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Editorial

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This special issue of “Fieldwork in Religion” was prepared by researchers who participated in the research program “Between Secularization and Sacralization” (BSS) (Droogers, 2007). This program began development in 1999 at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, VU University, Amsterdam. The main presupposition in the program was that secularization, the decline of the social significance of traditional institutionalized religion, is going on in Western Europe, while simultaneously new and diverse forms of deregulated religion emerge, in particular on micro-levels of society. The BSS research program was aimed at studying recent forms of more or less deregulated, that is, weakly institutionalized, religions and religiosities *and* at exploring the methods with which to study new forms of religion and religiosity.

In the articles in this issue the emphasis is on the latter goal, the methodology. The question of the qualitative methodology of research into new forms of religion and religiosities is brought to the fore. This is partly the consequence of the BSS research program’s view that the qualitative approach has its very own justification, in particular where one wishes to study deregulated and de-homogenized forms of religion on the micro-level of society. The so-called quantitative

methodology has certainly turned out to be very advantageous for discovering long-term motions in the religious field on the macro-level of society. Besides, in specific research cases quantitative and qualitative methodologies may complement each other fruitfully. Nevertheless, the qualitative methodology is autonomous and can be valid when used on its own merits. The researchers of the program, the authors of the articles in this issue, are aware of the differences in views on the mission of science, in this particular case social science, as far as quantitative and qualitative work is concerned. Thus they identify links between (neo-)positivist and quantitative preferences, just as they realize that qualitative research may be influenced by constructivist and phenomenological reflections on science's mission, rather than (neo-)positivist intentions.

Accordingly the researchers have worked on the basis of the supposition that the current religious landscape cannot be mapped adequately without qualitative methods. They suggest that in a situation where religious worldviews are changing fundamentally, the methodology used in studying them must reflect these changes. The richness and dynamic character of current religious transformations demand a qualitative methodology, showing the idiosyncrasies behind the regularities, the exceptions to the common trends, the motion picture between the stills of the surveys.

The background of this appeal for a qualitative methodology is formed by the idea that modern society differs profoundly from the contexts in which the world religions once emerged. Modernization has affected the religious situation worldwide in several ways. The processes it nourished, such as secularization, individualization, globalization, and migration, have deeply influenced the field of religion. Each of these processes has its specific consequences for the religious situation, as we will show now.

The process of *secularization* produces new types of worldview, but also brings changes to established religions. Moreover it nourishes the debate on the border between religious and non-religious worldviews. For secularization does not only mean that traditional religion is in decline, but above all that secularity has become a decisive cultural context for new emerging religions and religiosities. Thus in this issue *Rhea Hummel* writes on qualitative research into the worldviews of artists. All the artists she spoke with appear to be in one way or another "products" of secularization. Most of them have renounced institutional religion and consider themselves to be secular human beings, and yet they seem to develop an individualized worldview of their own. By making art, they still long for the coming of the sacred. We might say that in their work one may detect secular culture and the sacred simultaneously. It appears to be that only a qualitative method is appropriate for detecting this mix of secularizing and sacralizing motions. For once, the

alternating relation between religious and secular worldviews receives attention. The need to go beyond linear models calls for qualitative research.

Social motions of *individualization* are evident in new forms of religion and religiosities. The socially informed process of individualization is continuously producing a variety of religious forms that are beyond the control of the religious institutions, making the religious field much less homogeneous. The idea that religion is located in the first place in the sphere of the individual comes to the fore in several articles in this issue. *Johan Roeland* and *Peter Versteeg* for instance report on the ways participants in a meditation course are seeking individual experiences, while *Kim Knibbe* reports how modern Catholics in the Southern part of the Dutch province of Limburg are taken in by a motion of individual, critical disconnection from the moral authority of the Church. At the same time, both Roeland/Versteeg and Knibbe demonstrate that individualization is a social process, and that the seeking individual is socially and collectively stimulated and simultaneously shaped and constrained. It appears that the socially informed individualizing tendency in our culture and in modern religion makes the relation between individual and social elements extremely relevant for research, that is to say: for qualitative research. Only by way of this kind of research does it turn out to be possible to detect the ways along which individual subjectivities are being moulded by social-cultural motions.

And, of course, social motions of globalization, in particular in the form of *migration and transnationalization*, have introduced religion as an important ingredient of multicultural societies. Migration has not only changed the migrants' religiosity, but we may surmise that migration and the coming of Islam do have an impact on the ways secular identities are formed. *Edien Bartels*, *Martijn de Koning* and *Daniëlle Koning* demonstrate in their article in this issue that where migration and Islam form a cultural-political battleground, even the identity of the researcher who tries to understand Western Islam is at stake. It turns out to be impossible to take a neutral and "objective" stance when the field to be studied is a culturally and politically disputed field. In their article, these authors explore the distinct ways along which the "qualitative researcher" participates in the embattled field of Islam in the West.

