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**Is the critical, academic study of the Bible inextricably bound to the  
destinies of theology?**

Uehlinger, Christoph

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**OPEN-MINDEDNESS IN THE  
BIBLE AND BEYOND**

**A Volume of Studies in Honour of Bob Becking**

**Edited by Marjo C. A. Korpel and Lester L. Grabbe**

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# IS THE CRITICAL, ACADEMIC STUDY OF THE BIBLE INEXTRICABLY BOUND TO THE DESTINIES OF THEOLOGY?

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In den seltensten Fällen passen institutionelle Organisation einerseits und Struktur des wissenschaftlichen Arbeitens zusammen – allein schon deshalb, weil die Organisation meist eine Problembearbeitung zum Ausdruck bringt, die bereits überholt ist, aber auch deshalb, weil viele sachfremde Bedingungen des Umfelds die Gestaltungsmöglichkeiten bestimmen. Deshalb ist es gut, wenn man gelegentlich über die Bücher geht und überlegt, ob man die Organisationsform nicht einer neuen Problemlage anpassen sollte.<sup>1</sup>

## *Introduction*

Readers of this volume in honour of Bob Becking might have raised eyebrows at the title of this contribution. Why, one may ask, should the critical, academic study of the Bible be inextricably linked to theology – since the Bible as an object of study, while enjoying a special status in Christian (and, somewhat differently, in Jewish) theology, can well be addressed as literature, as a product of history, a monument of language and language history (from Hebrew and Greek to modern translations), a cultural artefact (indeed an ancient library of sorts, transmitted over many centuries), a medium serving various purposes in religion (from ritual to doctrinal), an intellectual resource and inspiration for the arts (literature,

1. Stolz 1998: 173 (= 2004: 304). ET: 'A match between an institution on the one hand and the structure of academic work on the other is a rarity – not only because the institution usually represents a kind of problem-solving mechanism that is already obsolete, but also because many extraneous conditions determine the opportunities for creativity. Therefore, it is good to occasionally reconsider the situation and ask whether the structure of the organization ought not to be adapted to a changed set of challenges.'



visual arts, music ...) and popular culture (film, comics ...), an explicit or implicit referent for educated social discourse (in philosophy, ethics, politics, economics ...), etc., etc.? The Bible, one should think when considering this non-exhaustive list, *must* concern academic fields and disciplines as diverse as languages and literature, history from ancient to modern, religious studies (whether comparative or tradition-focused), art history, cultural and media studies, musicology, the history and sociology of knowledge, etc.

To be sure, the study of the Bible is also an important, if not always an essential part of Hebrew Studies, Jewish Studies, 'Ancient Studies', disciplines taught in many universities around the world. From the perspective of these disciplines, the title question may easily be answered by the negative. It seems to make no sense at all in academic contexts where 'Biblical Studies' (the critical, academic study of the Bible *par excellence*) represent a full-fledged discipline of its own. Wherever the Bible is studied in the framework of one of these disciplines, within or alongside departments of Jewish Studies, Ancient History or Religious Studies/Comparative Religion,<sup>2</sup> this is usually done in a Faculty of Humanities and/or Letters and most often (though not exclusively) in a secular environment. Such is the case, for instance, in many universities in Israel, the USA, Australia, South Africa and other countries (including in Britain, especially in recent years). Whatever future these disciplines may have in their various contexts, it does not seem to be directly related to the destinies of theology.

### *The Place of Biblical Studies in Europe*

The situation is different, however, in most countries of Western, Central and Eastern Europe, where the critical, academic study of the Bible is, as a rule, closely if not exclusively linked to faculties and institutes of Christian (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant...) theology. Wherever theology has a place in public, state-run universities, the critical study of the Bible is a major, indeed foundational, theological discipline. It stands to reason that this peculiar arrangement is a European characteristic.

The reasons for this institutional arrangement are first of all historical: academic biblical studies first developed in Europe (Sæbø 2008); they did so out of Humanist *Philologia Sacra*, the philological study of Holy Scripture (*Sacra Scriptura*), that is the Old and New Testament to which Christian religion and theology attribute special, though not exclusive, quality in revelation. (More softly stated, this could also be termed the Bible's hermeneutical quality and significance for theology, the Church and the faithful.) Biblical philology (soon to be joined by antiquarianism, then supplemented by history, archaeology, epigraphy, etc.) was and still is thought by many to be the critical, scholarly starting-point for biblical (theological) exegesis, that is, an adequate understanding of the Bible's message for the contemporary reader (however one wishes to define the criteria of

2. See below, note 7, on terminology.

adequacy, which may range from philological and historical criticism to homiletic appropriation).

