

Mutual Interruption

Toward a Productive Tension between Theology and Religious Studies

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In the recent past, the relationship between theology and religious studies has repeatedly been a subject of discussion. In this essay I will approach my reflection on the relation between theology and religious studies from a cultural theological perspective.¹ This means that I will start off with a reflection about the way Christian faith relates to the present-day context and how this opens up possibilities for an authentic theological project. I will argue that, because of the changed relationship between faith and context, it is not only theology's turn to religious studies, but also the increasing isolation and 'pastoralisation' of theology, which present two comprehensible but nevertheless erroneous reactions to this situation. The first appears to be a survival strategy as a response to theology's loss of cultural and scientific plausibility, the second a protection strategy against the increased tension between faith/theology on the one hand and context/sciences on the other. On the basis of an analysis of the context in terms of plurality and diversity, I will offer a plea for a theological project that keeps theology and religious studies together in a productive tension – mutually interrupting each other – and thus maintaining a tension between continuity and discontinuity.

1. Introduction: terminological clarifications

Theology can be defined, classically, as *fides quaerens intellectum*: faith seeking understanding. Theologians engage in a reflection on and from within that faith – a reflection nourished by way of an existential praxis, rooted in a tradition, embedded in a community, and performed in actual historical, cultural, socio-political contexts, and on a scale that ranges from the particularly local to the global. We understand religious studies as the scientific study of the phenomenon of religion in all its diversity. Religious studies use the canonised philosophical and (sociological) scientific methods to reflect on the phenomenon of religion.

¹ This essay is a translation of *Verschil moet er zijn! Naar een productieve spanning tussen godgeleerdheid en godsdienstwetenschappen*, in *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 48 (2008) 3-14, which, in turn, is the adapted written text of a lecture given at a conference on this theme with Cardinal Danneels, held in Leuven on November 29, 2007.

It could also be said that not only the material but also the formal object of study can nowadays be characterised by its diversity. This includes the study of (reaching) self-understanding within a religion, a religion's so-called theological content. Today, the term religious studies concerns the study of world religions in particular. In that case, the object of study is an understanding a specific religion, or the way different religions relate, and this also incorporates diverse methodologies. This being said, to be involved in interreligious communication, and to reflect on this communication, e.g., can be performed from the perspective of both religious studies and theology.

Our study takes the classical distinction between the two as its starting-point. Religious studies reflect on the phenomenon of religion from an outsider's perspective, and the scientists need not belong to the religious tradition they study. Theologians, on the other hand, as participants, attempt in the end to come to a better understanding of the religious tradition they belong to; they strive to understand the meaning of life and what it means to live together from within that perspective. In what follows, however, it will become clear that – although this distinction keeps its important methodological and heuristic function – the line drawn between the two needs re-examination. Furthermore, and this is crucial, the distinction is not static. Rather, the relationship between both is dynamic and thus involves influences from outside, borrowing, exchanges, questioning, challenging, tensions, criticism, conflicts, etc.

Among other things, this dynamic relationship is due to the interdisciplinary character of the theological disciplines themselves, which make avail of philosophy, religious studies and the sciences in order to come to a greater self-understanding. Religious studies, in this case, are seen as supportive sciences (in line with the classical idea of the *ancilla theologiae*). The systematic theologian used to call on the philosopher mostly, but nowadays is willing to lend his or her ear toward the cultural anthropologist, the sociologist, the psychologist and even the economist. Matters are even more complex as the interdisciplinary relationship between theology and the (supportive) sciences interacts with the internal theological interdisciplinary relationship between different theological disciplines, which itself generates a dynamic interaction between e.g. systematic theology and church history, or practical theology, or biblical studies, etc. The way these various disciplines understand their relationship with their specific supportive sciences is of major significance to the way they relate to other theological disciplines. The manner in which church historians incorporate historical data into a theological reflection on history is in this regard decisive for the way church historians and systematic theologians can enter into dialogue.

