the Faculty of Catholic Theology at Frankfurt University, *Theologie Interkulturell*. The idea was simple, but in the prevailing atmosphere of suspicion of everything that did not conform to one’s own orthodoxy and might complicate matters such as church-approved teaching diplomas, it was not easy to find funding or ecclesiastical approval. Each year a theologian from a cultural context right outside Europe was invited to give a series of lectures in Frankfurt and individually in other universities around Germany, accompanied by seminars. (On the basis of my just having returned to Europe after four and a half years in Papua New Guinea, I was recruited to be the voice of the Pacific.) Year for year, very significant books reflecting the views of theologians from the most diverse Christian traditions and situations resulted, and the annual symposia with the guest professor and invited colleagues from a wide variety of disciplines were among the most stimulating I have ever participated in.

Intercultural theology, then, was something I was familiar with and convinced of. But I had also proposed that the area in which I taught at the Irish School of
Ecumenics should be rechristened Interreligious Studies, because for me the “inter-” was crucial to studying religion in a new key, that of interreligious communication. This implied the explicit engagement of people of faith, including scholars, with one another’s traditions, not in the sense of static objects of study but as lived commitments, whose interactions could have far-reaching consequences for mutual understanding and world peace. Henk’s achievement was to bring the two areas together at a time when it was just beginning to dawn on scholars of religion, whether theological or phenomenological, that their fields of enquiry were dynamic and interrelated.

ESITIS has another equally important significance: it involves young scholars, doctoral students and junior academics, and welcomes their often innovative and experimental approaches to this emerging field. I found the early conferences extremely encouraging in this regard, on a par with the Europe-wide Intensive Programs organised by Norbert Hintersteiner, at which—alongside substantive contributions by established scholars—scores of young academics from literally all over Europe learned from one another and continued networking long after the formal conferences were over.

In both these projects, SID and ESITIS, Henk has sowed the seeds of future development in theology and dialogue. Not only have established scholars benefited greatly from their encounters in the journal and at the conferences, but those just setting out on their academic careers have found immense stimulus and support. Important and substantial as Henk’s own contributions to scholarship have been, I believe it is these “entrepreneurial” ventures that will define his legacy. For this, I personally and, I am sure, all of us with kindred interests will always be grateful.

John D’Arcy May
Melbourne

Remembering Henk Vroom as Scholar and Editor

I first met Henk Vroom at the centennial celebration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago in August, 1993. I was serving as co-chair of the academic section of the Parliament, and he introduced himself as coming from the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. We struck up a conversation about common interests in philosophy of religion and interreligious encounter. Subsequently, he invited me to Amsterdam to speak about the experience of the Parliament. That was the beginning of twenty years of a professional and personal friendship.

In 1997 Henk invited me to join the editorial board of Studies in Interreligious Dialogue. This was the beginning of our working together in a more focused...
manner, something that continued down to the time of his death. Particularly in the years 1999-2006, when I also held a chair at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, Henk, Arnulf Camps, Anton Wessels, and I would gather regularly to discuss the flow of manuscripts being submitted for the journal, as well as to explore soliciting work from scholars around specific themes that we felt needed to be addressed. In the course of that time we were joined by Henry Jansen as assistant editor, who kept the flow of manuscripts and correspondence on a steady keel. Henk was a consummate editor to work with, always maintaining an overview of the work that was at hand, balancing that with the perceived interests of our readers as well as the concerns of the publisher, knowing to what extent he could draw upon each of us to pursue certain tasks, and keeping a cordial working relationship through it all.

Henk’s work with the VU conferences and series published as *Currents of Encounter* provided another venue where we were able to collaborate. Although I was never able to attend any of the conferences, I was able to contribute to a number of the volumes at his invitation.

The breadth of Henk’s interests within the field of the philosophy of religion, as well as his attention to the theoretical and practical dimensions of interreligious encounter, were evident both in his editorial leadership of the journal and in his extensive publications. His interest in the roles of religion in a pluralist, secular society, the various issues that arise theoretically and practically in bilateral religious encounter, the cross-cutting themes that emerged in comparative religious study—all of these fell within the range of his interests and were evident in his lecturing and writing. He was an extraordinary scholar, the likes of which are rarely seen.

Our last meeting was at his home about three weeks before his death. He quickly turned away any questions I had about his health and moved immediately into a range of issues about religion in contemporary society. He was keenly interested in some of the shifts in attitudes about religion among the youngest generation coming of age. He had already read Pope Francis’ extensive letter on evangelization entitled *Evangelii Gaudium*, published just a few weeks before, and was anxious to discuss what the pope’s proposals could mean for contemporary witness to faith in the Netherlands today. With a twinkle in his eye, he confided that, given his reading of postmodern society, Pope Francis could be the pope of Protestant Christians as well. Our parting was not so much a farewell as what it had always been through the years: a conclusion of one engaging conversation awaiting its sequel when we would meet again.

