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Constructing Modernity by Writing Religious History*

CONSTRUCTING MODERNITY BY WRITING RELIGIOUS HISTORY

This paper presents a re-description of the rise of comparative religion between 1870 and 1920. It argues that the reconstructions of the past depended on a critical evaluation of the presence. Using comparative methods, scholars identified elements of ancient, oriental and tribal religions in their own culture – in the beginning as survivals, later as powerful manifestations of a culture not subdued by rationality. Their historical reconstructions implied different diagnoses of the modern world.

The rise of comparative religion in the formative years between 1870 and 1920 was pushed forward not only by a host of new sources, found and deciphered since the eighteenth century, but also by powerful writings of historians and social scientists. When dealing with past and foreign data scholars could not avoid relating them to their own culture. We are encountering here a major issue in the theory of history: the validity of notions ‘invented’ by the scholar. All historians face that dilemma. In describing past data they do more than merely chronicle them: they turn them into something worth remembering and they attribute significance to them.¹ Reinhart Koselleck has introduced ‘experience’ and ‘expectation’ as the main categories effective in that operation.² I have used this point of view in order to demonstrate that the upcoming science of religions has been informed by the experience of the rise of the modern world. Friedrich Nietzsche once argued for a plurality of perspectives. The more perspectives we have, the more complete is our understanding and the greater our objectivity.³ My study on the rise of comparative religion is itself an example for his claim.⁴ When Sharpe

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1 J. Rüsen, *Historische Vernunft: Grundzüge einer Historik I: Die Grundlagen der Geschichtswissenschaft*, Göttingen 1983, 45-84 (‘Pragmatik: Die lebenspraktische Konstitution des historischen Denkens’); cf. K.E. Müller & J. Rüsen (ed.), *Historische Sinnbildung: Problemstellungen, Zeitkonzepte, Wahrnehmungshorizonte, Darstellungsstrategien*, Reinbek 1997.

2 R. Koselleck, ‘“Erfahrungsraum” und “Erwartungshorizont”’: Zwei historische Kategorien’, in: Idem, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt/M. 1979, 349-375. Cf. K. Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, London & New York 1991, 27-57; C. Lorenz, *Konstruktion der Vergangenheit: Eine Einführung in die Geschichtstheorie*, Köln etc. 1997, 177-187.

3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogie der Moral*, in: K. Schlechta (ed.), *Friedrich Nietzsche: Werke*, Darmstadt 1994, Bd. 2, 861.

4 *Die Entdeckung der Religionsgeschichte: Religionswissenschaft und Moderne*, München 1997. Fr. transl.: *À la découverte de l'Histoire des Religions: Les sciences religieuses et la modernité*, Paris 1999; Engl. transl.: *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, Princeton 2002; Ital. transl.: *La scoperta della storia delle religioni: Scienza delle religioni e modernità*, Brescia 2002.

wrote the history of comparative religion he pursued a different aim than J. Samuel Preus did or Brian Morris. My study is not primarily interested in correcting their reconstructions, though it sometimes does so. I do not regard it as feasible to write a history of comparative religion that is not governed by a particular selection. Jan Bremmer’s counter-proposal to focus on basic notions in religious studies or to take into account the institutionalization of the study doesn’t not challenge my approach; it complements it. I have restricted myself to one particular perspective: the status of ‘history’ in a science of religion.

The Issue of ‘History’ in Comparative Religion Today and Around 1900

Two recent volumes on basic terms in religious studies have disposed of ‘history’: *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark C. Taylor,⁵ and *Guide to the Study of Religion*, edited by Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon. Both volumes do not count it anymore among the terms, fundamental to religious studies.⁶ The reason is not difficult to grasp. In his preface Taylor argues, that the notion ‘religion’ is not a universal phenomenon, but rather the product of a complex Western history. ‘There is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study.’⁷ With these in the meantime famous words Jonathan Z. Smith addressed a major issue affecting cultural studies in general: the data cannot clearly be distinguished from their representation by the scholar. Though this sentence of Smith is most frequently cited, the conclusion, he has drawn, much lesser: ‘No datum possesses intrinsic interest. It is of value only insofar as it can serve as exempli gratia of some fundamental issue in the imagination of religion. The student of religion must be able to articulate why “this” rather than “that” was chosen as exemplum. His primary skill is concentrated in this choice.’ As to prevent any misunderstanding regarding the scientific character of the scholar’s creation, Smith added three requirements for the choice: the mastery of the primary material and its history of interpretation; the display of the exemplum in the service of some important theory; methods relating the exemplum to the theory and evaluating each in terms of the other.⁸ Compared with this full program of a critical science of religion, M.C. Taylor’s conclusion looks quite meager: ‘The investigators create – sometimes unknowingly – the objects and truths they profess to discover.’⁹ Past data are ‘inventions’ of present scholars. What do we not need anymore the category ‘history’?