That the study of religion doesn't happen in a value-free environment is an insight that has become more and more prominent in the past decennia. Religious studies always *also* express how a society views religiosity, and they influence those views at the same time. A good illustration hereof is the interest of society in world religions.

2. Recontextualisation as a method: the dialogue with the contextual critical consciousness as a theological programme

For this systematic theological essay about theology and religious studies, we start, as said, from a reflection about how the Christian faith nowadays relates to its surrounding context. We do so from a hermeneutical-theological perspective, using the method which we have termed in other instances as 'recontextualisation'.² Christian faith is always thoroughly embedded in a specific historical context which is partly constitutive for this faith. At the same time, the Christian faith never completely coincides with this context. This causes the contextually embedded manifestations of the Christian faith to become pressurised when the context changes, since Christians participate, like their contemporaries, in the current context, and share in its sensitivities, attitudes, thinking patterns, and ambiguities in a similar manner. Theology, as faith seeking understanding, then, is embedded in this context. It is its job to examine the internal comprehensibility and the external plausibility of the Christian faith in relation to this context.

The insight into this intrinsic link from the Christian faith to its context inspires theologians to take the contextual challenges seriously and to strive for a contemporary theology which can claim at the same time both a theological validity and a contextual plausibility. Recontextualisation is therefore a continuous, never finished, theological programme, and necessitates a consciously undertaken dialogue with the contextual critical consciousness. This consciousness, in turn, is an expression of the reflexive potential that is present in the context, and of its sensitivities, attitudes, thinking patterns, and ambiguities.

By and large, theological recontextualisation consists of two stages which cannot be separated distinctly, but which stand in a dynamic relationship with each other. On the one hand, it requires an acquaintance with the contextual critical consciousness in order to find out what it reveals both about the context, and, in relationship with it, the Christian faith today. That is,

² For a definition of many of the terms employed in this contribution (like recontextualisation, detraditionalisation, interruption, etc.), see my *God Interrupts History. Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, New York: Continuum, 2007.

how does the context define itself? In what manner is the Christian faith part of this context? How do changes in the context put the Christian faith under pressure? On the other hand, and in direct relation with the previous line of inquiry, recontextualisation means searching for a contextually founded Christian self-understanding. It entails needing to design a theology for today which addresses, from its own sources, not only the challenges posed by the context to the Christian faith, but also those posed by the Christian faith to the context. Thus, theology aims at a theologically legitimate and contextually plausible understanding of faith. In coming to this understanding, contextual language, images and thinking patterns are often employed, which then start to function in a theological discourse with a theological aim. In conclusion, the dialogue with the contextual critical consciousness presses theology to a present-day, theological critical consciousness of itself and the context in which it is situated.

In the course of history, philosophy was the privileged partner – *ancilla* – in this coming to understanding. From philosophy, theologians often took over models, patterns, ideas and words that helped them develop, structure, motivate, and unfold their own position. Philosophers elucidated the broader contextual character of life, and structured, for Christians also, the conception of reality and the critical perspectives on it. In short, particularly in the interaction with philosophy and because of the integration of interesting models to shape its own rationality, theology (along with the context) recontextualised itself, and came to a new understanding of both the context and itself. Thomas Aquinas' (1225-1274) employment of Aristotle's philosophy is still one of the most compelling examples of this. Aquinas' change of handmaiden, however, resulted in quite a different outlook on various theological positions.³

3. Theology, modernity and the rationality of religious studies

Because of modernity, it is no longer only philosophy which offers insights in the actual context and the position of Christian faith in it. With the rise of the (human) sciences and – in the case of religious phenomena – religious studies, theology obtains new dialogue partners. Because religious studies adhere to the criteria of modern epistemology (scientific method as a guarantee of the truth-claim, its universality, transparency, and communicability), they share the prestige and truth-claims of the sciences in general. They express a new, modern way of

³ Cf. E. Gilson, *The History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1955, repr. 1985, p. 382.

thinking, reaching out for knowledge free from tutelage. Evidently, this puts the way theology and the contextual critical consciousness have been in dialogue thus far under pressure.

