Keeping Theology and Religious Studies Together

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Keeping Theology and Religious Studies Together
On the Occasion of the 75th Anniversary of NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion

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Abstract
In this article, I offer some personal reflections on the developments NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion has gone through in recent years. Moreover, I argue that the continuing existence of journals like NTT JTSR is important for three reasons. (1) This type of general journals counterbalances the overspecialization that characterizes today's universities. (2) Their rootedness in particular geographical areas and political entities makes that this type of journal makes a distinctive contribution to theology and religious studies. (3) It is important that this journal keeps theology and religious studies together in one journal, for in spite of centrifugal forces at work, they belong together.

Keywords: theology, religious studies, perspectivity, overspecialization

Personal Introduction

On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion (formerly Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift), I was invited to look back on the recent decades of NTT JTSR. For several reasons, I am delighted to do so. First, a 75th anniversary is no minor achievement, especially in a field that has gone through so much change over the most recent decades.

1 In the following, I will refer to NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion with the abbreviation NTT JTSR; I will use the abbreviation NTT (Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift), however, when referring exclusively to the journal before its name change.
It is a pleasure to congratulate the current editorial board and publisher of *NTT/JTSR*, and all those associated with it, on this anniversary. Second, my own academic career is in many ways intertwined with the development of this journal. Vincent Brümmer, first supervisor of my PhD thesis, published some of his main articles in the journal and was its editor-in-chief at the time I was working on that. When I embarked on my own academic career, I soon became involved in the journal myself and I served two stints on the editorial board, from 1993–2003 as book review editor and area editor for philosophy of religion, and from 2011-2018 as editor-in-chief and area editor for systematic theology. Inevitably, then, the below reflections – especially their first part – are colored by my own involvement in the journal and have a more personal character than most articles published in this journal. In the following, I aim to do two things: first, to analyze the development of the journal within the wider context of the development of the study of religion in the Netherlands, and second, to explain why, in my view, journals like *NTT/JTSR* are especially important today and should be cherished.

**Tradition and Renewal**

Nowadays, the length of the publication history of a journal is considered an indicator of its quality: the longer a journal has been published, the more established its reputation is considered to be. When *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* in 2017 changed its name into *NTT Journal for the Study of Theology and Religion*, the new volume was published not as volume 1, but as volume 71. Under this new title, the journal is now completing its first 75 years. Arguably, however, the life span of this journal covers a century, not just 75 years. When *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* began in 1946, it was conceived as a continuation of *Nieuwe Theologische Studiën* (NTS), a journal that had been published from 1918-1942, initially by J.B. Wolters and later on by L.J. Veenman, the publisher who also published *NTT* during its initial decades. At the time, however, the life span of this journal covers a century, not just 75 years. When *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* began in 1946, it was conceived as a continuation of *Nieuwe Theologische Studiën* (NTS), a journal that had been published from 1918-1942, initially by J.B. Wolters and later on by L.J. Veenman, the publisher who also published *NTT* during its initial decades. At the time, however, the new post-war start was considered to be more important than the tradition that was continued, and the first issue of *NTT* appeared as volume 1, issue 1.²

In 1946, the academic study of religion in the Netherlands was concentrated in three State Faculties of Theology (Groningen, Leiden and Utrecht),