To be sure, throughout European intellectual history the Bible has rarely been studied and interpreted in isolation, at least among critical scholars. Scholars have placed it alongside non-Christian, even non-religious, works of literature or philosophy since Renaissance humanism.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as mentioned above, the Bible has long been an object of interest and intellectual curiosity far beyond religious circles, and one can hardly exaggerate the importance it has held in erudite discussions in European sciences, arts, letters, etc. from the fourteenth century to the modern period. This notwithstanding, the critical, academic study of the Bible as organized and institutionalized in (Western, Central, Eastern) European universities has, to the best of my knowledge, never developed into a fully autonomous, self-contained academic discipline ('Biblical Studies'), nor has it been consistently approached as an independent sub-field of other disciplines than theology.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned, this seems to be a European characteristic.

One *could* imagine alternative institutional arrangements, in which the study of the Bible would be based on an exclusively secular, philological, historical and culture-critical endeavour, unrelated or with no privileged connection to theology. To the best of my knowledge, however, such alternatives have rarely materialized in European universities, unless under exceptional circumstances. As a rule, the critical, academic study of the Bible flourished in Europe in close epistemic solidarity with Christian theology; in contrast, wherever some form of

3. But see below on the exclusion of the Bible from Friedrich Max Müller's *Sacred Texts of the East*, which resulted from restrictions by theologians who were eager to safeguard what they considered to be the Bible's exceptional status as Holy Scripture and normative revelation, not to be mixed up with the canonical writings of other religious traditions.

4. This statement requires qualification in view of the *European Association of Biblical Studies*, which does not particularly favour theological approaches to biblical literature. The EABS presentation on <http://www.eabs.net/site/about-overview/about-us/> welcomes a diversity of approaches and explicitly refers to areas as diverse as Archaeology, History, Hebrew Bible, Early Judaism, Talmud, New Testament, Early Christianity and Patristics. In contrast, no mention is made of theology and theologically informed approaches to the Bible. This is surprising in view of the fact that Theological Faculties probably provide the institutional background to a large part, if not the majority of EABS members. When observed from a distance, it seems that possible epistemological constraints due to actual institutional arrangements, whether secular or theological, are neither fully spelled out nor perhaps consciously reflected in EABS documents.

One may add that *study programmes* entitled 'Biblical Studies' and the like are offered as minors or majors in many European universities. However, the relevant curricula rarely represent an independent track or follow a strictly non-theological curriculum, but more often than not they consist of a more or less random selection of courses offered within the broader curriculum of biblical studies and their *Hilfswissenschaften* in Faculties of Theology. In reality, therefore, these programmes rarely represent a truly secular alternative to theology-related biblical studies.

(Christian) theology did not find its place in or was banned from public universities, biblical studies too remained virtually non-existent.

Stepping back and considering this situation from a distance, one may ask

- (a) whether the privileged conjunction of the academic study of the Bible with theology (what I consider to be a characteristically European arrangement) is *necessary* and appropriate beyond the contingencies of historical explanation;
- (b) whether it can be considered to be *beneficial* to either partner – and to other disciplines – under all circumstances; or
- (c) whether the conjunction of biblical studies and theology might also have had some *detrimental* side-effects, not least on disciplines excluded by the arrangement. One may further ask
- (d) whether such side-effects could be avoided or minimized by way of *alternative* institutional arrangements.

Is it possible, perhaps even desirable, to imagine such arrangements that would question, relativize and maybe even cancel the privileged link between the critical, academic study of the Bible and theology? Is it conceivable that such arrangements might better account especially for non-theological disciplines and interests? Our tentative, non-exhaustive listing has shown that they are numerous and cannot easily be dismissed as a *quantité négligeable*. Might such alternative arrangements perhaps be more appropriate to presently changing circumstances in academia in Europe, too, and should they therefore be encouraged?

The purpose of this paper is not to provide straightforward answers to the above-mentioned questions but to raise these questions in the first place.<sup>5</sup> My remarks would be misunderstood if read as a pamphletary call for radical change. I have no other agenda than to raise questions which, I think, are timely in view of ongoing transformations in European academia. The following reflections only want to address, by way of questions and imagination, a few possibilities and options that seem not yet to have been fully explored nor put into practice or tested, to the best of my knowledge, in our academic conversations and arrangements.

### *A Personal Remark*

Encouraged by the editors' invitation to celebrate Bob Becking's open-mindedness, my reflections are nourished by personal experience as much as by sympathy.

