From 1-4 May 1989 a conference was held in Groningen (Netherlands), dealing with the History of Religions and Critique of Culture in the Days of Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950). The conference was held under the auspices of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) and the Dutch Association of Historians of Religion and was organised by the department for Religious Studies at the State University of Groningen. It was sponsored by the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences, the Dutch ministry of education and science and the Dutch organisation for scientific research.

The conference concerned itself with an aspect of G. van der Leeuw’s work that until now has been nearly completely neglected: i.e. his attempt to incorporate non-Christian religions into a criticism of the European culture. With that Van der Leeuw took up an older intellectual tradition that was current in his days and which expressed itself in various forms inside and outside the universities.

The conference was opened with the issue of two conflicting traditions in the scientific study of religion: H. G. Kippenberg: “Gedanken zur romantischen Tradition in der Religionswissenschaft” and K. Rudolph: “Die religionskritischen Traditionen in der Religionswissenschaft”. At the time of G. van der Leeuw there were also other scientists of religion who in their research proceeded partly from a romantic point of view. The contributions of R. Plantinga (“Romanticism and the History of Religion: the Case of W. B. Kristensen”), B. Gladigow (“Naturwissenschaftliche Modellvorstellungen in der Religionswissenschaft zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen”), M. Pye (“Reflections on the Treatment of
Tradition in Comparative Perspective, with Special Reference to Ernst Troeltsch and Gerardus van der Leeuw’), U. Bianchi (‘‘Between Positivism and Historicism: the Position of R. Pettazzoni’’) and W. Hofstee (‘‘Gerardus van der Leeuw and the Concept of Primitive Mentality’’) all attempted to expose the ‘‘intellectual traditions’’ connected with the discipline between the two wars. Crucial for G. van der Leeuw was a critique of culture acknowledging religion as a ‘‘living option’’ (Z. Werblowsky) for a rational culture (L. Leertouwer, ‘‘G. van der Leeuw as a Critic of Culture’’; H. te Velde, ‘‘Kulturkritik und Religionsreform im Alten Ägypten nach Gerardus van der Leeuw’’; Z. Werblowsky in a public Dutch lecture: ‘‘Tussen primitief en modern: godsdienstwetenschap, kultuurkritiek en kultuurkrisis’’).

Some scientific interpretations of religions were inspired by a critique of culture and adopted by intellectuals outside the universities. Several contributions to the conference reviewed historically this connection between religious studies and some cultural-critical traditions outside the field of religious studies: H. Treiber (‘‘Im Westen nichts Neues: Menschwerdung durch Askese. Sehnsucht nach Askese bei Weber und Nietzsche’’); G. Küenzlen (‘‘Die Rezeption der aufklärungskritischen Tradition in der Religionssoziologie Max Webers’’); U. Linse (‘‘Asien als Alternative? Die Alternativkulturen der Weimarer Zeit: Reform des Lebens durch Rückwendung zu asiatischer Religiosität’’); R. Flasche (‘‘Der Irrationalismus der Zeit zwischen den Weltkriegen und dessen Begründung in der Religionswissenschaft’’) and R. Faber (‘‘Metaphysik des Heidentums’. Archaisierende Zivilisationskritik als antisemitische Religionsphilosophie’’).

However, the conference did not restrict itself to a historical approach. In view of the recent attempts that have been made to redefine our discipline, the conference evaluated the possibilities, limits and dangers of such a connection. For this reason the structures of interpretations of religion between the two wars were reviewed. Besides the phenomenology dealt with by D. Wiebe (‘‘Phenomenology of Religion as a Religio-Cultural Quest: Gerardus van der Leeuw and the Subversion of the Scientific Study of Religion’’) and J. Waardenburg (‘‘European Images of Other Religions and the Program of a Phenomenology of Religion’’), the