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² For the history of *NTT*, see Arie L. Molendijk, “Vruchten van wetenschappelijke studie: 60 jaar Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift,” *NTT* 60, no. 1 (2006): 1–24. The remarks I make about the early history of the journal are based both on my own observations and on Molendijk’s article.
a municipal Faculty of Theology (Amsterdam), four Protestant schools of theology (the Faculty of Theology of the Free University in Amsterdam, two schools in Kampen and one in Apeldoorn) and a Catholic Faculty of Theology (Nijmegen, for graduate studies only). The first four of these were public faculties of theology without official religious affiliation; in practice, however, the Dutch Reformed Church required its candidates for the ministry to take a bachelor’s degree there and to follow a ministerial training programme offered by professors-by-ecclesial-appointment attached to these faculties. This system was called duplex ordo: a double order of non-confessional purely academic theology on the one hand, and confessional theology geared toward church ministry on the other. As a result, professors in these faculties – also those not appointed by the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church but by the Crown – were predominantly Dutch Reformed. The other institutions were simplex ordo schools: they were Protestant (and in the case of Nijmegen: Catholic). From its beginning in 1946, Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift was a journal of the four duplex ordo schools: its editors were appointed by these, and professors of these schools could publish their articles in the journal without review by the board, because they were considered to be established authorities in their respective disciplines. As a result, in some respects the journal was rather broad, while in others it had a clear focus. The broadness was given in the fact that the journal was not attached to one particular theological school of thought and not limited to one discipline; NTT aimed to be a general theological journal and comprised history and phenomenology of religion (later: comparative religion, religious studies), Old Testament, New Testament, history of church and dogma, missiology, ecumenics, systematic theology, practical theology. Later on, philosophy of religion, ethics, social sciences and Jewish studies were added as separate categories. The focus of the journal was given in its being rooted in the Faculties of Theology of Leiden, Utrecht, Groningen and Amsterdam; most members of the editorial board and authors of the journal were Dutch Reformed, though also some Protestants of other denominations were involved. The fact that the journal aimed at high scholarly quality added to its focus as well.

The broadness and the focus on academic quality remain until the present day. In the course of its existence, the Dutch Reformed predominance was gradually reduced. Gradually, the journal lost its broadly Protestant

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character, even though Catholic authors remained scarce and editors from other schools than the four founding faculties were admitted only in 1992 when the editorial secretary Klaas Smelik moved to the Protestant Faculty of Theology in Brussels without losing his position on the board. Eventually, in 2012 membership of the editorial board was opened to those teaching in Catholic faculties of theology. By then, there were two of these in the Netherlands: Nijmegen and Tilburg. As a result, I could stay on as editor-in-chief when in 2012 I moved from Utrecht University to the School of Catholic Theology of Tilburg University.

While the broadly Protestant character of the journal gradually evaporated, its academic focus became stronger. Peer review had become the standard and scholarly quality, disciplinary broadness and freedom from any attachment to specific theological or other schools of thought remained the distinguishing characteristics of the journal. From the perspective of readership, this was problematic. Traditionally, subscribers included academics and Protestant ministers and students of theology. The reduction of the number of Protestant ministers would have led to a reduced readership anyhow; the gradual evaporation of its Protestant character led to an even quicker reduction of the number of subscribers. As so often, the changing face of the journal was clear to those closely involved (publisher, editors, authors and readers) only, and not to potential subscribers and authors. By and large, they still perceived the journal as broadly Protestant. As a result, there were only few new subscribers. To make things even worse, in the meantime religious studies had more or less completed its institutional emancipation from theology. While the first chairs in religious studies were erected in the nineteenth century within faculties of theology and while religious studies was from then on considered as one of the disciplines within theology, from the 1980s onwards religious studies scholars gradually became to construct the identity of their field not as that of one of the many disciplines within theology, but as a more neutral, objective and academic alternative for theology, to be located not within theology but next to it. This also meant that religious studies scholars became hesitant to publish in

6 The recent history of the institutional side of Catholic theology in the Netherlands is complicated. During the 1960s Nijmegen began to offer a full theological curriculum (including bachelor) and the approximately fifty former seminaries were transformed into theological schools in Eindhoven, Tilburg, Heerlen, Amsterdam and Utrecht. Eindhoven soon closed, and by 2012 Heerlen had merged with Nijmegen and Utrecht and Amsterdam had merged with Tilburg. Tilburg University still offers a full theological curriculum both in Utrecht and in Tilburg.

traditional *general* theological journals, which had always included religious studies. We are no theologians, and we do not want to publish in theological journals, a younger generation of scholars made clear. As a result, NTT not only lost subscribers and readers among theologians, but also lost authors among religious studies scholars. The combined decline in interest among theologically interested readers and authors specialized in religious studies was an unlucky combination. Together these developments constituted the reason to reconsider the profile of the journal within the editorial board.

