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Summary

The study of comparative religion in the Netherlands seemed to me to be in a state of stagnation when I was reading cultural anthropology. Not only had its introductory textbooks undergone no essential changes in the last decades, but they contained only answers to so-called 'what is - questions'. No mention was made of theories of religion, let alone that these contained (causal) explanations. It soon became apparent that other scholars had hinted at scientific stagnation in this discipline before me. In order to ascertain whether the absence of scientific progress was a fact, the works on religion of the three most prominent Dutch scholars in comparative religion in the period 1920 - 1980 - Dr G. van der Leeuw, Dr F. Sierksma and Dr Th.P. van Baaren - were analyzed.

From 1920 onwards, when he occupied the chair of religious studies at Groningen University, Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890 - 1950) developed almost single-handedly a new approach in the field of the study of religion: the phenomenology of religion. This phenomenology of religion appeared to be a humanistic approach to religion: it was neither an empirical discipline nor was it philosophy or theology. According to Van der Leeuw its subject-matter consisted of 'power' and its many manifestations, and its purpose was to name and classify religious phenomena. At the same time, the phenomenology of religion contained a formal research method (also called the phenomenology of religion), which by way of Verstehen and Schauen led to the classification of religious phenomena, i.e. manifestations of 'power'. Gerardus van der Leeuw incorporated in his phenomenology of religion two basic assumptions: that of primitive mentality and that of dynamism. He stuck to them to his death even though, in the light of empirical evidence, he should have abandoned them many years before. His phenomenology of religion gave the discipline a very distinct position when compared to sister disciplines, such as anthropology and sociology, in which religion was studied. As a result of this,
comparative religion came into an isolated position. Especially the Dutch anthropologists, after a period of much polemic discussion, gave the phenomenologists the cold shoulder. Dutch sociologists had almost no truck with the phenomenology of religion from the very beginning.

Fokke Sierksma (1917 - 1977) criticized Dr Van der Leeuw, his former teacher, severely for these matters and pursued another course. He wanted comparative religion to be an empirical social science, with a firm basis in biology, psychology and cultural anthropology. He rejected the phenomenological approach and accepted (causal) explanations in the realm of religious behaviour. Consequently, he developed a scientific research programme for the study of religion based on these assumptions. This resulted in his conducting quite a number of religious studies, among other things in the fields of (religious) projection and acculturation processes. His work met with almost no response, for two reasons. Firstly, his colleagues in comparative religion hardly understood what he was doing, for he had strayed far from the beaten tracks of the phenomenology of religion and theology. They also weren’t interested in his work, because Dr Sierksma had alienated his colleagues by treating them as opponents and adversaries instead of as colleagues. Neither did the anthropologists of religion want custom with him, because they saw in him a proponent of Van der Leeuw’s faulty inheritance of the study of primitive religions. Those few anthropologists who read his works accused Dr Sierksma of manipulating the facts. However, by far the most important factor for the non-reception of Sierksma’s work was the fact that he had no pupils. In the light of the theory of scientific growth, which will be discussed presently, a lack of pupils is lethal for the pursuit of a scientific research programme.

After the untimely death of Gerardus van der Leeuw, Dr Van Baaren (1912 - 1989), and not Dr Sierksma who had been generally anticipated, succeeded Van der Leeuw in the chair of comparative religion at Groningen University in 1952. To the point that he was interested in the scientific study of religion, for his great love was making surrealistic collages and poetry, Dr van Baaren proved to be very suc-
cessful in writing on primitive religion for the general public. Tens of thousands of copies of his several books were sold. He succeeded in getting rid of the mistaken concepts of primitive mentality and dynamism, but he continued to describe and classify all kinds of religious phenomena as the late Van der Leeuw had done before him. Only at the end of his career would he concede that the discipline had fared worse by concentrating on the great tradition (Redfield) and by paying no attention to the little tradition. The discipline was as far removed as ever from becoming an empirical social science in which the religious behaviour of humans occupied a central position. The conclusion may be justly drawn that stagnation was a fact in Dutch comparative religion in the years 1920 to 1980, the more so since in the sister disciplines of anthropology and sociology some progress was made in this field in the Netherlands.

In the second part of this study a theory was developed in order to explain the (lack of) scientific progress: the theory of scientific growth. The theory was embedded in the paradigm of rational choice or individual utilitarianism. Scientists working in an organization strive for (scientific) status. Status is achieved by bringing about results, in other words, status is achieved by scientists working in a progressive scientific research programme. In the Dutch situation it is especially those holding a chair who are able to develop a research programme of their own.

It was argued that young scientists aspire to become professors. Only a few aspirants will succeed, because of the scarcity of chairs. The majority of those unsuccessful scientists would cause stagnation because they go their own ways, either giving up their scientific ambitions or moving to the margins of the paradigm.

It was then argued that comparative religion was badly in need of a new theoretical foundation and that such a foundation could be found in the paradigm of rational choice theory. Two illustrative studies were presented one contemporary and one historical. The first study was entitled Denomination-al fissions and the achievement of status in a Dutch maritime community. In the Netherlands one finds villages and towns
in which the population as a whole still consider themselves as belonging to a (protestant) denomination; which is quite remarkable under Dutch circumstances. Consider for instance, Bunschoten/Spakenburg, Marken, Staphorst-/Rouveen and Urk. Contrary to the first three villages, in Urk the denominational homogeneity has disappeared. In the period from 1947 to 1988 the number of denominations increased from 3 to 10, with some 16 parishes. A (theoretical) explanation is given for the strong increase in the number of denominations in the protestant Urk. There appears to be a clear relationship between the scarcity of status positions for non-fishermen, i.e. by far the majority of the male population of Urk. At the same time an explanation is given for why all the new denominations are found on the 'experiential' (bevin-delijk) wing of (Dutch) calvinism.

The second study was entitled A game-theoretical explanation of the institution of early kingship in Israel. The Dutch anthropologist Dr Claessen c.s. developed the complex interaction model (C.I.M.) in order to explain the institution of early-kingship (see for example Claessen et al. 1978, 1981). The model is especially lacking in making clear the mechanism of why a king is appointed in an early state. Moreover, this model needs quite a lot of empirical data; quite often, these data are not available, especially in the case of early states. A theory is proposed to explain the institution of an early king. First, the coming into being and initial development of the early kingship in Israël is reconstructed. During a period of continuous (threats of) war with the neighbouring peoples the Israelites appointed a king. The king was "a halfway house" between the traditional judge and a king as their neighbours had known. The coming into being of the kingship in Israel is explained by way of utilitarian individualism, also called rational choice theory. The 'people' ask for the collective good: safety. The decision-process is analyzed by means of a non-cooperative game for two players: Samuel and the Elders. From the result-matrix the outcome of the decision-process can be predicted retrospectively: though both players have another first choice, they both agree to the coming of a king.