In sum, we may say that the de-regulation and de-homogenization of religion in the West, brought about by the processes mentioned above, resulted in the mix of the secular and the sacred, in the mix of subjectivization and social formation, in the mix of the global and the local, and in the mix of construction and deconstruction of religious and secular identities. It is because of these complex, "mixed" situations that we need creative and qualitative methods in the study of religion. The consequences of the four processes colour the elaboration and selection of

methods. We must have access not only to collective and official views but also to individualized non-institutional convictions. The methods chosen should not only show the dynamics of *religions* but also those of *secular views*, as well as the ambiguous beliefs and practices in-between.

The contributors to this special issue do not claim to present a final solution to the need for methodological reorientation in the study of religion. Although their research program was designed to cover a number of general themes, the case-study approach they adopted led them to study these themes in a concrete micro-level context, closer to idiosyncrasies than to broad generalities. Though generalization, common in a quantitative approach, is not a primary goal of qualitative research, the unique details of a concrete case can nevertheless show the plausibility of causalities, correlations and trends in beliefs and practices. Validity does in this case not stem from correctly composed samples, but from the recognizable familiarity and the inner logic of the cases and of persons' behaviour.

Validity is also based on the subdivision of the field of religious change in the five general themes that were at the heart of the BSS program: experience, ritual, language, morals, identity. Though not exhaustive, these five themes cover the better part of religious phenomena. With the – dubious – exception of ritual, they are not exclusively limited to the religious field. This makes them usable in the study of non-religious worldviews, just as they point to the wider social and cultural context.

These themes as well as the cases in which they were studied are an essential part of the BSS research program. Any theme represents one corner of a triangle, with method and theory as the other two corners. This triangle has its own dynamics, since theme, method and theory influence each other, both opening new perspectives and closing off others. Methodology therefore cannot be viewed in isolation, but should always be considered in its mutual relationship with the theoretical framework that is preferred and the specific theme chosen, including the particularities of the fieldwork case. The researcher, also in the role of author, moves between the corners of the triangle, carrying her or his own idiosyncrasies.

Once we add to this the four processes that changed the religious situation, the dynamics become even more impressive. Each of these processes comes with its own package of theories and sometimes also its thematic and methodological preferences. Since an exhaustive enumeration would put the authors in the role of a team of circus jugglers, condemned to keep all the balls in the air, in the concrete practice of their articles not all the ingredients of current worldview research can be honoured in a final and decisive way. Also, for that reason, the articles in this special issue cannot pretend to show the complete picture. Yet, together they give

an impression of the demands of new developments in the field of religious worldview studies.

One of these new developments is that the researchers in these articles are on the way to overcoming a classic dilemma of the insider/outsider problem in the study of religion. The insider/outsider problem raises the question of whether, and to what extent, someone can study, understand, or explain the beliefs, the world-views, the words and actions of religious “others.” The dilemma is whether one chooses to become an insider, tries to enter into the experiences and meanings of the religious “other,” and get access to the most inner life of religion, or whether one prefers to be an outsider and tries to give an “objective” explanation for religious phenomena, on the basis of the idea that religion as a human activity can be explained in non-religious terms (cf. McCutcheon, 1999: 1–10). From the texts in this issue we may discern that this dilemma is cast in too simple terms.

From the article on religious experience (*Roeland and Versteeg*) and the article on religious ritual (*Knibbe, Van der Meulen and Versteeg*) one may learn that participation in religious groups and ritual practices can deliver fruitful insights into, for instance, the social nature and the disciplinarian tendencies in religious groups. We do not wish to suggest that by their participation the researchers are joining in the hearts and minds of religious people: one does not necessarily bridge the gap between the researching subject and the religious subject, making “the other” his or hers very own object. For these qualitative researchers it is clear that their participation in religious actions presupposes that both parties, researchers and believers, signify the ritual as a meaningful event in their own ways, making it possible for each party to give different meanings to the ritual. On the other hand, one may learn from the articles that, relative to the “object” under study, there are different levels of researchers’ participation in religion. Participation by the researcher may, relative to the object under study, vary from participation in religious rituals (as *Knibbe, Van der Meulen and Versteeg* indicate) to existential understanding of narratives (*Hummel* on modern artists), complicity in social communication (*Knibbe* in understanding the gossip of Catholic believers), or to being a partner in religious organization and having affinity with a religious worldview (*Bartels, de Koning, and Koning* on research into Western Islam).

