Goden en mensen. De godsdienstwetenschap van Gerardus van der Leeuw 1890-1950
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Summary


Gerardus van der Leeuw was in his time the foremost historian of religion in the Netherlands. As professor at the University of Groningen from 1918 till 1950, he not only dominated the study of religion in his own country but, together with Raffaele Pettazzoni, Mircea Eliade and Joachim Wach, deserves to be seen as one of the most important European scholars in this field of inquiry. The man who had more readers in his lifetime than any other Dutch historian of religion was severely criticized after his death, and is now only encountered in historical overviews. All he did was read and write (he did not do any field work) and he produced an immense oeuvre in which he sometimes achieved a kind of prophetic power.

This study examines Van der Leeuw's science of religion as it developed in the years between the two world wars. In the first chapter I give a theoretical justification for the questions I raise and provide a short historical introduction to the development of the history of religion in the Netherlands. The second chapter is a chronological account of the life and times of Van der Leeuw and his main publications. Chapter Three deals with the most important writings of Van der Leeuw on the history and phenomenology of religion and the problem of primitive mentality. The last chapter is a brief epilogue, in which I try to evaluate his work in terms of its meaning for the study of religion today. The study is based on personal and official archives, interviews and secondary sources.

Chapter One introduces a few questions inspired by the ideas of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The most important question concerns the position of Van der Leeuw in the development of the study of religion in The Netherlands. The second chapter is a chronological account of the life and times of Van der Leeuw and his main publications. Chapter Three deals with the most important writings of Van der Leeuw on the history and phenomenology of religion and the problem of primitive mentality. The last chapter is a brief epilogue, in which I try to evaluate his work in terms of its meaning for the study of religion today. The study is based on personal and official archives, interviews and secondary sources.

In Chapter Two, Van der Leeuw's science of religion is examined in the years between the two world wars. In the first part I introduce a few questions inspired by the ideas of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In the second part, I provide a short historical introduction to the development of the study of religion in the Netherlands. The second chapter is a chronological account of the life and times of Van der Leeuw and his main publications. Chapter Three deals with the most important writings of Van der Leeuw on the history and phenomenology of religion and the problem of primitive mentality. The last chapter is a brief epilogue, in which I try to evaluate his work in terms of its meaning for the study of religion today. The study is based on personal and official archives, interviews and secondary sources.

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understanding of the genesis of intellectual products.

The development of the history of religions as an academic discipline in The Netherlands began in 1877 at the University of Leiden with C.P. Tiele. At the University of Groningen the history of religions was taught as part of the philosophy of religion by Is. van Dijk. With the appointment of Van der Leeuw in 1918, Groningen also established the history of religions as an independent academic discipline. Nevertheless, it still held strong ties with theology, as it did in Leiden, Amsterdam and Utrecht. All students of religion had a theological background, and they specialized mainly in the religions of the Near East and the Ancient World. Historical and philological research dominated the discipline and the main objects were primary sources. As a result, a small group of highly specialized and well-trained experts produced outstanding research in various specific fields of inquiry. Strangely enough, however, there was hardly any influence from other disciplines, such as ethnology, sociology or psychology. It was Van der Leeuw who introduced these disciplines into the history of religions in the twenties and thirties.