The outcome of this process was a reorientation. If NTT wanted to retain its scholarly profile within the changing academic world, it needed substantial rebranding. The journal could no longer be presented as a *theological* journal; the name *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* (Dutch Journal of Theology) would have to go. We had to give in to the general tendency to juxtapose theology and religious studies. In the end, we did so by the new title *Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion*. On the one hand, this title made the continuing commitment of the journal to theology clear, while on the other, it made also clear that academic approaches to religion that did not consider themselves as theological were also more than welcome in the journal (as they had always been). In fact, the name change was intended as a movement *ad fontes* (back to the roots of the journal) rather than as a movement in an entirely new direction. It was intended to help religious studies to regain its proper place in the journal. By then, however, of the four founding universities of NTT three had replaced theology by religious studies; only Groningen continued to offer theology. Thus, within the Dutch universities the relative positions of theology and religious studies had changed and it was to be expected that religious studies would become more prominent in the journal than it had been ever before. This reorientation was underlined by the fact that the first issue with the new name (71/1, 2017) was a special issue devoted to “The Study of Religion Today.” That the first issue of the journal in new form was a special issue also shows that an innovation introduced some years before would be continued and reinforced: the publication of special issues focusing on specific themes.

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8 Subscribers with a religious studies profile were not numerous either; see Den Hollander, Zock & De Roest, “Lezersenquête,” 273. There is good reason to believe that their numbers had been small from the beginning, however, because in 1946 the number of religious studies scholars was relatively small, and it had grown only gradually.

9 Of the ten most recent issues (2019, 2020, and 2021, no. 1 and 2), five were special issues. Of the ten issues preceding 2017 (the final two of 2015 and those of 2016 and 2016) only one was a special issue. But then it should be mentioned that the first two issues of 2015 were a special issue as well. It is interesting to see that in the 1950s the introduction of special issues had been discussed and rejected. See Molendijk, “Vruchten,” 12–13.
In the discussions within the editorial board, special attention was given to the question whether we should retain “Dutch” in the title. While the journal had always published some articles of colleagues abroad, these were often based on guest lectures that had been given in the Netherlands. In the end, the board decided to retain the connection to the journal’s tradition by retaining the abbreviation of its former title Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift: NTT. These three letters were no longer considered as an abbreviation, however, but as a name. This reflected a process that had been going on for a long time. In the Netherlands, the Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift was in common parlance no longer indicated by its full name but by its abbreviation NTT. This is similar to the way in English the abbreviations AM, PM and PhD are pronounced exactly the way they are spelled, and not by pronouncing the original words (ante meridiem etc.). Thus, in the end the new name of the journal became NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion. We hoped that in this way, the continuity between NTT and NTT JTSR would be more easily perceived.

Though it could be debated to what extent the juxtaposition of “theology” and “the study of religion” reflected a new direction for the journal or rather reflected more clearly its already existing orientation, in another respect the name did indicate a real change. The default language of the journal changed from Dutch into English. While Dutch and German articles could still be published in the journal, from 2017 onwards the journal aims to publish primarily in English. This reflects the fact that scholarly research nowadays is an international endeavor with English as its lingua franca.

In 2018, the reorientation of NTT JTSR was completed by its transferral to a new publisher. Boekencentrum, which took NTT over from L.J. Veenman in 1972, in its turn transferred the journal to Amsterdam University Press. For Boekencentrum, which caters for ministers in Christian churches and intellectual church members rather than for academic theologians, NTT JTSR no longer fitted well in its portfolio. For NTT JTSR, on the other hand, the academic stature and digital presence of AUP were interesting. In the long run, downloads and digital subscriptions are expected to become more important than paper subscriptions. Therefore the transferal was considered a win-win situation.