The Articles

We conclude this introduction by summarizing the articles. Exploring at least one illustrative short case study, each article offers a reflection, both theoretically and ethnographically, on one of the five themes under discussion: experience, ritual, language, morals and identity. To the degree that they are relevant, the four

processes mentioned above – individualization, migration, secularization and globalization – receive due attention, though not necessarily all at the same time. The authors suggest a matching research design and method, including a discussion of the choice for qualitative approaches. Questions of subjectivity and intersubjectivity are also discussed.

The article on *experience*, by Roeland and Versteeg, addresses the processes of deinstitutionalization and individualization, since these processes increased the opportunities for the experiential dimension of religion. They avoid the pitfall of limiting the study of experience to the individual level. In their view the social and political dimensions are to be included, despite individualizing tendencies. Religious experience, even of the authentic type, is socially constructed. Focusing on subjectivization, they also apply this insight to the debate around the concept of spirituality. This view has consequences for the methodological choices that are to be made. Through the case study of a meditation course they show how the dual social and individual construction of experience can be uncovered in fieldwork.

The article on *ritual practice*, by Knibbe, Van der Meulen and Versteeg, focuses on the question of what participation in ritual praxis “delivers” for research of religion. The authors demonstrate that being a participant in rites may enhance the understanding of social processes in the group of believers who are regularly involved in ritual. Experiencing the emotional and physical sensations that often accompany ritual can give the researcher a clue as to the experience of other participants. The authors discuss the tendency in ritual studies to objectify ritual phenomena as parts of a symbolic network, while thereby overlooking the experiential meaning of ritual. The authors envision a methodology for the study of religious ritual which consists of going from insider to outsider to insider again.

The contribution on *language* is the most interdisciplinary of the five articles, as it is written from the double perspective of literary studies and anthropology. In her analysis of worldview language as used by artists and writers, Hummel seeks to enrich anthropological qualitative analysis of life histories by showing how language students study and interpret narrative discourse. Individualization, fragmentation and secularization are the modernization processes that stand out in her approach. Artists and writers pose as authentic individual meaning-makers *par excellence*, exploring the frontiers of signification. Interestingly the majority of the respondents use their discourse to emphasize the inchoate nature of life, rather than presupposing coherence and consistency. Despite the strong individualism of the artists and writers, Hummel distinguishes four types of worldview language, thus showing that her research group obeys supra-individual tendencies, despite the confessed uniqueness of the life stories and worldviews presented. Here again the individualizing tendency is shown to have a social and cultural component.

This is also visible in the role model that artists and writers present to others in a de-churched society. She also pays attention to the ways in which the researcher establishes rapport with this type of interviewee.

The *morals* theme is discussed in this issue from the perspective of Kim Knibbe's fieldwork in the south of the Netherlands in a predominantly Catholic environment. Knibbe draws attention to three aspects of her research that were crucial for understanding how moral orientations changed and the role of religion in these changes: the role of gossip and secrets, the stories about failing priests, and the ways the image of the "Other" is constructed in liberal Catholicism. At first sight, it seems counter-intuitive to take gossip seriously, or to include individual secrets in a general analysis. However, during Knibbe's research it became clear that any kind of analysis of the role of religion in moral orientation would not be complete without these suppressed genres of speech. The underlying motif in her approach is the effort to go beyond an individualizing methodology, calling attention to the social roots of individually experienced phenomena, especially the clergy's former moral dominance. In describing her methodology, she shows how a researcher becomes complicit in the social processes involving secrets and gossip, and subsequently how writing about this can come to feel like a long series of small betrayals. This leads to a discussion of the ethical considerations involved in doing research.

The last article in this special issue focuses on *identity*, taking it from the perspective of the researched as well as that of the researcher. In fact, identity has become part of the vocabulary of the faithful, in this case Muslims. The authors suggest that the interaction between researcher and the people he or she studies is instrumental in constructing the identities of fieldworkers and the persons studied. They also show that the wider context of a multicultural society, including the sometimes dramatic events taking place in it, weighs heavily on the process of identity definition. The influence of migration and globalization is taken into account, especially the resulting politicization of Islam. The dynamics of these processes are made visible in the three cases the authors describe and in their identity construction as researchers. The delicate margin between the roles of insiders and outsiders, between participation and observation, is illustrated by the three cases, focusing respectively on the roles of consulting partner, believer and youth worker.

Reference

McCutcheon, Russell T., ed. 1999. *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*. London and New York: Cassell.