In Chapter Two, Van der Leeuw’s life is divided into four periods. After an introduction to his family background, childhood and student days, which is an account of his formative years (1890-1918), I deal with his life from his appointment as professor in Groningen until the appearance of his magnum opus Phänomenologie der Religion (1918-1933). During this period he formulated his main scientific ideas. In the early twenties, Van der Leeuw began to use the psychological ideas of L. Binswanger, E. Spranger and in particular K. Jaspers in order to construct a methodological framework for his phenomenology of religion. After a few publications which can be considered as 'try-outs', he published his impressive volume on the phenomenology of religion in 1933. A few years before the Nazi's came to power in Germany, Van der Leeuw began to express his concern about the loss of values in modern society and the cultural crisis in Europe. He considered 'personalism' as expressed by M. Scheler and D. de Rougemont, as a means by which a revival of culture could be achieved. The third period concerns these years of social and political crisis (1933-1945). Van der Leeuw considered German national-socialism and Russian communism as equally great threats to Western civilization, because of their nihilistic character. For him, the three main shortcomings of modern times were the lack of community, authority and belief. These three inseparable 'basics' he saw as antidotes to modern man falling victim to nihilism and despair. In both primitive society and the Ancient world, these notions were present because collective representation was a central element. Not only in his phenomenological methodology and his idea of science
in general, but also in his critique of culture, Van der Leeuw recalls Jaspers' existential analysis of modern society. Because of his contacts in Germany, Van der Leeuw was well aware of the difficult situation of many German intellectuals, Jews in particular. During the German occupation of the Netherlands, Van der Leeuw refused to cooperate with the Nazi authorities who had taken over the administration of the University of Groningen. Two of his sons were active in the student-resistance, and Van der Leeuw himself had to go underground for a short period. Despite this difficult situation, he was still able to write and publish articles and books.

The fourth period encompasses Van der Leeuw's last years (1945-1950). After the war he was asked to become minister for education, science and culture in the Dutch governmment. Because of differences of opinion within his own Labour Party, his political career lasted only one year, but it was not without results. He developed plans for educational reforms and scientific research. His 'politics of culture' was debated long after his leaving office. After his return to the University of Groningen, Van der Leeuw was invited to South Africa, where he had the opportunity to observe 'primitive mentality' for the first time. He also visited the United States twice. In 1948 he discussed his possible appointment as Professor of comparative religion and Director of an Institute of Religion and Thought in Chicago. He declined the offer, as he had done previously when he was asked to become professor in Marburg. In 1949 Van der Leeuw attended the Goethe-festival in Aspen, where he personally made acquaintance with Thornton Wilder and José Ortega y Gasset. He also participated in the famous Eranos Tagungen in Ascona in 1948, 1949 and 1950. There he met Carl Gustav Jung, Martin Buber (with whom he already corresponded long before), Karol Kerényi, Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem, Rudolf Otto and many others. In 1950 Van der Leeuw was diagnosed as suffering from a serious kidney disease which could not be treated. One month after accepting the Presidency of the International Association for the History of Religions, of which he was one of the initiators, he died.

In Chapter Three I deal with Van der Leeuw's main publications on Egyptology, ancient Greek religion, phenomenology and primitive mentality. His doctoral dissertation (1916) on images of gods in ancient Egyptian pyramid texts is not only a philological study, but also at the same time an attempt to understand the psychology of the Egyptians. Here we find the first references to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and K.Th. Preuss. The influence of the positivist Berlin-school led by Erman and Sethe is less present here than one would expect. Van der Leeuw compares Egyptian with other non-Western religious thought, because he wants to discover the universal structure in religious thinking. The same attempt was made in his monograph on the as an original idealist not und...
made in his monograph on Echnaton (1927), whom he considered as an original idealist not understood in his own time.

In his work on Greek religion, Van der Leeuw continues his efforts to understand both Greek religion and the common roots of religious thinking in Western civilization. He considered Greek religion dualistic in character (Apollo and Dionysus), concentrating on literary texts. For him, stories, fairy-tales and myths are more interesting than ritual as a religious structure. To a certain extent, they emerge from a feeling of dissension about every-day life and give meaning to life by repeated images and symbols. Van der Leeuw's interpretation of religion is based on a communicative relation between gods and men. From this point of view, he created a mythical ideal-image of Greek religion, which served as a model that presents knowledge as well as values. Van der Leeuw discussed almost all important publications on Greek religion that appeared between 1920 and 1950. It turns out that, in time, his own views are most influenced by the works of Walter F. Otto and Otto Kern. Van der Leeuw's view of Greek religion also became increasingly 'primitive' over the years, due to his intensive reading of Lévy-Bruhl.