The human sciences, including religious studies, reflect on humanity, culture and religion according to their own scientific methods. Theology cannot lay aside the insights that they generate (like in historiography, philology, psychology, and sociology). At the same time, a fundamental change has occurred, since these sciences not only adhere to the criteria of modern epistemology, but are also part of the secularisation process that thoroughly changes society's structure. The methodical atheism that characterises the sciences is the most explicit expression hereof. Methodical atheism allows the sciences to act autonomously over against theology to a much greater extent than Thomas Aquinas allowed philosophy to act independently from theology. Furthermore, as these sciences at times enter into conflict with Christianity, this results in situations in which science and faith/theology seem to make rival truth-claims. Such conflicts grow worse when, on the one hand, science is considered to illegitimately distort Christian truth-claims, and/or, on the other, when science becomes an argument in a secularist criticism of religions. Either way, even apart from such explicit ideological use of science, this process stimulates an implicit cultural consciousness in which the definition of truth is equated with the presumed objectivity of science.

As a result of this new challenge, different theological profiles have come into being, depending on whether theologians could or would make a distinction between scientific results and ideological applications, or whether these results were seen as a challenge in coming to a theological self-understanding. At this point, so-called modern and anti-modern theologians disagreed about to which extent the autonomy of the secular could or should be respected. Anti-moderns regarded modernity as an alienation and as humankind's hubris, which both needed to be overcome, and whose fruits needed to be integrated in an entirely Christian synthesis. Modern theologians deemed modernity a learning process, with which Christians could or had to engage in a fruitful dialogue, and which would make their self-understanding more adequate.

Although modern theology granted contemporary philosophy and the human sciences more autonomy, theology's dialogue with them nonetheless, because of correlation methods, led to a new synthesis. Modern, correlational theology⁴ therefore regarded itself as the fruitful outcome of the mutual critical encounter (co-relation) between a passed-on Christian tradition

⁴ Cf. D. Tracy's use of the category in *The Uneasy Alliance Reconciled: Catholic Theological Method, Modernity, and Postmodernity*, in *Theological Studies* 50 (1989) 548-570.

and a progressively modern, secular culture and society. So doing, the insights and results of religious studies provided a foundation for Christian truth-claims.

Thus to some extent, the correlation method enabled theology to cope with the pressure from modern scientific ideals, precisely because theology had a positive attitude towards (human) science's results, and formulated its own truth-claims in correlation to those results. On the basis of such correlation between the content of Christian faith and the context (religious studies), theologians succeeded in making the message and meaning of Christian faith understandable in light of the anthropological function of religion. Christianity offers and fulfils what is good for humanity or what responds to human desires. Nevertheless, this caused a tension between the so-called universality and objectivity of religious studies, on the one hand, and the confessional, particular character of theology and its universal truth-claims on the other. Increasingly, the specifically theological legitimisation of theology was questioned. As a consequence, the burden of proof for theological discourse progressively fell on their partners from the humanities.

4. Toward an unbearable tension and an imminent bankruptcy of theology

In the meantime, the tension between the religious sciences and theology continues to increase, because the existing religious overlap of society and Christian faith progressively disappears. Such a 'detraditionalisation'⁵ not only results in a decrease of the cultural plausibility of theology, it also shows that the religious phenomenon itself is a lot broader than it was perceived to be from a Christian perspective. It is exactly at that moment, that the tension of theology to legitimate itself in terms of religious studies becomes unbearable,⁶ and that the theological project collapses, both at the methodological level and in its cultural credibility. Methodologically, theology is floored when exegesis of the Old and New Testament becomes the study of Christianity's sources, when liturgical studies and sacramentology become ritual studies, and when systematic theology becomes the philosophy of religion. Why would one still hold on to a specifically Christian content of theology, as coming to a deeper understanding of the religion of one particular group? Even more so – and this concerns any sense of cultural credibility – what if that particular group diminishes more and more, and religiosity is less and less considered to be necessarily connected to one

⁵ The concept of detradditionalisation points at the broader process in which traditions, religious as well as other (class, gender, etc.), are no longer capable of continuing without difficulties in the next generation.