Personal experience because, as a former biblical scholar having spent roughly 20 years in a distinguished theological environment (the University of Fribourg's

5. Maybe the EABS (above, note 4) should organize a consultation on such questions among its members, or stage a conference where they could be debated?

very Catholic Faculty of Theology),<sup>6</sup> I find myself now teaching and researching for more than a decade in a sensibly different institutional environment. The Institute of 'Religious Studies'<sup>7</sup> of the University of Zürich (UZH), though part of the Faculty of Theology for weighty historical<sup>8</sup> and other good reasons, considers itself and is today considered by faculty and university authorities alike a distinctly non-theological entity, an enclave of sorts within the Faculty of Theology and at the same time a bridge to the Faculty of Letters, with which we entertain as much stimulating and fruitful cooperation as with our colleagues of the theological tribe.<sup>9</sup> Having changed sides in more than one respect: from a relatively small ('provincial' however 'catholic') university to a big university in a cosmopolitan city; from a Roman-Catholic to a Protestant faculty; from a discourse community where theologians form the majority, to another where I find myself in the company of historians and (post-) 'Orientalists'; from biblical studies operating within a theological framework to the methodologically agnostic study of religion(s) (History of Religions/Comparative Religion) – all this has made me experience and reflect time and again on the contingency, reality and effects of particular institutional arrangements, disciplinary boundaries and academic discourse communities.

'Sympathy' because, I am told, biblical studies and scholars working in this field in the Netherlands have been considerably affected by recent institutional realignments and drastic budgetary cuts, decided by governors for reasons that are unknown to me, but which cannot be based on a scholarly evaluation.<sup>10</sup> Be

6. See Uehlinger 2003. Although subjectively, from my own point of view, I had always understood my previous work as a Hebrew Bible scholar interested in ancient Near Eastern iconography and religion as fully compatible with a theological framework, I apparently did not succeed in making my point fully understandable (or acceptable) to some of my former colleagues.

7. Note that this notoriously ambiguous designation has been imposed on our *Religionswissenschaftliches Seminar* by an office of the central administration in charge of UZH's nomenclature. This is not the place to quibble over terminology, but my own preference goes for 'Study of Religion(s)' to designate the field or discipline, and I find my own work best reflected in 'History of Religions/Comparative Religion', which I consider as a sub-discipline of the former.

8. Stolz 1998; Uehlinger 2010.

9. Terminology here, as with 'clans' a littler earlier, is loosely indebted to Becher and Trowler 1989 (2001).

10. I shall not comment on specific developments in the Netherlands, since I lack sufficiently detailed information on their background, but I am aware that the formerly-held mixed regime, which accepted biblical studies and other philological-historical disciplines in universities run by the state but required the Churches to take charge of systematic and pastoral theology, has been disrupted. As a result, several faculties of theology with a long-standing history and excellent academic record (among them Utrecht University, an eminent member of the League of European Research Universities, as well as Leiden University) have been dissolved, hitting *de plein fouet* distinguished and internationally

it only for circumstantial reasons, then, it seems legitimate and timely to ask the question formulated in my title.

*Is the Conjunction of Biblical Studies and Theology a Necessary One?*

The first of our four questions can be quite easily answered, but the answer will depend on the point of view from which we consider the relationship. From the perspective of theology, it seems hard to conceive of this discipline without a constituent part of biblical studies. A relationship considered to be necessary is almost naturally bound to be a complicated one, since one partner's expectations risk being (or can be felt to be) imposed on the other rather than naturally looked for by him; the effects will then be inhibiting rather than stimulating, or alienating instead of strengthening one's partner.

Theological expectations may vary from doctrinal alignment through moral education to pastoral utility, none of which are regarded by critical biblical scholars as essential values that should govern their textual analysis and interpretation. On the other hand, biblical scholars who think that their critical study of the Bible should impact systematic and/or pastoral theology at all are more easily inclined to expect that theological teachings should adapt to new findings in biblical scholarship rather than the other way round. Thus the two clans of the theological community (biblical scholars and historians vs. systematic and practical theologians) each place expectations on the other to which the latter generally refuses to conform. Readers familiar with Theological Faculties know about habitual tensions between the two clans. Needless to say, sophisticated theological discourse rarely expresses this tension as straightforwardly or bluntly as I did here. But practitioners of academic theology will have recognized in this caricature situations well-known from their own experience. As a matter of fact, such tensions do occur among faculty members, or between faculty members and students, and cannot always be resolved.