By now we are halfway through the fifth volume after the rebranding, and insofar as I can see – from a distance, since I am no longer on the editorial board – from an intellectual perspective the rebranding has turned out successfully. By and large, half of the articles published in recent years were religious studies rather than theology, and a large majority of recent articles was published in English. Moreover, the increasing number of special issues
led to more coherent issues. Altogether, the journal has gained quality and become more attractive.

The Continuing Importance of *NTT JTSR*

Why is it important that a journal like *NTT JTSR* continues to exist? What specific contribution can this type of journal make? When we consider the continuing value of *NTT JTSR*, three features are especially striking, and I would like to propose some comments on each of them. Firstly, *NTT JTSR* is a general journal in theology and religious studies. Secondly, *NTT JTSR* is connected to a specific geographical area and political entity: The Netherlands. And thirdly: *NTT JTSR* is one of the few journals that explicitly keeps theology and religious studies together. Let me explain why I consider each of these important.

Universities worldwide and also in the Netherlands foster an ever-increasing specialization. The religion domain is no exception. While in the past Dutch faculties of theology used to have one chair in “comparative religion,” more recently they hired specialists in the major religions and nowadays religious studies has often become institutionally independent of theology and includes a similar number of specialisms as theology itself. At the same time, faculties (or departments) of theology have an increasing number of specialisms as well. To give one example, around 1870 the Faculty of Theology in Leiden had four chairs and after the introduction of the above-mentioned duplex ordo in 1877 these became seven: five for professors appointed by the Crown (also called state professors; religious studies was added) and two for professors appointed by the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (also called church professors: dogmatics and practical theology). Nowadays, Leiden no longer has theology, but when I look at the list of theology professors of the Free University of Amsterdam it includes 36 professors (retired professors not included). These do not include lecturers and senior lecturers, who often have additional specializations. With such a number of professors, one cannot limit oneself to specializations like Old Testament, New Testament, Church History, Religious Studies, Philosophy of Religion and Ethics, Dogmatics, and Practical Theology. Additional specializations include “History of Neo-Calvinism,” “Theology and Religion in Post-Trauma Societies” and “Reception History of the Hebrew Bible in Antiquity.” Other

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Dutch faculties have smaller numbers of professors, but the trend is the same: the number of specializations tends to increase. Nobody will deny that the increased amount of knowledge makes an increase in specialization necessary. But all of these specialisms are related, and the risk is that a declining number of people is able to see the larger picture. This risk also applies to the study of religion (both in theology and in religious studies).

When a survey among the readers of NTT was published in 2006, it contained the following advice: to seek broadening rather than further specialization. The pressure to specialize is huge, also for academic journals. When I invited colleagues to publish in NTT JTSR, I often received a negative response because “NTT is not read in the small but international research community of which I am a part.” Moreover, monodisciplinary journals tend to be ranked higher in journal rankings. Against this pressure, the editorial board of NTT JTSR has followed the lead of its readership and made it its policy at all cost to avoid becoming a specialized journal in one of the disciplines of theology and religious studies. This is not to say that these journals are not necessary – they are! – but that we should also retain journals that enable us to see the larger picture. The special issues make a particularly important contribution to this ideal, by providing different, sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory perspectives on one topic. They help readers to broaden their horizon and to think for themselves. For systematic theologians like myself, who take it to be their job to arrive at syntheses, the multidisciplinary character of journals like NTT JTSR is indispensable, I add.

As to the second reason why NTT JTSR has in my eyes continuing value (its being rooted in a specific country, the Netherlands), I can well understand that at first sight many colleagues consider this local connection irrelevant, or perhaps even a disadvantage. If scholarly research is an international enterprise, as I have argued above, local journals seem to have a secondary importance at best. Whether this is indeed the case, depends on the meaning of “local,” however. If we take “local” as implying that the research published in a journal is read only in a very limited area, e.g., because the journal is published in a language that most researchers worldwide do not know, this is a disadvantage indeed. This, however, is not the case with NTT.