We all share in Mattie’s and their children’s loss of an extraordinary man. *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* will not be the same without him. But his memory encourages us to take up the task once again, buoyed by his vision of what
the discussion of religion and religious encounter can and should be in a pluralist, secular, or even post-secular society.

Robert Schreiter
Chicago

_Pious between Exclusivism and Inclusivism_

The very first book review that I wrote as a starting academic discussed Henk Vroom’s _No Other Gods_. The review was entitled “Pious between Exclusivism and Pluralism.” In Dutch, the title entailed a word play with Henk’s surname (_vroom_ means “pious” in Dutch). Henk was not amused and wrote a letter to the editor of the journal that published the review to express his anger. I had not met Henk at that point.

Ten years later I met Henk in person and understood that the word play was a beginner’s mistake. I encountered in Henk a humble and charismatic person, a true “missionary,” so to speak in the sense that he never tired of taking new initiatives, starting new societies, new research centers, new journals. And my interpretation of his piety between exclusivism and inclusivism was caused by the difference between him and myself: Henk was a typical “Northern Protestant,” and I a typical “Southern Catholic.” For Henk, as a Protestant thinker, there was basically no difference between philosophy of religion and fundamental theology, and mixing thorough philosophical reflection with naïve religious beliefs was no problem for him.

The difference between us became our strength later as we tried to set up a joint research Centre of Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (CITIS) in a true interconfessional spirit. Earlier, Henk had founded this journal, _Studies in Interreligious Dialogue_, in collaboration with my predecessor, Arnulf Camps, also a typical southern Catholic. The Centre of Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (CITIS) was proposed out of frustration because of the incorporation of the Inter-University Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research (IIMO) into the University of Utrecht (UU). Both VU University Amsterdam and the Catholic University Nijmegen were against this incorporation. With our colleague Jerry Gort we discussed the new centre and its name in Henk’s living room in Bilthoven. Henk wanted “Interreligious Dialogue” in the name, in harmony with the name of the journal, _Studies in Interreligious Dialogue_. I opted for the—in my view more neutral—label “Interreligious Relations” in the name. The result was the compromise “Interreligious Studies.” But we easily agreed on the activities to be included in the Centre. These were the journal, _Studies in Interreligious Dialogue_, a new book series in which two already existing series, the Amsterdam-based Currents of Encounter and the Nijmegen-based Studies in World Christianity and Interre-
ligious Relations, both published by Editions Rodopi, would merge and the already existing joint visiting professorship, the Dom Helder Camara Chair, whose holders already alternated between Amsterdam and Nijmegen—and money, of course, huge amounts of money, to be generated through joint research programs to be funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research and the European Union. The contract for CITIS was signed, seeding money was given by a Catholic funding agency, and the advertisement for the vacancy of an academic secretary was published.

But the Centre did not materialize. The establishment of a Center for Islamic Theology at VU University Amsterdam and the collapse of the Graduate School of Intercultural Theology at the Catholic University Nijmegen were the main reasons. Nonetheless, this did not prevent us from taking another initiative. The two of us wrote a letter to invite some colleagues who were present at the conference on “The Problem of Evil in Religious Traditions,” organized by VU University on the occasion of its 125th anniversary, in the Royal Tropical Museum, 17-19 March 2005, to sit together and to form a new professional society, the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (ESITIS). Happily, this initiative did materialize. Henk and I, as the cofounders of ESITIS became members of the board with Henk as chair. Many board meetings followed, in Aarhus, Birmingham, Salzburg, and Amsterdam, chaired by Henk in his very personal style, discussing a concrete topic, letting his and the other board members’ thoughts go in various directions up to the point that the meeting became chaotic, but then systematizing the thoughts in a pointed manner and formulating a conclusion. The Centre was a failure, but the Society was a success, as is shown by the fact that it will celebrate its tenth anniversary next year and has more than 100 members. Five years after setting up the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies, Henk and I collaborated again on a new initiative, which is now known as the Netherlands-Indonesia Consortium for Muslim-Christian Relations. Again various meetings followed, in Yogyakarta, Kaliurang, Amsterdam, and Utrecht, and again he contributed to them in his personal style, a mix of chaotic brainstorming and pointed systematization.

Reconsidering the review that I started with, I was right and wrong. Undoubtedly Henk was a pious person. But looking back at my encounters with him, the qualification “between exclusivism and inclusivism” should be replaced by “between particularity and universality.” Henk stressed the particularity of religious traditions and disliked superficial and easy-going dialogues. But it is precisely in their particularity that religious traditions show their universality. Only a philosopher can make sense of this, and maybe I have been too much an empirically oriented scholar to understand what Henk meant.

Frans Wijsen
Nijmegen
Henk Vroom: Mentor and Friend

I first met Henk through a mutual friend, Jan van Butselaar. I had been in the Netherlands for about six months, was getting nowhere with figuring out where I wanted to go with a dissertation and feeling quite discouraged. Jan suggested I get in touch with Henk. I did, and a meeting with Henk that took no more than an hour resulted in a workable plan for a dissertation.