Viewed from the opposite perspective, of biblical studies in a broader sense, the critical study of the Bible extends far beyond theology, at times to the extent that theological concerns are simply ignored. Prioritized research questions in biblical studies are concerned with language, literature, history, archaeology, culture, etc. From this perspective (which the other clan will perhaps suspect to be reductive or reductionist), the question whether biblical studies entertains an essential and necessary relationship to theology is easily answered: No.

To sum up, if theology may be a legitimate framework within which one can indeed practise critical, academic biblical scholarship, it is by no means the only framework nor a necessary one for biblical studies.

respected scholars. These transformations will not only affect theology, and biblical studies for certain, but will have considerable implications and consequences for the study of religion(s) as a whole.

*Is the Conjunction of Biblical Studies and Theology always a Beneficial One?*

Answers to this second question will again depend on one's perspective and interest. We should start by clarifying the terms: Should we consider whether the two mentioned partners (theology and biblical studies) find common or mutual benefit in their privileged interaction (or not); whether one of the two is taking advantage (or not) from interaction with the other; or whether other players might benefit (or not) from a situation of privileged interaction between the two partners mentioned?

In the first case, evaluations will vary along the same options as I have just discussed. One should also point out, however, an essential feature of theology: a self-reflective system in which two unequal partners must cooperate promises to be intellectually dynamic precisely because of potentially conflicting interests. On the one hand, systematic and practical theologians aim at exposing the meaning of Christian faith to *present-day* believers; on the other, biblical scholars (and fellow Church historians) work with historical-critical methods, employing themselves to re-connect biblical and other ancient texts to their *antique* social, cultural, literary and ideological contexts, an enterprise which produces considerable a-chronicity and estrangement. Such a situation of tension between ancient texts and modern readers represents a hermeneutic challenge and promises intellectual benefit.

Scholars who support a harmonious understanding of theology will also argue that progress in knowledge in one or another field of theology will naturally lead to the overall system's increasing complexity and sophistication, a process which academics are inclined to value as such, regardless of any particular outcome. The everyday faculty reality is of course more prosaic: as a rule, actors in one field (theology or biblical studies) are eager to impart complexity and sophistication to their own area of expertise, but they remain relatively indifferent to complexity and sophistication in a field which is not their own. Here as in any other academic discipline, selective interest and indifference are the price to pay for specialization. When observing the arena from its margins, one recognizes that there is a considerable hiatus between theological assumptions and postulates on the one hand (e.g. that the Bible is *norma normans* for Catholics, or to Protestants provides the exclusive key [*Sola Scriptura*] to faith) and the polite mutual ignorance with which members of one clan (biblical scholars and historians) consider the other (systematic and practical theologians), and vice versa. For either side it is often hard to recognize real progress in the other clan's scholarship and sub-disciplinary discourse.

This being sceptically stated, there are of course situations where findings in one field may trigger new questions, or new approaches in the other field. The necessary condition for such a thing to occur is that people on one side of the divide be aware of what happens on the other. Again, when observing the arena from a certain distance, it seems to me that biblical scholars are generally more curious about and tuned to advances in the neighbouring fields of ancient history, archaeology, ancient Near Eastern studies, Egyptology or Graeco-Roman and Hellenistic studies, linguistics, literary or cultural studies rather than to new options in systematic and pastoral theology; while colleagues of the latter fields

will devote more attention to philosophy, literature and the arts or psychology and social sciences than to biblical studies.

The third case will lead us to our next question: Consider the above-stated question from the point of view of a non-theological outsider, whether a comparative historian of religion, a historian *tout court*, an archaeologist, a scholar in literature, a psychologist, sociologist or anthropologist. He or she will be aware that colleagues from the theological faculty labour fields that remain untilled and unploughed in his or her own faculty. They will be ready to assume that there is much to be gained from critical interaction and interdisciplinarity. But cooperation across faculty boundaries often confirms the expectation that questions, methods and answers produced in theological discourse (regardless of which discipline is involved) differ – in ways which colleagues external to theology often find hard to define – from what they are used to in their own discipline and faculty, for better or for worse.

### *Detrimental Side-effects of the Conjunction of Biblical Studies and Theology*

Although interdisciplinary exchange is greatly facilitated by new media technologies (for instance, access to electronically published journals regardless of physical obstacles such as discrete institute libraries), one may ask whether the tradition-honoured and characteristically European conjunction of biblical studies with theology has not also produced a number of side-effects which should be criticized on scientific and academic grounds.