13 For a brief, recent, and good discussion of the integrative character of systematic theology, see Arnold Huijgen, Maria: Icoon van genade (Utrecht: Kokboekencentrum, 2021), 320–322.
When I first saw a specification of the geographical distribution of subscribers to *NTT*, I was quite surprised how international our readership was. Today, according to Worldcat, it is available in almost 300 libraries worldwide, most of them university libraries. And as if that is not enough, volumes older than three years are available through open access. This means that the potential readership reached by *NTT/JTSR* is huge. In that respect, the journal certainly is not local. It is to be hoped that in the near future, the archive of ancient volumes of *NTT* will also be made available in open access, and that new issues will immediately become available in this way. Publicly funded research should be publicly available.

The journal is local in another respect: it is rooted in a particular academic tradition, the Dutch, and most of the research published in the journal is undertaken from an – often implicitly – Dutch perspective. And perspectives matter. H.W. von der Dunk has shown for the science of history that it is always bound up with the place, time and worldview of the historian. Which questions a historian asks and which facts she finds worth mentioning depends at least in part on that historian's views. This applies to religious studies and theology as well. Several articles in recent issues explicitly focus on various aspects of religion and the study of religion in the Netherlands. Most of the information given there is of interest to me, living and teaching in the Netherlands, and is not to be found in other journals. That is not to say that it is relevant to the Dutch only. The special issue on the study "the 'current crisis' in the science of religion in the Netherlands" (*NTT/JTSR* 74, no. 3, 2020) is of interest to anyone interested in religious studies, and becomes more interesting when read in its international context. Nevertheless, the particular perspective of this specific issue would not be adopted in a journal without Dutch roots.

"Perspective," however, has a wider application, and also in this wider application it helps to see why a journal with local roots has something

special to offer. The term “perspective” as we use it in the philosophy of science is a metaphor taken from geometry; literally, “perspective” means “the view of the world from a given place.” Even when people meet in one and the same room, each of them will see a different “picture” and thus have a different perspective. If one wanted to fully describe a certain perspective, one would need at least the following data:
1. the location from which the observation is made
2. the sensitivity of the organ of perception, e.g. the eye
3. the interest guiding the perception.

Arie van den Beukel illustrates the perspectivity of our perception with the example of a poacher who goes into the woods at night with a dazzle-light in front of his belly, his rifle at the ready to shoot rabbits.

The dazzle-light is his theory, his searchlight, and the only facts relevant to him are the rabbits he catches in his beam. If he were asked to describe ‘the reality’ of that forest, he would say: ‘A forest is a place where one can shoot rabbits if one has a good light box and a good rifle, and is a good shot.’ Everything else ... he does not see, because he wishes to ignore it.

If one were to send a birdwatcher, a poet, or an environmental scientist looking for light pollution into the same forest and ask them about their observations, each would tell a different story – which is not to say that their accounts would be any less accurate.

Applied to the case of the study of religion in the Netherlands: location makes a difference because the religious situation in the Netherlands is quite unique. Among the countries in which secularization was not directed by the government – as it was in the countries of the Eastern Bloc – the Netherlands is one of the most secularized countries in the world. We are a forerunner, so to say. When it comes to the sensitivity of the organ of perception, secondly, it is important to be aware of the fact that much theological research takes place in the library through reading. Dutch is no world language and therefore, the Dutch traditionally read French, German and English, and since they have already mastered these three languages.

18 Staf Hellemans, *De grote transformatie van religie en van de Katholieke Kerk* (Tilburg: Tilburg University, 2019), 18–22.
and are proud of their linguistic skills, they learn additional languages with relatively little effort. This means that they can read more languages than their average French and American colleagues.