5 M. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago & London 1998.

6 W. Braun & R.T. McCutcheon (eds.), *Guide to the Study of Religion*, London & New York 2000.

7 J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago & London, 1982, xi.

8 Smith *Imagining Religion*, xi-xii.

9 Taylor, *Critical Terms*, 7.

When we recollect the time around 1900, the place of 'history' was completely different, though the scholars were well aware that the notions, they used, derived from their own imagination. In 1898, the French social scientist Emile Durkheim in a preface to the second volume of his journal *L'Année Sociologique* expected his readers to be surprised about the priority, the issue gave to religion. Religions were the seed from which nearly all other social phenomena were derived; they had given birth to diverse manifestations of the collective life, he declared.¹⁰ We can imagine, that the readers indeed were astonished. Not so long ago religions had been seen by educated people as definitely superseded by modern civilization. Now Durkheim reversed that view: in order to understand contemporary phenomena, a social scientist has to turn to religious history.¹¹ Max Weber, a couple of years later, changed the direction of inquiry in a similar manner. In 1904/5, in a famous essay, he traced the 'Spirit of Capitalism' back to 'the Protestant Ethic'. Weber realized, as Durkheim had done, that his view was not self-evident. 'The modern man is in general, even with the best will, unable to give religious ideas a significance for culture and national character which they deserve.'¹²

Religion from Survival to Power

Both scholars are voicing a view indicative for a new shift in the field of the science of religion, the second in twenty years. The first occurred, when in the 1880s Edward Burnett Tylor replaced the comparative mythology of Friedrich Max Müller by the paradigm of a development of religions.¹³ According to Tylor, it was wrong to trace myths to a 'disease of language', as Müller had done. Instead he introduced the concept of 'animism'.¹⁴ Animism constituted an early mode of thought, explaining natural events by the activities of spiritual beings.¹⁵ The notion of the 'soul' became the source and essence of religion. 'Soul' for Tylor indicated the invigorating principle in man, and was then communicated to animals and objects, before ultimately it developed into the idea of spirits and gods. The idea of God resulted from that.¹⁶ That religious development procee-

10 E. Durkheim, *Journal Sociologique*, Paris 1969, 13.

11 Cf. H.G. Kippenberg, 'Explaining Modern Facts by Past Religions: The Study of Religions in Europe Around the Year 1900', in: S. Hjelde (ed.), *Man, Meaning, and Mystery: 100 Years of History of Religions in Norway: The Heritage of W. Brede Kristensen*, Leiden 2000, 3-17.

12 M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/5), translated by Talcott Parsons (1930), introduction by Anthony Giddens, London & New York 1997, 183.

13 K.-H. Kohl, 'Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917)', in: A. Michaels (ed.), *Klassiker der Religionswissenschaft*, München 1997, 41-59; R.M. Dorson, 'The Eclipse of Solar Mythology', in: Th.A. Sebeok (ed.), *Myth: A Symposium* (1955), Bloomington & London 1971, 25-63.

14 E.B. Tylor, 'The Religion of Savages', in: *The Fortnightly Review* 6 (1866), 71-86.

15 E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. 2: *Religion in Primitive Culture* (1871), New York 1958, 194-195.

ded continuously and produced soul, spirit, and god all in a row, was soon challenged by Andrew Lang with sound reasons.¹⁷ And Friedrich Max Müller in his Gifford Lectures likewise exposed the weakness of that assumption, as Lourens van den Bosch shows in his book.¹⁸ Basically, Tylor himself could have known that the idea of God did not develop from the concept of the soul.