⁶ A document that elucidates this point for the Dutch situation, is the 2004 KNAW-document: *Van God los: Tussen theologie en wetenschap* (I thank dr. Maarten Wisse for pointing me toward this reference).

particular tradition? In other words, the supposed obvious continuity between theology and religious studies no longer functions or legitimises, neither methodologically nor culturally.

This tension becomes even more strenuous when the religious landscape changes not only because of detraditionalisation, but also because of pluralisation. Religious plurality has increasingly taken very concrete forms due to population migration, new religious movements, tourism, and mass-media.⁷ World religions and religious movements have become a constitutive part of our society, and for that reason alone deserve profound reflection. Detraditionalisation and pluralisation, however, also invigorate each other. Today's interest in (other) religions and religious movements is not only due to an appeal to what is new and different, it also resonates – as will be shown in the next paragraph – with a contextually sharpened existential longing to come to terms with one's own identity construction.

In the last decennia, the ongoing process of detraditionalisation has been accompanied by the post-modern criticism of the modern grand narratives. Ideological and religious universal truth-claims have come under scrutiny. This suspicion mainly concerns the modern narratives of emancipation and progress, of modern rationality, and of science and technology, because they failed to live up to their promises. The loss of plausibility of quasi-evident traditions and ideologies results in an increased need for the construction of identity (individualisation): as such, identity, fundamentally, is no longer a given. Such is the elemental background of religion's present-day revival, which certainly stimulates an attraction to the study of religion. Because of detraditionalisation and pluralisation, however, such an attraction no longer necessarily (or primarily) leads to theology. The post-modern critical consciousness, combined with a decentring of the modern subject, causes humankind to stumble on the fragmentary character of identity and destabilises every obtained identity. It establishes a longing for connectedness and wholeness, belonging to a greater whole ('religare'), which, because of the structural changes of culture and society, is not necessarily, and/or primarily, a Christian whole.

Post-modern criticism, furthermore, is also directed – besides at the (institutionalised, classical) faith – against modern scientific standards. Such criticism, however, does not affect scientific praxis itself, which is nowadays legitimated mainly by means of its performativity.⁸

⁷ This religious pluralisation has changed the Western religious panorama in a field containing a diversity of religions, and has resulted in an increasing awareness of this diversity.

⁸ Cf. Lyotard's remarks, which date back to 1979, concerning this issue in his *La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris: Minuit, 1979.

When all stable frameworks get relativised, what remains then is ‘what works’. Together with scientific methodologies that start off from mathematical models, the scepticism about substantial normative hypotheses (which can always be deconstructed as too particular or as connected to specific interests) moreover result in an increased quantification of the research according to today’s research standards, not only on the level of scientific methodology, but also on the level of accounting for the research praxis itself.

In short, the combination of detraditionalisation, pluralisation, religious revival and pragmatic research standards not only explain the success of religious studies, but also elucidate why theology’s project is under pressure. In both cases, this is true on a scientific as well as a cultural level. Therefore, it is no wonder that, because of this, theological faculties and departments decide to switch into becoming religious studies, or to use the aura of religious studies in order to become ‘fashionable’ again.

5. Between continuity and discontinuity: a critique of survival strategies and protection mechanisms

Today, the typical modern manner of legitimising the theological project by means of supportive religious studies – either for reasons of opportunism, or of a supposed continuity – no longer functions, or may indeed function counterproductively. Turning theology, therefore, into religious studies as a survival strategy works, again from this conclusion, either out of opportunism, or from a more radical consequence of the presumed continuity: Christian theology, then, is considered a mere illustration of a potentially more general study of the religious phenomenon, and can be reduced to its religious scientific content.