The most blatant example of such a side-effect known to me is related to the so-called *Konfessionsklausel* applied in German and Austrian universities, according to which a biblical scholar (but this also holds for any other theological sub-discipline) applying for a faculty position must belong to the 'correct' confessional denomination. Is not this a perfectly irritating criterion which has nothing to do with intrinsically academic standards and which can lead to openly absurd situations when it comes to filling a position in, say, biblical archaeology or in History of Religion(s)? Equally unacceptable from an academic point of view is the fact that Church authorities of whatever level (whether the provincial authorities of a cantonal Church in Switzerland or officers with global authority operating in a Vatican prefecture) should participate in (be it only to confirm) the choice of faculty. Such situations undermine the academic credibility and reputation of theology and biblical studies, and they should not be tolerated in public universities whose exclusive referent must be the search for critical knowledge in an open, pluralist and democratic society.

I may add that another detrimental side-effect is, luckily, in decline: When the canons of theological disciplines and their respective *Hilfswissenschaften* were fixed in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and as a result of increasing specialization and disciplinary differentiation within Faculties of Letters and Humanities, the study of biblical languages (Hebrew, Greek, often Syriac and other 'Oriental', usually Near Eastern, languages) was allotted to biblical studies wherever these existed at university level. As a result, biblical philology was somehow disconnected, by



faculty divide, from other ancient Near Eastern philologies, but also from so-called 'Classical' (Greek and Latin) philology. Since language skills (grammar, lexicon, etc.) and comparative linguistics are fundamental to any philological discipline, scholars working in biblical and cognate philologies soon came to compensate for the divide through individual cooperation. Still, the very fact that so-called 'Biblical Hebrew' or 'New Testament Greek' is usually taught in Faculties of Theology rather than among cognate philologies in the Faculty of Letters remains an oddity.

Even more problematic, the history of Canaan/Israel/Palestine from the late second millennium to the Late Roman period has been treated for decades by biblical scholars in an enclave largely detached from general history – a situation which has been and continues to be detrimental to both sides. I do not have to recall here how difficult it was for the 'history of ancient Israel and Judah' to free itself from the biblical master narrative. Nor will I have to stress that theoretical advances in general history (*Geschichtstheorie*) have often taken decades and generations to be received in biblical scholarship.

Archaeology, to take an even more striking example, has long remained in Palestine/Israel an enterprise of Bible-driven scholars and institutions – many of them amateurs rather than professionals in terms of archaeological technique. 'Biblical archaeology' thus evolved largely disconnected from other Mediterranean archaeologies until only a few decades ago. If things have undoubtedly improved over the last 40 years or so, this is due to two main factors: first, the rise in Israel of secular, non-theological research institutions concerned with Israel's 'national' history and archaeology; second, the growing inclusion, within non-theological departments of history, languages and literature, of research topics that had formerly been reserved to Faculties of Theology.

Let me conclude this collection of grievances by pointing out a field where the insulation of biblical scholarship operating in theological environments can be felt drastically in another way which, from a scholarly point of view, is unsatisfactory: the special field of the history of ancient Levantine religion, which includes the religion of 'ancient Israel and Judah'. Having been involved in research in this field in my former academic position as a biblical scholar, I noticed in hindsight, having moved to *Religionswissenschaft* (or, more focused, History of Religions/Comparative Religion), how relatively little mutual awareness and conversation exists between the religio-historical study of ancient Israel/Palestine in 'biblical times' and other fields of comparative religious studies, both materially and theoretically. As a result, scholarship on the history of ancient Levantine religion usually privileges ancient 'Israelite' religion more than anything else – because of theological prejudice and of its putative link to the Bible (and ultimately, to 'credal Israel'); but the very notion of what should be looked for and construed as 'religion' in 'ancient Israel' is actually more indebted to Christian, Protestant concepts of belief than to ancient material evidence; and much of this research has developed with hardly any reference to anthropological, cultural and social theory.<sup>11</sup>

11. Remarkable exceptions to the rule have been published recently, and most recent studies and syntheses are now taking care to consistently relate material data to theory.



*Crossing Borders: The Bible in the Study of Religion(s) – Systemic Ignorance?*

I should not, however, put all the blame for this unfortunate situation on biblical scholars and the relative handicap of working within theological environments. As a matter of fact, the great divide between biblical studies (as practiced in privileged conjunction with theology) and the History of Religions/Comparative Religion has a detrimental effect on the latter discipline as well. All too often the History of Religions (not to speak of *Religionswissenschaft* in the broader sense) evidences a startling ignorance of the material sources, conceptual problems, sophisticated methods and historical hypotheses debated in contemporary critical biblical scholarship. Fairness of judgement demands that we acknowledge this ignorance to be mutual; as a matter of fact, it is detrimental to the quality of academic scholarship performed by scholars of either tribe.