In the history of a scholarship a bias is always instructive, since it reveals vital intellectual interests. Apparently it was very important for Tylor to prove the notion of the soul as the basic universal principle of human cognition and self understanding. The notion of an immaterial personal soul not only survived in modern culture: it is essential to it. Tylor conceived of 'survival' – one of the most crucial notions in his theory of culture – not merely as a valuable witness for remote origins and for stages in the development. It clearly functioned as a concept, indicating the presence of primitive religion in modern culture.¹⁹ Due to the comparative method the 'savages' became more philosophical, animism acknowledged as a 'natural philosophy', explaining phenomena as dreams, sickness, death, or bad luck. On the other hand, survivals reveal a condition of modern culture not destroyed by the progress of civilization. 'The more we study civilization, the more clearly we shall see that the civilization of any age is not a new creation to meet the wants of that age, but that it is the result of past times, modified to meet new conditions of life and knowledge, yet showing in its cases of survival clear vestiges of the course of its development.'²⁰ Tylor here argued a similar thesis as Herder had done a century ago. 'Der Mensch ist kein "Selbstgeborener"': no one has generated him- or herself. Even in terms of his/her spiritual capacities, nobody is autonomous. As J.W. Burrow in his fine book *Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Anthropology* has pointed out: 'survivals', as Tylor conceived them, indicated irrational beliefs and practices operative in advanced culture.²¹ Tylor's notion 'survival', looking so innocent, implied a strong thesis about the dependency of modern culture on stages surpassed by the progress of civilization. The acceleration of time in the age of scientific progress did not entail a vanishing of all non rational beliefs and practices.

16 *Ibidem*, 333-334.

17 A. Lang, *The Making of Religion*, London 1898, 173-209.

18 L. van den Bosch, *Friedrich Max Müller: A Life Devoted to the Humanities*, Leiden 2002, 336-338.

19 H.G. Kippenberg, 'Survivals: Conceiving of Religious History in an Age of Development', in: A.L. Molendijk & P. Pels (eds.), *Religion in the Making: The Emergence of the Sciences of Religion*, Leiden 1998, 297-312.

20 E.B. Tylor, 'On the Survival of Savage Thought in Modern Civilization', *Proceedings of the Royal Institution of Great Britain* 5 (1866-1869), 522-535, quotation on p. 533.

21 J.W. Burrow, *Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory*, Cambridge 1966, 13-14.

E.B. Tylor's understanding of advanced civilization squares with the genesis of the notion 'modernity'.²² J. Bremmer rises doubts about the value of the concept, suspecting it as a 'catch all' notion. If we trace the genealogy of the notion in the same manner, as he has done with religion, ritual, the opposition sacred vs. profane and magic,²³ we encounter a most interesting and relevant history. The notion derived from a quarrel in the seventeenth century triggered by the claim that the achievements of the own time were superior to the ancient ones.²⁴ After an intense debate a consensus arose, that one has to distinguish between science and art. Ancient and modern art each possesses its own right to exist. The impact of the debate on the understanding of 'modern' culture was fundamental: modern is a culture in which the realms of knowledge and of aesthetics are developing along different lines. In art there could be no measurable and undoubted progress as in science. Modern is an age that is constituted by a 'rift with the present'.²⁵ In the course of time related debates happened regarding philosophy, ethics and finally also religions. Religions too appeared among areas of modern culture, not entirely devaluated by progress.

It is the argument of my book, that the rise of study of past and foreign religions has to do with that issue. Between 1850 and 1900 educated people in Great Britain as in Germany and elsewhere expected science to be able to explain everything by natural laws, even the human mind. The historians of religions, I focused on, were aware of the break between the claims of the rising scientific civilization and the data, they were researching. Yme Kuiper, aptly grasping that assumption of mine, nevertheless reproaches me of bringing arbitrarily scholars together under the artificial 'umbrella' of 'a diagnosis and criticism on modernity'. But he does not reject my findings principally: metaphors that introduce into the data a reflexivity that had its place in the age of the scholar. What I found was a common issue, shared by some (not all) scholars, and addressed in various (not identical) ways.

For nearly two decennia Tylor's 'survival' remained the fundamental metaphor in constructing past and foreign religions. Yet at the end of the century the

22 H.U. Gumbrecht, 'Modernität, Moderne', in: *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Bd. 4, Stuttgart 1978, 93-131.