The sharpened discontinuity between Christian faith and the present-day context, of which the unbearable tension between theology and religious studies bare witness, however, not only leads theology to a survival strategy of becoming religious studies, but also generates theological protection mechanisms. Rather unnuanced, one can call this the ‘isolation’ and ‘pastoralisation’ of theology. Coming from a strict methodological and/or substantial distinction between theology and religious studies, one wishes to protect theology against all manoeuvres in the direction towards becoming religious studies, by emphasising the autonomy of theology, which as such is definitely, in no sense, religious studies. At the same time, however, such protective strategies limit the room for the necessarily interdisciplinary character of theology. One attempts to save the theological orientation, but overlooks the fact

that the theological method is intrinsically interdisciplinary, and dynamically linked to the sciences and religious studies. Because of such an inadequate view of theology, a following step often leads to considering the relevance of theological studies to be the education of pastors. ‘Isolation’, then, leads to ‘pastoralisation’. As a consequence, theology surrenders, intentionally or unintentionally, all too easily, the loss of its place in the public academic forum, and is reduced to education for clerics.

In both strategies, theology is sacrificed. The survival strategy is hardly able to still develop theological questions, or immediately repudiates these as (too) confessional or parochial. Moreover, research from a religious studies perspective does not necessarily, and from itself, lead to theological investigation. The protection strategy encloses theology in its own discourse, robs it from its necessarily interdisciplinary underpinning, and threatens to functionalise theology in terms of the schooling of clerics. There is barely any room left for theology’s indispensable dynamic between Christian faith and the contextual critical consciousness, of which religious studies are a typical case. At the moment when the continuity between theology and religious studies has become implausible, a politics of discontinuity causes a divorce between the two, with detrimental consequences for the praxis of theology. From the outset, in both strategies no chances for theological recontextualisation remain, which causes theology to lose its proper role in the interaction of church, academy, and society.

In sum: theological strategies of continuity drain today’s theology and reduce it to religious studies, while strategies of discontinuity rob theology from its chances to come to a present-day self-understanding. On closer inspection, a post-modern variant of the ancient secularisation thesis appears to be at work in both. Applied to theology, the secularisation thesis (‘the more modernity, the less religion’, and vice versa) states: the more religious studies, the less theology; and vice versa. When secularisation is considered to be fully realised, only a generally scientific access to the phenomenon of religion is deemed to be legitimate. Theology, in turn, is thought to either link up with this manoeuvre, or retreat into its own domain. In the latter case, theology easily develops into a discourse that defies the legitimacy of religious studies themselves (accusing them of reductionism and secularism).

From a theological perspective, however, it is dubitable whether these are the only two remaining options for theology today. In both cases, the theological project ultimately vanishes. Furthermore, can we only think of the relation between religious studies and theology in terms of continuity or discontinuity? A renewal of theology with the contextual

critical consciousness can be of help in answering this question. Elementary for this postmodern consciousness is the increased attention for (methodological and religious) plurality and diversity. Theology's present-day partner is not just a singular secular culture, to which it needs to co-relate in a one-to-one relationship. Rather, theology finds itself in a plural and varied context, both on the level of religious sciences and of other religions. Theologically, it indeed fundamentally matters whether one approaches the relation between Christian faith and context in (modern) terms of secularisation, or in (post-modern) terms of plurality and diversity.

6. Toward a recontextualisation of the relation between theology and religious studies

Today, the methodologically atheistic sciences and religious studies both possess an unalienable but particular position among the plurality of ways of perceiving life and reality. The dynamics of secularisation, to which these sciences belong, however, no longer exclusively determines the context to which the Christian faith relates. Furthermore, in post-modern criticism the objective observer position, classically taken in by science and modern rationality, has been fundamentally questioned, while the hermeneutical circles and power mechanisms in which it stands, have been laid bare. Nevertheless, amidst a multitude of models and theories, and legitimated foremost by their efficiency and performativity, they remain constitutive for the way in which people, including the Christians, live their lives. Hence, they continue to be of importance for a recontextualising theology.