Thirdly, that the interest guiding the perception makes a difference, is also clear. When studying a liturgical celebration, for instance, it makes a huge difference whether one uses historical, dogmatic, or practical theological methods – to mention traditional methods only. One would focus again on other aspects if one used semiotics or the methods of the material religion approach. Which approach one will choose is partly determined by the academic traditions in which one has been trained and the methods with which one is familiar, and these are partly determined by the country one lives in. To give just one example, in philosophy there is an often wide divide between the analytical, Anglo-Saxon tradition that is predominant in the English-speaking countries and the hermeneutical, Continental tradition that is predominant in the French- and German-speaking traditions. As a result of the linguistic skills of the Dutch and of their geographical position in between countries dominated by the hermeneutical tradition and countries dominated by the analytical tradition, Dutch philosophy has a mediating position between both traditions. Dutch philosophers, even if they lean towards the analytical or towards the hermeneutical, almost always are aware of the one-sidedness of the tradition towards which they lean and try in various ways to overcome this. This in-between character of Dutch philosophy is shared by many of the (other) theological disciplines. It is this type of local peculiarities that makes a journal like *NTT JTSR* – like the *Scottish Journal of Theology* and the *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* – not just one more international journal, but a journal with a particular, distinctive voice of its own.

The third and final reason why I think that *NTT JTSR* is important and has a future, is that it keeps theology and religious studies together in one journal. Above, I explained briefly how religious studies emancipated from one of the constituents of theology to an equivalent of theology, mirrored in the juxtaposition of “theology” and “the study of religion” in the name of the journal. What in this way remains the same, however, is that theology and religious studies are published in one journal, and as a result also interact, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. In my opinion, this

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19 Various philosophical disciplines – philosophy of religion, ethics, hermeneutics – are also a part of theology, and on these disciplines *NTT (JTSR)* has published articles.
is a good thing since these fields belong together. From the perspective of the philosophy of science, a difference of emphasis between both may perceived, but not a sharp distinction.\^{21}

I would like to give two reasons for this position. Firstly, the definition of “religion” is notoriously difficult, so much so that up to the present day even those engaged in academic religious studies disagree on it. (By the way, there is a nice parallel here. While theology is the only science that studies an object of the existence of which is uncertain, religious studies is the only science that studies an object the definition of which is impossible...).\^{22} This fact is illustrated by a recent discussion taking place on the pages of this journal. When Markus Davidsen proposed to define religion as “all those beliefs, practices, experiences, narratives, and discourses that assume the existence of transempirical agents, worlds, and/or processes.”\^{23} his colleagues in the field lost no time to disagree with him.\^{24} While I agree with them that this particular definition is problematic – on it, even many fairy tales and computer games would be “religion” – I immediately add that I do not see much in the suggested alternatives either. Katja Rakow supports Peter van der Veer’s bottom up approach, which however is not less problematic. In order to even begin such an approach, one has to have criteria to select the phenomena from which to derive the characteristics of religion bottom up. In practice that means that one has to be able to distinguish between religion and non-religion. Once one can do that, however, one has the definition of of religion.

Paul Griffiths has very persuasively argued that the heart of the problem is that the modern concept of religion is formed “by a process of abstraction from features of Protestant Christianity” and ultimately means something

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like "things like Christianity." 

"Religion" therefore means the functional equivalent of Protestant Christianity, with the latter acting as a (usually implicit) normative benchmark. Griffiths thus explains the difficulty of providing an adequate non-theological definition of religion by arguing that the concept of religion itself is thoroughly religiously colored, in particular by a Protestant form of Christianity. Fundamentally, Griffiths polemically argues, the concept of religion understood by religious scholars is no different from that of the Anglican priest Thwackum in Fielding’s Tom Jones, who says: “When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England.”

For a science of religion separate from theology, therefore, there is no future, according to Griffiths. There is no neutral or objective way to define the subject of the study of religion: religion.

The second reason why theology and religious studies belong together, is that methodologically they have grown closer to each other. Let me illustrate that by listing a number of distinctions which made a clear distinction possible in the past but no longer apply. Firstly, in the past theologians studied Christianity, and sometimes Judaism, while those engaged in religious studies studied other religions. Primarily as the result of the growing influence of the anthropology of religion, the study of Christianity has become part of religious studies as well. Secondly, in the past theologians adopted an insider’s perspective on religion, while those engaged in religious studies adopted an outsider’s perspective. Nowadays, with the growing popularity of anthropological terminology, the insider’s perspective is mostly called “emic” perspective, and the outsider’s perspective “etic” perspective. For a long time already, theologians – and especially Biblical scholars and church historians – often adopted the etic perspective. More recently, some scholars in religious studies self-identified as scholar-practitioners and adopted an emic perspective.