23 J.N. Bremmer, '"Religion", "Ritual" and the Opposition "Sacred vs. Profane"', in: F. Graf (ed.), *Ansichten griechischer Rituale: Geburtstags-Symposium für Walter Burkert*, Stuttgart & Leipzig 1998, 9-32. In the same manner his article 'The Birth of the Term "Magic"', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 126 (1999), 1-12, now reprinted in J. Bremmer & J. Veenstra (eds.), *The Metamorphosis of Magic*, Leuven 2002, 1-11.

24 H.R. Jauss, 'Antiqui/moderni (Querelle des Anciens et Modernes)', in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Bd. 1, Darmstadt 1971, 410-414.

25 H.R. Jauss, 'Literarische Tradition und gegenwärtiges Bewußtsein der Modernität', in: Idem, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation*, Frankfurt/M. 1974², 1-66, quotation on p. 49.

tide turned. In 1900 Robert Ranulph Marett (1866-1943) argued in a paper on 'Pre-animistic Religion' (1900),²⁶ that Tylor's definition of primitive religion as a belief in souls and the animation of nature was 'too narrow, because too intellectualistic.' An experience of power lies at the root of all religions, in the past as well as in the present. Marett moved the beginnings of religion from an intellectual need of explanation towards a universal and fundamental experience of dependency, that logically (and historically) preceded animism. Pre-animism was the common matrix not merely for diverse beliefs in religious history, but also for practices. 'Religion involves more than thought, namely feeling and will as well.'²⁷ The notion of 'survival' became useless.²⁸ Marett conceived of religions as related to an experience of dependency and limits of rationality.

Most scholars of religions embarked on the new paradigm and replaced Tylor's concept of animism and his metaphor of 'survival' by Marett's pre-animism and the experience of power, with one notable exception: Sir James George Frazer.²⁹ Frazer continued using the concept of 'survival', though he conceived of the continuity between primitive and modern culture in a way that in fact turned Tylor upside down. He did not regard primitive religion as a 'survival'. In contrast he saw modern culture as merely a thin veneer above a powerful world of primitive magic. In a lecture in Liverpool in 1908 J.G. Frazer pointed out that 'in civilized society most educated people are not even aware of the extent to which these relics of savage ignorance survive at their doors. The smooth surface of cultured society is sapped and mined by superstition ... We appear to be standing on a volcano which may at any moment break out in smoke and fire.'³⁰ After the terrifying experiences of World War One the literary impact of *The Golden Bough* among poets and novelists increased tremendously, while the scholarly impact declined.³¹

The other leading scholars in religious studies deserted to Marett's pre-animism. Marett's claim that religion resides in the precarious relation of mankind to the natural powers of the world was adopted by Rudolf Otto and Gerardus van der Leeuw. In 1989 a conference was held in Groningen, dedicated to Gerardus

26 R.R. Marett, 'Pre-animistic Religion' (1900), in: Idem, *The Threshold of Religion*, London 1914², 1-28.

27 *Ibidem*, p. 1.

28 R.R. Marett, 'The Interpretation of Survivals', in: Idem, *Psychology and Folklore*, London 1920, 120-142.

29 In 1900 J.G. Frazer published the second edition of *The Golden Bough*, now with the subtitle *A Study in Magic and Religion*, in place of *A Study in Comparative Religion* of the first edition in 1890. Cf. R. Ackerman, *J.G. Frazer: His Life and Work*, Cambridge 1987.

30 J.G. Frazer, 'The Scope of Social Anthropology', added to his *Psyche's Task: A Discourse Concerning the Influence of Superstition on the Growth of Institutions*, London 1913² (1968), 170.

31 T.S. Eliot e.g. in 1922, in his *The Waste Land*, conceived of the fate of his generation as an re-enactment of the senseless cycle of death and life in ancient vegetation rituals, as Frazer had depicted them in *The Golden Bough*. Cf. J.B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough*, Princeton 1973.

van der Leeuw. It focused on the critique of culture inherent in his work.³² Van der Leeuw assumed a primeval, essential religion, that in the course of history has been diversified in various religious phenomena. Hermeneutics in the line of Wilhelm Dilthey were an adequate tool of entering that realm that never could be grasped fully in terms of rational notions. In van der Leeuw's understanding only an awareness of religion can preserve true subjectivity against the cold hegemony of modern rationality.