Moreover, from a theological-programmatic perspective of recontextualisation, the latter is also true on theological grounds. Precisely because God reveals Godself in concrete history, theology cannot but engage its context. Therefore, the two deficient strategies of the previous paragraph do not result from 'too much' but 'too little' recontextualisation. Religious studies as a survival mechanism renounces the theological project of faith seeking understanding; isolation and 'pastoralisation' cut theology off from the confrontation with the contextual critical consciousness. It is the way theology and religious studies relate to each other which is at stake. Exactly at this point, an analysis of the current context in terms of pluralisation opens up different perspectives than a secularisation schema.

For those analysing the present-day situation in terms of plurality, the constitutive experience of Christians today concerns Christian faith being one of many positions in the religious field.

The confrontation with other positions (like the Buddhist, Muslim, or atheist ones) not only challenges Christian faith (from the outside), but at the same time and immediately leads to a (re)discovery and (re)statement of its own position. This doesn't mean that the Christian tradition is stated over against other positions in an impenetrable and unchanged way. It does involve, however, in the confrontation with plurality and difference, how the process of theological recontextualisation commences. Christian faith, thus, is not merely a 'counter-culture', nor is it any longer a partner of a fundamentally secular culture. On the contrary, it is placed in the middle of an internally pluralised field within which it is challenged to situate itself in relation to the others.

The disciplines of religious studies also function in this field of plurality and diversity. From their own methodologies they generate insight into religion and religiosity, investigating historical religions, current religious sensitivities, empirical data, etc. To the extent that these sciences analyse and interpret histories, texts and data, they take part in the ongoing 'conflict of interpretations'. This latter insight has nothing to do with relativism, but points to the specific responsibilities and consciousness of one's own limitations, which arise when one can no longer naively claim an uninvolved observer's position. The results of such investigations can challenge present-day theological reflection to the extent that they shed light on Christian faith and its current position, but also on humankind, culture and society.

Theologians, however, should not forget that religious studies by themselves do not come to theological questions – there is no simple continuity between them! This is the case for the 'classical' religious sciences, as well as for the study of world religions. Such research, even when it is comparative, doesn't automatically lead to theological investigations. Hence, in their engagement with religious studies, theologians need to pose theological questions from the very start of their investigations: 'where and how does God reveal Godself? How can we think God's saving presence? In what way can the Christian tradition testify to God's active commitment with humankind and history? How can it become a valuable reading key for people dealing with the question of meaning, etc.? In this sense, such theological questions interrupt the discourse of religious studies, because they explicitly hint at the elaboration of a Christian understanding of reality – a wish which is nourished by the theologian's involvement in a particular tradition, rooted in existential praxis and community.

Alternatively, there is also no simple discontinuity, to the extent that religious studies investigate the phenomenon of religion, Christianity constituting one such phenomenon. Even more, insights and theories from religious studies theories can put a Christian self-

understanding under pressure, i.e. ‘interrupting’ its present-day discourse. Yet, to the degree that the discourses of religious studies are not able to aim at bringing God to speak, a theological engagement with them will also involve interruption. Taking part in this dynamic game of continuity and discontinuity – of being interrupted and interrupting – is what theology today is up to, for the sake of its own objectives.

7. Theology and religious studies: mutual interruption for the benefit of a present-day theological self-understanding

The relation between theology and religious studies can, as stated above, be grasped in terms of interruption. On the one hand, an understanding from a religious studies viewpoint can put pressure on older ways of Christian self-understanding. A theological investigation raising theological questions from the very start, on the other hand, places the self-understanding of religious studies in perspective and interrupts a straightforward appeal to continuity and/or discontinuity. In what follows, I present – too shortly and without any nuance – four examples of the intended productive relationship, introducing each one of them with a somewhat provocative question.