In the meantime he developed his phenomenology of religion. After a discussion of the philosophical backgrounds of phenomenology, and Van der Leeuw's use of the term, I analyse his *Phenomenologie der Religion* (1933) and discuss the most important reviews. Van der Leeuw's description of religion and aspects of religion, his phenomenology, is in fact a reconstruction based on his personal religious experience. The assumption that all human experience has a common structure and is therefore understandable (Jaspers) makes this reconstruction possible. Understanding was more important than explanation. The need for adequate description of religious phenomena was great in those days, and Van der Leeuw provided a synthesis of many different facts. He also integrated sociological, ethnological and psychological material in his book, which was in this respect 'modern' and without doubt a milestone in the history of the discipline.

Finally I discuss the problem of 'primitive mentality', raised by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in 1910. After a short introduction to Lévy-Bruhl's thought, I give Van der Leeuw's interpretation of Lévy-Bruhl's concepts. In this context I analyse his two most important publications on primitive mentality (1928 and 1937) and a few reviews he wrote of Lévy-Bruhl's works. The correspondence between Van der Leeuw and Lévy-Bruhl sheds light upon the appreciation of both scholars for each other. Both oppose a positivist and evolutionary approach to the study of religion, and both were convinced of the universal unity of mankind. It is interesting to see that this relativism was not at all recognized by some American anthropologists, who criticized Lévy-Bruhl's work.
because of its lack of relativism.

In a concluding epilogue I claim that the concept of primitive mentality is the key to understanding Van der Leeuw's science of religion. By making this central to the structure of the human mind, Van der Leeuw makes it possible to connect modern religious thinking with that of the Ancient Egyptians and Greeks, and the 'primitive peoples'. In order to do so he first had to practice the history of religions, and only after that theology. It is not without reason that his chief theological work appeared no earlier than 1949.

Too often and too easily Van der Leeuw's work is considered to be outdated and, worse, non-scientific. Especially his use of Lévy-Bruhl's insights has been severely criticized. This opinion, however, is not based on substantial knowledge of either Lévy-Bruhl's or Van der Leeuw's work. At least two approaches in modern anthropology are closely linked to Lévy-Bruhl's cognitive relativism: structuralism (like George Dumézil's) and interpretative anthropology (like Clifford Geertz's). With the questions he raised, following Lévy-Bruhl, Van der Leeuw was on the way to an interpretive science of religion, despite his insufficient knowledge of ethnography and despite his imperfect methodology. His work shows the necessity of a critical attitude towards a sterile empirical and rational approach in the study of religion. Next to rational explanation of observable facts, there has to be room for speculation. That is the only way to keep an open mind towards new theoretical dimensions.

Curriculum vitae van de auteur

Willem Hofstee (Ens, Noordoostpolder) MULO, de Gymnasium alumnus, later Almere College, bijna twee jaar als student van Religionswetenschap studeerde hij zes jaar geleden aan de Universiteit Groningen. Hij richtte zich op eeuwse en nieuwe geschiedenis, volkscultuur en religieus boek, met de studie culturale antropologie van het mediterrane gebied, Nijmegen, waarbij hij zich heeft begrepen als antropologie van het mediterrane gebied. Na enkele jaren als student vakkraag culturele antropologie, veldonderzoek in Italië ter bevordering van zijn kennis van het gebied, Groningen af als cultureel veldonderzoek, antropologie en vergelijkende cultuur.

Ruim een half jaar later was hij als assistent in de godsdienstwetenschap van de Universiteit van Tilburg (KU Brabant) en vervolgens docent aan de Faculteit der Filosofie van de Staat Universiteit Groningen. Hij publiceerde op het gebied van theologische antropologie en is als redacteur van het tijdschrift Foal. Daarnaast is hij lid van de Genootschap voor Godsdienstwetenschap van de Universiteit van Tilburg, deel uit van de in 1970 opgerichte interdisciplinaire onderzoeksgroep onderdeel van het Rudolf Steiner Instituut Groningen. Hij werkt momenteel in de rede bij Th.P. van Baaren en de ges.

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