Bremmer's remark that it is necessary to consider institutional arrangements, is particularly yielding for the Netherlands. The success of history of religions in the Netherlands was due to the peculiar institutional arrangements for theological teaching. Arie Molendijk has argued convincingly that the Act on Higher Education of 1876 that turned the traditional faculty of theology into a non-confessional study of religion, was in line with Dutch liberal Protestantism. That wing of the Church adopted 'history of religions' as part of the academic education of theologians since it expected to prove by comparison the superiority of Christianity.³³

Pre-animism had a tremendous impact on social scientists likewise. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) in his *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), cited Marett at a central point in his argument. He claimed that he, Durkheim, had already in 1899 pointed out the necessity to avoid the concept of spiritual personality when defining religious facts. Durkheim regarded Marett's essay as an endorsement for his own idea, that an unpersonal power reigns over the individual.³⁴ But the power referred to, Durkheim suspected, was not the power of uncontrolled nature, but the secret power of the collective. His own fascination with pre-animism was inspired by an unsolved problem in modern society. In his first major study *The Division of Labor in Society*, published in 1893, he raised a question that remained crucial to his entire work. Can a society ruled by the iron law of an ongoing division of labor, supply a social bond among its members? Durkheim had an idea where to look for an answer: in religious history. With the rise of a division of labor, the area in which the individual acted autonomously, expanded. Little by little, political, economic, and cognitive areas and functions broke away from the religious one. But the retreat of religion from the public realm stopped short at the individual's right of self-determination. 'As all other beliefs and practices assume less and less religious a character, the indi-

32 H.G. Kippenberg & B. Luchesi (eds.), *Religionswissenschaft und Kulturkritik*, Marburg, 1991.

33 A.L. Molendijk, 'Transforming Theology: The Institutionalization of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands', in: Molendijk & Pels (eds.), *Religion in the Making*, 67-95.

34 E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), transl. by J. W. Swain, London 1976, 201, 209.

vidual becomes the object of a sort of religion.'³⁵ Individualism, established by Christianity along with enlightened philosophers and the French revolution, is the moral bond, the participants of modern economic society remain depending on. In his last book Durkheim delved into the religions of the simplest peoples as an entrée into the unknown world of the collective. Here he expected to observe how religions are generating the moral and cognitive bonds in social life. In order to explore the architecture of modern society, one has to turn to the elementary religions of the (allegedly) most primitive tribes.

Max Weber (1864-1920) likewise based his comparative sociology of religion on Marett's claim, but did it from a different perspective. Durkheim was concerned that the division of labor threatens the social bond in a society. He was appeased only by the knowledge – drawn from the religious history – that individualism was guaranteed by collective constraints and has its roots in a deification of the human soul in elementary religions. Weber's concern was different. He was afraid that modern bureaucracy destroys the freedom of spontaneous individuals. Marett's pre-animism provided him with a matrix that was responsible for a variety of practical attitudes to the world. People in their practical life conceive of the world as an 'enduringly and meaningfully ordered cosmos (*dauernd sinnvoll geordneter Kosmos*)'.³⁶ The implementation of this belief stimulated the spread of the idea of the existence of a legal order and the validity requirements.³⁷ Simultaneously it elicited an awareness of a cleavage between the expectation of a 'meaningful' order and the experience of a world devoid of meaning. Weber conceived of the history of 'world religions' as different responses to that experience. In order to distinguish different types of prophecy, Weber adopted a concept of Cornelis Petrus Tiele (1830-1902), that in last resort derived from Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900):³⁸ the distinction between a strict transcendent God demanding loyalty towards his commandments – and a divine being immanent in man/women and approached solely by contemplation. The last concept (called 'theanthropic'), whose discovery F.M. Müller regarded as the most important in the nineteenth century,³⁹ dominated India and China, while the first 'theocratic' concept dominated Near Eastern and Western

35 E. Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), transl. by George Simpson, New York 1964, 172.

36 M. Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. by Guenther Roth & Claus Wittich, Berkeley 1978, vol. 1, 430. The posthumous text has been edited critically and with a commentary by Hans G. Kippenberg together with Petra Schilm and Jutta Niemeier: *Max Weber, Religiöse Gemeinschaften*, MWG I/22-2, Tübingen 2001, 165.

37 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 431; Idem, *Religiöse Gemeinschaften*, 167.