The modern academic discipline called History of Religions (or ‘Science of Religion’ in the words of Friedrich Max Müller, himself a major representative of the Orientalist philological tradition<sup>12</sup>) developed through dissociation from theological *Philologia Sacra*, applying the latter’s methods to religious writings of various ‘world religions.’<sup>13</sup> Müller, the founder and general editor of a large collection of translated writings entitled *Sacred Books of the East*,<sup>14</sup> had initially planned to include the Bible in his enterprise but was fiercely opposed on this project by fellow theologians.

Since its disciplinary establishment as an independent academic discipline in the late nineteenth century, the History of Religions stresses its non-theological and non-confessional character. Having been established against theology by Orientalists, History of Religions largely lost sight of the Bible, which in turn became a kind of hostage controlled by theology. It comes as no surprise that History of Religions, according to my experience, largely ignores research and recent advances in the study of ‘ancient Israelite’ religion, since historians of religion rarely develop specific expertise in this particular field of studies. Even more detrimental, biblical studies are sometimes wrongly suspected by practitioners of *Religionswissenschaft* to be confessionally inhibited per se, or the Bible to be the ultimate origin of all Christocentric and Eurocentric prejudice.

The academic labour division which keeps the Bible away from comparativists and historians of religions (and vice versa ...) seems to have gone almost unquestioned when the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* occupied a prominent position in biblical scholarship.<sup>15</sup> While being clearly conversant with religio-historical research performed at the time in other fields of ancient studies (especially Classical Philology, Assyriology and Egyptology), this particular approach to the Bible and its re-evaluation of the ‘myth of salvation’ represented a rather

12. On Müller see Van den Bosch 2002.

13. Another unfortunate concept which still seems to appeal to some theologians but has long been banned from the vocabulary of the study of religion(s): see Masuzawa 2005.

14. Müller 1879–1910 (repr. 2001).

15. Note the subtitle in Lüdemann 1996.

disputed development *within theology*. As far as I can see, it only marginally affected the academic community beyond theology, and its impact on the History of Religions tribe remained limited.<sup>16</sup> Of course, one should not forget Rudolf Otto who, together with other prominent phenomenologists, marks an important intersection in the history of both theological and religio-historical scholarship. However, while Otto's legacy can still be celebrated among theologians, historians of religion have long since considered the work of Otto and other fellow phenomenologists a problem rather than a promise for their discipline.

We must recognize of course that biblical scholars, especially those specializing in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, have generally been most inclined among theologians, by sheer professional necessity, to deal with non-Christian and non-Jewish religion(s). They have been eager to learn about ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Western Semitic or Greek and Roman religion. But their qualified interest in neighbouring fields notwithstanding, European biblical studies have continued to develop within relatively restrictive disciplinary confines.

### *Religion in the Academy of Managers*

Academic studies in religion(s) are presently undergoing profound transformations in many countries around the globe,<sup>17</sup> and certainly so in Western Europe.<sup>18</sup> Transformations include attempts to relocate (confessional) theology in state-run universities and/or to redefine theology's relation to other ways of studying Christian and other religion(s). Such transformations are not always imposed on the academic community from the outside: I know of several cases where creative reorganization and realignment resulted from self-conscious initiatives on behalf of those first concerned,<sup>19</sup> while in other situations, state or university authorities have pressed the faculties concerned toward change but still left them some *marge de manoeuvre* to conceive what transformation would be acceptable from their own point of view within certain parameters. More often than not, however, transformations were imposed from outside on other than scientific grounds, the basic compulsory requirement being shrinkage and budgetary reduction

16. Submission deadlines prevented me from further investigating this issue, hence this all too brief statement which is open to revision.

17. For recent overviews on the field worldwide, see Alles 2007; Casadio and Prandi 2009.

18. On the study of religion(s) in Western Europe, see the extraordinarily informative overview by Stausberg 2007; 2008; 2009.