(a) *Is the God of statistics the same as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?* How to evaluate the project of ‘empirical theology’, as coined by, amongst others, the Nijmegen pastoral theologian Hans van der Ven? The latter’s empirical research taught him that in contemporary European societies there is a transition from personal conceptions of God to non-personal, more holistic images of God. From such results, however, van der Ven concludes rather prematurely that theology should adapt its conception of God, because it is too personal, (and thus?) too authoritative and patriarchal.⁹ From our perspective, he calls for a too straightforward continuity between context and Christian faith. A more appropriate theological strategy would be to think in terms of mutual interruption: such statistics indeed appeal to theology to reflect upon the Christian conception of God in relation to its narrative tradition, also questioning its too authoritarian and patriarchal features. Such reflection, however, need not necessarily result in adaptation, but rather in a rediscovery of the personal character of the Christian God – of a God who reveals Godself within concrete histories as love, as the Other communicating to humankind and creation. The interruption of empirical

⁹ Cf. J.A. van der Ven, *God Reinvented? A Theological Search in Texts and Tables* (Empirical Studies in Theology, 1), Leiden: Brill, 1998, 14-19; *Faith in God in a Secularized Society*, in *Bulletin ET* 9 (1998) 21-45; *Contemporary Theology in a Secularized Society*, in *Bulletin ET* 9 (1998) 199-219.

data then stimulates a self-critical theological reflection on how God relates to the world of today.¹⁰

(b) *Do ritual studies constitute the future of liturgical studies and sacramentology?* ‘Religiosity is all over the place’, Paul Post said a few years ago, and he demonstrated how, in rituals, identity is performed in relation to bodiliness and materiality. As far as he was concerned, liturgical studies had to shed light on the ways in which religiosity is rooted in concrete rituality and performativity.¹¹ No doubt becoming aware of this ritual performativity may contribute to the understanding of Christian life; the theologian’s task, however, has not ended before one sheds light on the way God is at work in it. To put it candidly: what about the theological performativity of a Christian sacramental praxis? Rituals are sacraments precisely because they speak of God and mediate God’s salvific love. Hence, from a theological perspective, a ritual studies perspective on the rites of passage, e.g., is to be interrupted sacramentologically.¹²

(c) *Do evolutionary, neurotheological theories of religion at last deliver the fatal blow to religion?* Be it the atheistic apologetics of Daniel C. Dennett who explains religion in an evolutionary way as a ‘meme’¹³, or be it neurotheology, which employs a neurological explanation and attempts to render religious experience to nothing but brain activity (along the lines of comparative studies¹⁴): a theological confrontation with such thinking should not let itself be tempted to an undifferentiated dismissal. Theology surely should criticise the seamless extension of methodological atheism to religious atheism displayed in such studies, but also – after dismissing the possibility of reduction – learn to appreciate attempts to uncover, scientifically, the historical-biological and neuro-physical basis of religion and religious dynamics. For, how else could God reveal Godself but through the mediation of history and bodiliness?¹⁵

¹⁰ I engage in this reflection in *God Interrupts History*, ch. 7.

¹¹ Cf. Paul Post, *Life-Cycle Rituals: a Ritual-Liturgical Perspective*, in *Questions Liturgiques – Studies in Liturgy* 83 (2002) 10-29.

¹² For my reflections in this regard, in discussion with E. Schillebeeckx, see my *L’interruption sacramentelle des rites d’existence*, in *Questions Liturgiques – Studies in Liturgy* 83 (2002), reprinted in an adapted English version in *God Interrupts History*, ch. 5.

¹³ Cf. D. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell. Religion as a natural phenomenon*, New York: Penguin (Viking), 2006 (see also R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, New York: Bantam Books, 2006).