38 H.G. Kippenberg, 'One of the Mightiest Motors in the History of Mankind: C.P.Tiele's Impact on German Religionswissenschaft', in: G. Wiegers & J. Platvoet (eds.), *Modern Societies and the Science of Religion: Studies in Honour of Lammert Leertouwer*, Leiden 2002, 67-81.

39 'The Lesson of "Jupiter"', *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review* 18 (1885), 626-650, esp. p. 626.

religiosity and was a driving force in disenchanting the world – a prerequisite for modern culture.⁴⁰

The experience of the irrationality of the world was a fixed point from where Weber compared the world religions. Because the problem was in principle insoluble, the history of religion continues unimpeded in contemporary society and supplies consistent foundations of conducting one's life. The religious history of the 'disenchanted world' however is not the same as that of the pre-modern world. The more a lack of 'meaning' in nature and history is recognized and becomes a belief in itself, the more 'meaning' becomes an achievement of individual. Weber, reconstructing past religions, conceived of validity as a matter of practice. The traditional handed-down religions are turned into principles of conduct of life and achieve their validity only by being practiced. In this form, the gods are still alive, as Weber declared in his famous speech *Politics as Vocation*: 'Today the routines of everyday life challenge religion. Many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanted and hence take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another.'⁴¹

Sources of Reflexivity

The reflexivity in religious studies can be ascribed to the experience of modernity, as Marshall Berman conceived of it: 'To be modern is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air.'⁴² The experience of modernity is deeply ambivalent: an increase in options of conducting one's life corresponds with a decreasing confidence in self-evident norms and the experience of a world devoid of meaning.⁴³ That experience has affected writing religious history.

Since the sixties of the nineteenth century people were increasingly either hoping or fearing that the natural sciences would sooner or later replace the sanctified religious world views. 'Scientific materialism' became the subject of a fierce battle, in the academy and beyond. By studying and reflecting on past and foreign religious beliefs and practices, scholars of religions checked its far reaching claims. Not by chance crucial concepts of our discipline were shaped and

40 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 447-449; Idem, *Religiöse Gemeinschaften*, 189-190.

41 H.H. Gerth & C.W. Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Oxford 1946, 149.

42 M. Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, New York 1982, 345.

43 P.L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*, New York 1979, xi.

defined at that time. They share a similar kind of reflexivity we observe in the rhetoric of the historical writings. The scholars shifted with their writings the focus from external institutions to internal mental states, from past data to present religiosity, from history to practice. In the words of Gustavo Benavides: writing on religion in an age of modernity involves a reflection on the distancing from the past. The reflection on modernity became the matrix for conceiving of religious history.⁴⁴ By using hermeneutical and comparative methods, scholars identified in modern cultures beliefs and practices similar to those in past and foreign cultures. But they differed in their constructions. Rudolf Otto and Gerardus van der Leeuw and the so called phenomenologists recovered an experience, marginalized or threatened by rationality. According to them religions are suppressed by rationality and deserve to be repatriated. Emile Durkheim and Max Weber on the other hand regarded religions as still powerful in the midst of modern culture, establishing either constraints on thinking and acting or enabling alternatives. It makes of course a big difference whether religious history is represented in modern world as an irrational experience, or as collective obligations inherent in social interactions or a principle of conducting ones life. Apparently in religious studies – as in other areas – not the paradigms are the stable element, but the problem, they cope with.⁴⁵

What do we learn by placing paradigms of our discipline in the context of contestations about modern culture, by isolating their reflexivity, and by treating them as cases for a theory of history? Looking back from present religious studies to the beginning of the twentieth century, we discover a reversal in dealing with the issue of historical imagination. Most students of religions about 1900 were fully aware that they were constructing historical data by means of their own notions. But they did not regard them as mere 'imagination'. We owe to Georg Simmel a convincing explanation of that position. Kant's critique of pure reason, he argued, has succeeded in rendering the power of nature into subjective categories of the human mind. An example may help understanding what he meant. When today we recognize 'causality' as a subjective category, we stop regarding it as a force of nature itself. Modern physics would be impossible without that critical distancing. G. Simmel demanded a similar critical reflection with regard to history. Only when we succeed in rendering our involvement in history into conscious concepts of our mind, we have the chance of becoming aware of the powers we are unconsciously dependent on.⁴⁶ Scholars at the beginning of

44 G. Benavides, 'Modernity', in: M.C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Chicago & London 1998, 186-204.