That was 25 years ago. Since that time, Henk and I became close friends and collaborators on a great many projects, including this journal, which he founded with Anton Wessels and Arnulf Camps shortly after we met. Henk needed an English editor and translator for this journal and other articles and books he was working on.

That was my introduction to interreligious dialogue, and I have been involved in it ever since, on the margins perhaps (as editor and translator of articles for this journal and the English editor for the series Currents of Encounter) but nonetheless involved. But even though I am not as directly involved in interreligious dialogue as others are, there is a way in which Henk’s mentorship and my subsequent exposure to interreligious dialogue has influenced my theological outlook and practice. My interest was not in interreligious dialogue as such but more in the ways in which existing traditions were influenced by their surrounding cultures and how surrounding cultures were influenced by them, and it is here that Henk influenced my thinking deeply.

The first influence Henk had on my thinking is shown clearly in my first dissertation, *Relationality and the Concept of God*. I began in that study with a much different intention than where I ended up. Having started with the desire to resolve the question of God’s relationality in a final, decisive way, I instead arrived at a stage in which I lived and continued to live in the tension of an unresolved question. During the writing of the dissertation Henk introduced me to the ambiguity or, as I prefer to say, the polyapplicability of the biblical narratives. Perhaps I could say that it was not so much the ambiguity of the biblical narratives, their openness to various interpretations, that Henk introduced me to so much as the ability to accept that tension. I do not think that that notion was original to Henk—although it was certainly not a dominant position among philosophers of religion, at least among the ones I knew—but it was from him I learned it. Working in a Reformed tradition that viewed the Christian scriptures as a goldmine from which various treasures could be extracted in different forms, the way was open for me to a different appreciation of the Scriptures and of how beliefs work.

My second major study, *Laughter among the Ruins*, focused on how suffering was understood and dealt with in major contemporary comedic novelists. This study, though to a large degree dependent on interests that I had long before I...
met Henk on the connection between religion and literature, clearly bears Henk’s imprint. The basis on which the study was built, a look at how secularized people deal with suffering, was the theory Henk developed in his book, *Religions and the Truth*. To put it as simply as possible, Henk maintained in this theory that religions and worldviews deal with basic experiences or existentials of human existence. Such existentials have remained more or less the same throughout the ages. They are relatively few in number: finitude, human responsibility and human failing, the experience of the good, the receiving of insight, and suffering. Religions and worldviews deal with these fundamental experiences. This study was, in fact, an application of Henk’s theory. Even though it cannot be claimed that novelists as such set out to prove a certain worldview or to describe it—although some do—even novelists, sees the world in a certain way. And that is, in effect, a worldview. This is how the world, according to them, works, what it looks like. To paraphrase the title of a novel by John Irving, one of the novelists I looked at in this study, it is in each case the world according to Irving, or Iris Murdoch, or Anne Tyler, or Cees Nooteboom. And in these worldviews, as articulated and expressed in novels, these basic experiences or existentials are assigned a place, either implicitly or explicitly, in one fashion or another.

And because, as Henk never tired of arguing, worldviews are not closed systems but porous and changing realities, elements of worldviews are constantly entering and influencing other worldviews. Thus, how a writer like John Irving views suffering will influence Christian, Buddhist, or Muslim people who read him, just as much as their individual worldviews will influence how they read Irving. For those who are involved in any type of spiritual care, whether as priests or ministers or imams, on the level of spiritual guidance or diaconal care, it is important to understand how these elements are present, become present, in our worldviews.

These considerations bore fruit in other ways as well, in the various articles I submitted to this journal over the years. My personal favourite in all this is the one I published on Bruce Springsteen, “The Location of Religion in Bruce Springsteen’s *Wrecking Ball*: Common Ground Prior to ‘Religious’ and ‘Secular’” This was originally a paper I read at the ESITIS conference in Bilbao in 2013 (and will be published in a volume dedicated to Henk). Again, this article was inspired by Henk’s theory of existentials. In that article I explore Springsteen’s use of religious language and what that use means. Does it place Springsteen among (Catholic) Christians, as so many want to claim? Or does his use of it place him secular appropriations of religious language? Or is there possibly a third option? That, of course, is the option I choose. Springsteen’s use of religious language takes that language back to its basis in human experience. It is not the sophisticated language of theology nor its secularized version. Rather, the language reflects how people experience “salvation,” “redemption,” the “promised land” in the midst of lives of skewed human rela-
tionships, failed marriages, dead-end jobs, and broken dreams. It is there too that I would want to locate my use of religious language.

This is the point to which my journey with Henk (and several others) brought me. I may have arrived there in the end on my own or via other friends and acquaintances and colleagues. But the path I took was via Henk, and it was from his insights and personal interests that I learned so much.

Henry Jansen
Almere