FROM CONSONANCE TO AUTONOMY:
THE SCIENCE OF RELIGION IN THE NETHERLANDS,
1948-1995

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"[The] science [of religion] has a right to a place of its own [in the
university] free from heteronomy from whatever quarter" (van Baaren
1960b: 324)

1. From consonance to dissonance

The modern ‘Science of Religion’ in the Netherlands is the product
of three major paradigm shifts which were tantamount to as many
revolutions brought about by as many outsiders. In the first one,
which occurred between 1860 and 1877, C. P. Tiele, merely a min-
ister of the tiny Arminian Church, played a major role. It consisted
in the establishment by law of the so called duplex ordo in the Faculties
of Theology of the (State) Universities of Leiden, Groningen and
Utrecht. That new order eliminated ‘confessional’ theology from
those faculties by removing the chairs in dogmatic and pastoral the-
ology and in other ‘denominational’ subjects from the faculty

1 Van der Toorn’s unpublished paper, “The Coming of Age of Comparative
Religion”, which he read at a conference on Challenges to Theology (Utrecht, 27
April 1990), has been a source of inspiration for me during my work on this article.
This article is one of two articles in which I survey the history of the Study of
Religions in the Netherlands from 1860 to the present day. The complementary
article deals with the period 1860 to 1960 (Platvoet 1998). For other surveys, see

2 All the translations from the Dutch in this article are by the author.

3 In Dutch, godsdienstwetenschap: I am aware that this Dutch designation is best
rendered in English by ‘the academic study of religions’. In this article, however, I
prefer to stick to the Dutch, and continental, custom of terming it ‘science of reli-
gion’ (Religionswissenschaft in German; science des religions in French; scienza delle religioni
in Italian; religionswetenskap in Danish; religioznawcze in Polish; religiovedeniya in Russian;
and the Afrikaans term godsdienswetenskap in South Africa).

4 The law of 28 April 1976 by which the Dutch public education at secondary
and tertiary level was reformed.

5 The Municipality of Amsterdam also applied it to the Faculty of Theology of the
(then Municipal) University of Amsterdam.
proper; and it admitted the brand new science of religion into it. As a reward, Tiele was given the professorship in the ‘General History of Religions’ (de godsdienstgeschiedenis in het algemeen), as the science of religion was termed in official documents, in the Leiden Faculty of Theology in 1877. He was, however, the only scholar from outside the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk to obtain a professorship in these faculties which were formally, but for a long time to come not factually, disestablished.

Some seventy years later, in 1948, another outsider, Fokke Sierksma, the brilliant and literary gifted pupil of Gerardus van der Leeuw, revolted publicly, in his self-imposed role as ‘nihilist’, against the theological inspiration of the phenomenology of religion of his virtually worshiped teacher (Sierksma 1951a: 1979). Sierksma was an outsider because he had become thoroughly alienated from the mainline Calvinist religion in which he had been raised. In retribution for his rebellion, and because he was a foreign body in ecclesiastical terms, Sierksma’s candidacy for van der Leeuw’s chair was turned down by the Groningen Faculty of Theology in 1951 after van der Leeuw’s sudden death in November 1950.

In his stead, another outsider was appointed in 1952: Theo van Baaren who been trained by H. W. Obbink in the even more confessional Utrecht faculty. Though a much more cautious and irenic scholar, van Baaren rather unexpectedly continued the rebellion and in the end turned it into a proper revolution. He first exposed the “clay feet” of van der Leeuw’s phenomenology (van Baaren 1957), then revealed the biases in van der Leeuw’s views on ‘primitive mentality’ and preliterate religions (van Baaren 1960a), and finally established a fundamentally different paradigm, in which religions were studied as data in cultural history only (van Baaren 1969, 1973).

The institutional root of the disaffection of Sierksma and van Baaren was the fact that the four duplex ordo faculties of theology continued, and were meant to continue, to provide the major portion of the academic training of the future ministers of the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, the former public or established church, were maintained at, or in, the public universities despite their not being an organic part of it. In addition, though appointed by that church, they were paid by the state. See Platvoet 1998 for more historical details; see Adriaanse, Krop, and Leertouwer 1987 for an analysis of the academic status of these subjects in Dutch public universities in this century.

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6 The disestablishment of confessional theology was, however, even formally a partial one, for these chairs, and their professors, appointed by the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, the former public or established church, were maintained at, or in, the public universities despite their not being an organic part of it. In addition, though appointed by that church, they were paid by the state. See Platvoet 1998 for more historical details; see Adriaanse, Krop, and Leertouwer 1987 for an analysis of the academic status of these subjects in Dutch public universities in this century.