19. For instance, the Faculty of Theology of the University of Lausanne has recently undergone profound mutations and is now the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. The terminological and institutional arrangement has parallels, e.g. in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

in conjunction with a thorough remodelling of academia according to internationally defined European rules.<sup>20</sup>

One does not need to be a diviner to recognize one new feature in recent transformative processes, when compared to earlier reforms: economic, political and managerial considerations and arguments are today frankly outspoken, not hidden as they often used to be in the past behind an elegant veil of academic ideals, epistemological principles or moral values. There are many good reasons, from a humanistic scholar's perspective, to regret the ongoing managerial revolution in academia. But the fact that economic and managerial arguments are made crystal-clear and transparent should in my view be positively valued (which is not to say that I always find them convincing). As a matter of fact, it is today considered legitimate and has become perfectly acceptable in both public and even academic discourse to state that scientific research, and the production and transmission of knowledge in state-run institutions of higher education, particularly universities, should be subjected to economic, organizational, bureaucratic, legal and political rules: that is, society-related considerations which are non-intrinsic, often unrelated and sometimes contrary to the scholarly subject matter. To use a system-theoretical terminology (loosely borrowed from sociologist Niklas Luhmann<sup>21</sup>) while the peculiar rationality of science and scholarship ('Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft') has not yet deserted public universities, state-run public universities are today subjected to principles of governance which are obviously no longer driven by the rationality of science in the first place.

The fact that managerial power has taken over the rule should not prevent scholars from claiming that when it comes to decisions involving the critical assessment of the taxonomy of knowledge, they might know better because of their acquaintance with the subject matter, with disciplinary histories and with interdisciplinarity. However, they can no longer rely on the assumption that the models inherited from the past will go unquestioned.

### *Societal Change and Confessional Pasts*

When seen from a distance and articulated in the most neutrally detached terms possible, the above-mentioned processes of change in academia seem linked in no small proportion to a decrease of esteem, among contemporary decision-makers, for what academic tradition (not least in the Netherlands) used to call 'pure knowledge' and 'fundamental research', that is, research leading to knowledge which is thought to have an intrinsic value and significance and cannot be immediately applied to some useful end. In the case of research on religion(s), one may further observe a growing tendency of European and national funding agencies

20. A special issue of *Religion* (Engler and Stausberg 2011) is entitled 'Crisis and Creativity: Opportunities and Threats in the Global Study of Religion's'. Stausberg specifically addresses 'The Bologna process and the study of religion's in (Western) Europe' (187–207).

21. Luhmann 1992.

to favour projects with a recognizable and more or less immediate social pay-off. Such research is certainly valuable in its own terms and should be encouraged in its own right; being more akin, however, to social engineering (and hence, to the disciplining and domestication of societies increasingly pressured, e.g., by public debate on migration and multiculturalism) than to the production of meaningful knowledge as such, one should not favour it at the expense of fundamental research since the two kinds of research clearly do not fulfil the same social function and do not respond to the same academic needs. With all due respect to colleagues studying domestic religion and religion policies in the field of social sciences, it stands to reason that the scientific study of religion(s) has, over the last two or three decades, come under the increasing pressure of utilitarian, policy-oriented considerations. As a result, more traditional research aiming at an improved knowledge of ancient societies and 'dead' languages have been increasingly marginalized in academia.

Since the above-mentioned displacements in the rational foundation of research occur in most Western European countries at the same time and at a similar pace, it also partly stands to reason that it is partly driven by the political process of European integration. Academia may have been a relatively decentralized system a generation or two ago; but with central bureaucracies operating at national levels, it is nowadays ruled by technocrats applying transnational managerial standards. It is interesting, however, to observe that change has nevertheless followed quite different, distinct ways of procedure in various European countries, depending on established political, legal and even academic structures that differ considerably from one country to another. As far as theology and religious studies are concerned, processes of change are often conditioned by existing state–church arrangements, which range from close cooperation to strict separation, and to current debates concerning publicly exposed religious minorities, their place in civil society and the role they might play within public institutions.

The processes mentioned can be observed throughout Europe, but they seem to have affected countries of Protestant tradition more than traditionally Catholic countries. In most of the latter, especially in Southern Europe (but not in Germany), a clear separation of state and church had banned theology from state universities for generations.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, many countries of Protestant tradition have long lived on state–church arrangements in which the state considered the church as an eminent guardian of public order and morality, and hence granted it considerable privileges in academia and in society at large. That theological institutes in countries with a laicized legal regime such as France or Italy seem to suffer less profound transformations today is not really surprising, since they have long been exclusively supported by their respective religious bodies anyway, with only minimal or no state involvement at all. In contrast, universities in countries where a strong Protestant tradition has long prevailed (England, Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands ... ) witness more profound challenges to and transformations of traditional institutional arrangements.