With the appointment of Bee Scherer as professor of

Buddhist studies at the Vrije Universiteit (Amsterdam), this type of “engaged scholarship”\textsuperscript{30} gained more prominence in Dutch religious studies as well. As the recent discussion between Markus Davidsen and others in this journal makes clear, this type of scholarship can count on quite some support in Dutch religious studies. This also means that the neutrality and objectivity religious studies always aimed at, no longer is a self-evident ideal.\textsuperscript{31} Thirdly, in the past theologians reckoned with an interventionist God, while those engaged in religious studies strictly kept to methodological naturalism. Nowadays, many theologians, again primarily Biblical scholars and church historians, confess themselves to non-interventionism.\textsuperscript{32} On the other hand, it does no longer go without saying that those engaged in religious studies hold on to methodological naturalism.\textsuperscript{33}

On top of these two reasons why there cannot be a sharp distinction between theology and religious studies, I would like to argue briefly for the further-going position that they need each other. Theology runs de risk of focusing too much on the sources (mostly written texts) and arguing from these, thus creating a normative superstructure that does not land in the lives of ordinary people. Some attention to “lived religion” and “material religion” can be most useful, then. But here again, often these can only be fully understood in light of the textual sources, and that’s what theology tends to focus on. Religious studies runs the risk of interpreting religion in terms of abstract rational concepts that often derive from the Enlightenment and that distort the way religious believers themselves experience their religion. Theology tends to do more justice to this insiders’ perspective, which does not mean that it cannot in some cases profit from comparisons with other religions. Theology runs the risk of overemphasizing the uniqueness of one’s own religion, while religious studies runs the risk of disregarding

See also the articles in \textit{Tarka} 0 (2021), a special issue entitled “On the Scholar-Practitioner.” Cf. various contributions in: Robert A. Orsi, ed., \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); the leading idea here is that in the study of religion it is impossible to be consistently insider or outsider; one is always both insider and outsider. A similar position is adopted in Jeffrey J. Kripal, \textit{Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms} (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 103–105.  
\textsuperscript{31} Cf. Gijsbert van den Brink, \textit{Philosophy of Science for Theologians: An Introduction} (Frankfurt aM: Peter Lang, 2009), 99–143, on perspectivity from the view of the philosophy of science.  
\textsuperscript{33} Von Stuckrad, “Institutional Histories,” 249–250.
the uniqueness of a religion. They keep each other in balance. I concur with Christine Helmer:

Theology must strive to examine its own presuppositions about knowledge and power critically, while religious studies must critically study its own ideological, often tendentious, positioning against Western alliances between the study of religion and theological authority. ... Theology ... and religious studies not only can but ought to be in discussion with each other, in order better to produce knowledge about religion and religions, which, after all, is the goal of our scholarship.\(^{34}\)

It is only if there is real interaction that religious studies and theology can come to full fruition. For that, the existence of journals devoted to the field of religion irrespective of the discipline from which the interest in religion comes, is important. I am convinced that both “religious studies” and “theology” do not denote one discipline; they are umbrella terms that refer to series of connected disciplines that, in Davidsen’s terms, form transdisciplinary research fields.\(^{35}\) In an ideal world this transdisciplinarity should lead to interdisciplinarity, to genuine interaction, debate and cooperation. *NTT JTSR* provides an important platform for that. It is my hope that *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* will continue to attract the quality of scholarly discourse it has in the past, will increasingly contribute to the interaction between religious studies and theology, and will become one of the main platforms for debate on religion at every level.

**Bibliography**


\(^{35}\) Davidsen, “Theo van Baaren’s Systematic Science of Religion,” 220, who disagrees with this view.