¹⁴ Cf. A.B. Newberg et al., *Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2002.

¹⁵ Cf. L. Boeve, *Gooi God niet weg! Over hoe God weggegooid wordt in een pleidooi om God niet weg te gooien*, in D. Pollefeyt & E. De Boeck (red.), *Niet van God los? Geloof en wetenschap* (Nikè-reeks, 53), Leuven: Acco, 2007, 31-44.

(d) *Is ‘comparative theology’ the new matrix with which to take up the challenge of religious plurality in contemporary theology?* The name is certainly trendy, and apparently covers a plurality of versions – the inter-religious reading of texts being its minimum. At first glance, ‘comparative theology’ suggests that the discipline has an aura of objectivity, since comparing requires an observant overview. From a perspective of mutual interruption, critical questions then quickly rise. Nonetheless, the comparative-theological approach is more complex, and its practitioners are often well aware of the difficulties of this theological project.¹⁶ Nevertheless, difficult questions remain. Does comparative theology not ultimately ignore the given that the irreducibly particular historical basis of Christian faith always affects its universalising truth-claim? Does this theological approach not neglect the insight that the biggest differences between religions often occur where they seem to come closest to each other? And furthermore, what does it mean, for instance, to be religiously multi-lingual? Is the metaphorical analogy of natural languages with different religions really appropriate? What does double or multiple belonging amount to: are religious engagements such that they could be shared?¹⁷ The challenge of the religious other usually is best served when one accounts for the constitutive differences between religions. It is not in spite of, but thanks to a respect for such difference, that religious encounters both challenge one’s own identity, while nevertheless pushing common interests. When God’s self-disclosure is recognised in (engaging) the religious other, then this may bring Christians to a better self-understanding – of course with respect for the other – and should not necessarily result in canonising the other religion.¹⁸

Concluding remarks

When the relationship of faith and context is no longer analysed in terms of secularisation but in terms of detraditionalisation and pluralisation, at once the discussion concerning the relationship of theology and religious studies takes a different form. Between continuity and discontinuity, in a dynamics of mutual interruption, religious studies challenge theology, and help theology in its coming to a renewed self-understanding, while theology interrupts the

¹⁶ Cf. N. Hintersteiner, *Intercultural and Interreligious (Un)Translatibility and the Comparative Theology Project*, in: N. Hintersteiner, *Naming and Thinking God in Europe Today* (Currents of Encounter 32), Amsterdam / New York: Rodopi 2007, 465-491.

¹⁷ Cf. e.g. C. Cornille, *Double Belonging: Aspects and Questions*, in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 23 (2003) 43-49.

¹⁸ F.X. Clooney appears to have taken this critical consciousness into account in his conceptualization of comparative theology, but nonetheless doesn’t escape the mentioned ambiguity (cf. item 5. of his definition on <http://www2.bc.edu/~clooney/Comparative/ct.html>).

discourse of religious studies from its specific theological perspective: where and how does God reveal Godself today? It is such a dynamic, interruptive relationship which makes a present-day, plausible theology possible. At the same time, it prevents theology both from its reduction to religious studies and from its isolation from the latter and consequent ‘pastoralisation’. Only by doing so, can faculties of theology credibly position themselves on the crossroads of church, academy and society. It is from such a position that theology can render its optimum services for all of the three domains involved.¹⁹

To conclude: the present discussion does not only involve a discussion of ideas, but also of institutional organisation and structures. Experiences within many institutions seem to show that where religious studies and theology are structurally separated, the minds of the practitioners also diverge, often resulting in a situation which advances the two deficient strategies mentioned. Therefore, for the sake of theology and its project, it is imperative to search for structures that promote and support the interconnectedness of theology and religious studies.

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¹⁹ It is probably evident by now that this positioning is itself a result of the profile theology puts forward, i.e. a cultural-theological, methodological exercise, confronted with and informed by social studies and philosophy. As such, it is an example of that which it envisions.