45 O.G. Oexle, 'Max Weber: Geschichte als Problemgeschichte', in: Idem (ed.), *Das Problem der Problemgeschichte: 1880-1932*, Göttingen 2000, 9-37.

the century regarded, even suspected, religion as one of these powers. They turned to the religious past in order to become aware of present constraints. Ernst Troeltsch has phrased the paradox in the apt words: 'Spiritual powers [geistige Mächte] can rule, even if they are contested.'⁴⁷ The historian is 'inventing' notions in order to expose the hidden power, religions still hold on 'our' thinking and acting.

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46 G. Simmel, *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* (1907), ed. by G. Oakes & K. Röttgers, *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 9, Frankfurt/M. 1997, 229-230.

47 E. Troeltsch, *Die Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die Entstehung der modernen Welt* (Historische Bibliothek, 24), München & Berlin 1911, 22.

ARIE L. MOLENDIJK

'In hoc signo vinces' De geschiedschrijving van de godsdienstwetenschap*

'IN HOC SIGNO VINCES': THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF SCIENCE OF RELIGION

How is the history of science of religion to be written? Various recent books on the history of the scholarly study of religion – prominent among them Hans G. Kippenberg's *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (Princeton 2002) – call for further reflection upon the historiography of the field. How to avoid the danger of writing its history in a teleological way, glorifying the present status quo? Is all research on religion to be included in the historiography, or do we have to limit ourselves to the more or less clearly demarcated 'discipline' 'science/history of religion'? Can the narrative of the emergence of the field of the scholarly study of religion in the nineteenth century be related (exclusively) to processes of modernization? What is the role of institutions in the establishment of the field? These questions are dealt with in this tentative essay on – what I would prefer to call – the 'construction' of a field, which at the beginning of the twenty-first century is again a somewhat conflicted intellectual endeavour, drawing the attention of many people, who want to understand what is going on in the rapidly changing worlds of late modernity.

1 Inleiding: Friedrich Max Müller en zijn 'science of religion'¹

In 1867 publiceerde Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) het eerste deel van zijn *Chips from a German Workshop*. Een wellicht wat merkwaardige titel voor een boek van een geleerde die al geruime tijd in Engeland woonde en daar ook – zij het niet zonder enige tegenslag – een glansrijke carrière maakte.² De *Chips* ('spaanders') waren bedoeld om zijn kennis met een breder publiek te delen. In het voorwoord beschreef Müller een bezoek aan Cornwall, waar hij bergen met koper rond de mijnen zag liggen, terwijl arme mensen om koper bedelden om er brood voor te kunnen kopen. Bij deze gelegenheid – zo schreef hij – werd hij

* Dit artikel is een uitgebreide versie van mijn bijdrage aan het symposium 'Godsdienstgeschiedenis en de moderne wereld', gehouden op 27 september 2002 ter gelegenheid van het afscheid van dr. L.P. van den Bosch van de Faculteit der Godgeleerheid en Godsdienstwetenschap van de Rijksuniversiteit te Groningen. Centraal stonden hier de volgende twee studies: Lourens P. van den Bosch, *Friedrich Max Müller: A Life Devoted to the Humanities*, Leiden 2001, en Hans G. Kippenberg, *Die Entdeckung der Religionsgeschichte: Religionswissenschaft und Moderne*, München 1997, vertaald als: *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, Princeton 2002. In mijn bijdrage richt ik mij vooral op de visie van Kippenberg.

1 In deze bijdrage gebruik ik de termen 'godsdienstwetenschap' en 'godsdienstgeschiedenis' als synoniemen. Voor een korte bespreking van de verschillende termen zie A.L. Molendijk, "'Tweede-hands Werk': Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye als godsdiensthistoricus', te verschijnen in: P.J. Knegtmans (red.), *Theologen in ondertal: Godgeleerdheid, godsdienstwetenschap, het Athenaeum Illustre en de Universiteit van Amsterdam*, Amsterdam 2003.

2 L.P. van den Bosch, *Friedrich Max Müller: A Life Devoted to the Humanities*, Leiden 2001, 1-183; vgl. over Müllers ongemakkelijke positie als Duitse geleerde in Engeland ook Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*, Princeton & Oxford 2001, 106-107.