

Religious Studies: Back to the Future

A Response to Markus Davidsen

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Abstract

The author appreciates Davidsen's concern with the future of Religious Studies, but thinks that its strength lies in being an interdisciplinary field of study. The field has the potential to bring together scholars involved in the study of religion and demonstrate its relevance by generating insights into complex, relevant and pressing problems.

Keywords: Religious Studies, interdisciplinary, anthropology, theology

While Markus Altena Davidsen is right that Religious Studies is undisciplined, so to speak, this can also have advantages.¹ In 2006, I moved from a Department of Anthropology to a Faculty of Religious Studies and found it liberating. The new institutional setting offered exciting possibilities. The interdisciplinary field of Religious Studies allowed me to work on a relevant problem closely with people from various disciplinary backgrounds. Rather than through the lens of official religion, we sought to gain insight into religiosity by looking at the new ritualization of death among the religiously unaffiliated, in which death is not considered to be the end.² We were able to combine qualitative and quantitative methods in fruitful ways. There was an open mind towards bringing together text and

1 On the advantages of being un-disciplined, see 'Editorial', *Journal for Material Culture* 1 (1996), 5-14.

2 E. Venbrux, *Ongelooflijk! Religieus handelen, verhalen en vormgeven in het dagelijks leven*. Inaugural lecture at the Radboud University Nijmegen, 2007.

context-oriented approaches and, for example, towards taking into consideration the tension between religious prescriptions and actual practices. The domain of Religious Studies also facilitates a productive dialogue between Theology and Anthropology (concerning, for instance, sacrifice, relics, and incarnation/embodiment).³

Partly due to the religion of New Public Management, the field of the study of religion in The Netherlands has become very fragmented. The interdisciplinary field of Religious Studies could be a useful platform for the dispersed scholars to enter into debates that help to shape a future, more integrated and relevant study of religion. For the time being, and here I agree with Birgit Meyer, it could function as a kind of laboratory.⁴ Religious Studies might emerge from such debates as a new (and inclusive) discipline, encouraging innovative work and thought. Cultural Studies could be taken as an example. I don't believe in Religious Studies in the (more or less) old style, as proposed by Davidsen. I am more charmed by the proposal in the 2015 KNAW (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences) report on the study of religion to focus on lived religion.⁵ I think the profession is better served with demonstrating its relevance to the public domain than with defining disciplinary boundaries and policing them.

Much ink has been spilled on the question of what religion is. 'Our problem, and it gets worse by the day, is not to define religion but to find it', as Clifford Geertz rightly put it in 1968.⁶ Inspired by American cultural anthropology, Theo van Baaren published his article *Systematische Religionswissenschaft* in this journal in 1969. Comparative Religion, in Geertz's view, had always been troubled by 'the elusiveness of its subject matter'.⁷ Davidsen, however, presents Van Baaren's proposal of a 'systematic science of religion' as a project that is feasible and desirable. Yet, so far, in spite of attempts in Groningen and Leiden, it has failed to materialize. Should we keep trying? Or would we be flogging a dead horse?⁸

3 See also D. J. Davies, *Anthropology and Theology*, Oxford 2002.

4 B. Meyer, 'Afterword. Towards Religious Studies "New Style"', *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 71 (2017), 96-105.

5 KNAW, *Klaar om te wenden De academische bestudering van religie in Nederland: een verkenning* (Ready to tack ... The academic study of religion in The Netherlands: a foresight study). Amsterdam 2015.

6 C. Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, Chicago 1971 [1968], 2.

7 Geertz, *Islam Observed*, 2.

8 For the anthropologist Jan van Baal the 'ultimate cause of its failure' to contribute 'to our insight in religion as such, ... should be sought in its definition of religion as an ideologically

What is more, Davidsen's endeavour would only be for armchair scholars of Religious Studies, who would be drawing on the collection of data by scholars from other disciplines, including anthropology. Davidsen seems to think that 'the ambition to study and theorize religion in comparative perspective' is predominantly the prerogative of scholars in the so-called systematic science of religion (p. 237). Frankly, I am disappointed by this. For, having taught comparative methods (e.g., experimental, controlled and cross-cultural comparison) for many years, I think a discipline like anthropology has something to offer here. The same goes for theorizing religion.⁹ Critical approaches (and again Davidsen mentions anthropology) are not welcome, which raises the suspicion that Religious Studies is, indeed, 'a discipline consciously designed to shield its object of study from critical interrogation'.¹⁰

What Davidsen has in mind with 'classification of religions' is unclear, but it suggests that he regards religions as limited (p. 218). As Suzanne Owen points out, 'the method of categorizing religions as discrete entities based on belief' is the bread and butter of the World Religions paradigm.¹¹ Disciplines tend to be conservative; Religious Studies has trouble shifting a paradigm. I find that the focus on so-called World Religions leaves far too little room for indigenous religions, which are so important for the understanding of religious diversity and for theory formation in the study of religion.¹² What is the place of lived religion, religious change and non-religious

qualified state of mind, i.e. by an assumed cause, instead of as a complex of notions and ideas which are observable facts.' J. van Baal, *Symbols for Communication: An Introduction to the Anthropological Study of Religion*, Assen 1971, 91.

9 Two contributions I find particularly interesting are M. Bloch, 'Why Religion Is Nothing Special but Is Central', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 363 (2008), 2055-2061, and W. H. Goodenough, 'Being Religious: Working at Self-maintenance and Self-transformation', *Zygon* 34 (1999), 273-282.

10 B. Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions*, Chicago 2012, 134.

11 S. Owen, 'The World Religions Paradigm: Time for a Change', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 10 (2011), 253-268, here 260. The paradigm fits well with the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) as it reflects 'a Western Christian perspective of "religion" as a cognitive process based on set creeds and doctrines' (my emphasis). Owen, *The World Religions Paradigm*, 262.

12 Van Baaren at least still had an interest in indigenous religions and art. Unfortunately, Durkheim's important work *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique d'Australie* has not yet been translated into Dutch. This in contrast to Partridge's *Introduction to World Religions (Handboek van de Wereldgodsdiensten)* for which there apparently is a market.

worldviews in the proposal of a systematic science of religion? And how does it relate to another proposal from the Netherlands, by André Droogers et al., to transform Religious Studies into Worldview Studies?¹³ I appreciate Davidsen's efforts, but these matters demand further discussion.

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¹³ A. Droogers, A. van Harskamp (ed.), *Methods for the Study of Religious Change: From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies*, Sheffield 2014.