22. Again, one should not draw hasty conclusions, since Belgium presents a different case.

When viewed from a distance in a social-historical perspective (Braudel's intermediate level of history), there is a certain irony in the fact that Protestant theological faculties in once Protestant-ruled countries, which had adapted earlier and more successfully to enlightenment ideals and liberalism than Catholic faculties, to the extent of being forerunners of enlightenment and even rationalism themselves, have today come under the heaviest pressure. That not only individuals but also the institutions directly concerned should experience the loss of their historic privileges as a kind of rejection (sometimes coming close to a sentiment of being forced into an intra-societal exile) can easily be understood even by the remote observer. Such a sentiment is clearly palpable, e.g. among Protestant faculties in Switzerland which all represent a Reformed, or Calvinist (i.e. heavily rationalist and 'secularized'), form of Christian theology.

### *A German Sonderfall?*

Other circumstances hinting at relative stability seem to apply in Germany, where major churches and their faculties of theology still enjoy a particularly privileged situation buttressed by fundamental state law. Interestingly enough, the questioning of historic privileges thus takes a different trajectory in Germany: Instead of Catholic or Protestant denominational faculties of theology being pressured or suppressed, Jewish and Muslim collectivities invoke constitutional rights in order to obtain similar rights and establish new faculties or institutes of Jewish or Islamic theology. Supported by the German *Wissenschaftsrat*, this claim has led to the consolidation or establishment of a Jewish Faculty of Theology at Potsdam, and of Institutes of Islamic theology at several universities (Erlangen, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Münster, Tübingen ...). This development in Germany is contrary to what happens in most other European countries, where state authorities tend rather to disenfranchise themselves from historic obligations towards churches and confessional theologies, and it is arguably motivated more by political interests and social engineering processes than by academic, let alone scientific, reasons.

From a European perspective, the institutional status and organizational arrangements of Christian theology in Germany represent a kind of *Sonderfall*: Faculties of Theology enjoy a special protection by constitutional law and operate on the basis of special contractual obligations and commitments between the Federal State and the major national Churches. I will not go into the problematic history of this arrangement, but viewed from the outside, this regime which seems to be almost immune to organizational innovation looks so peculiar that it cannot per se provide a model for other European countries. Nor should it, in my view, be regarded as a model in the first place. This is a regime which anachronistically sanctifies social exceptionalism and protectionism of Christian religion and theology in a way that openly contradicts the values of modern, pluralistic democracies and finds itself in regular tension with intrinsically scientific and academic standards.

Interestingly enough, it is in Germany where such historic privileges subsist (but for how long?), preserving academic theologies in a protectionist environment, that the discourse about a fundamental incompatibility of theology vs. the non-confessional study of religion(s) remains the most vivid and often takes a quite polemical tone. Such polemics are not without a *fundamentum in re*, since protectionist interests and attitudes have as a matter of fact, under those particular German circumstances, prevented the self-composed development of non-confessional studies of religion(s), a development that seems to be called for by growing pluralism and would certainly be in tune with a profoundly changed place of religion in present-day societies, in Germany as much as in other European countries.

Turning to biblical scholarship, I do not question the fact that German scholars have long played (and some continue to play) a leading role in international biblical research. But a constitutionally privileged system does not produce high-quality results per se and quasi-automatically, and there is no guarantee that it will continue to do so under currently changing social, political, economic and (perhaps) legal circumstances. When viewed from a distance, German biblical scholarship currently benefits from an unbalanced protectionist regime. Needless to say, such a regime does not invite young scholars interested in the comparative History of Religions to invest their future in biblical studies, as long as the latter are exclusively linked to Faculties of Theology. It is hard to predict how long this peculiar regime will endure; but people in charge of universities in other countries should not consider German exceptionalism as a model for future policy-making.

Can we learn from the German *Sonderfall* in a way that will not take it as a model but as an example of institutional arrangements that should *not* be followed in the future?

### *Who will Care for Critical, Academic Biblical Studies in the Future?*

Who then, we may ask, will care for (and take care of) the critical, academic study of the Bible and of 'ancient Israelite' religion in European state-run universities if theology comes increasingly under pressure? I wonder whether the potential of a 'strategic alliance' of sorts between biblical studies and the non-confessional study of religion(s) has been sufficiently explored in recent discussions and organizational realignments.<sup>23</sup> Such an alliance would bring together two new 'partners' who do not have much experience in common academic endeavours but are rather used to keeping distance between each other. An alliance would probably require major intellectual moves on behalf of both partners: on the one hand, the recognition by biblical scholars that their traditional close relationship to theology may be a feature that, in state-run universities, belongs to the past, and that they have much to gain from academic cooperation with the non-confessional study of

23. Such an alliance, in some form or other, seems already to have been taking place in many UK universities over the past two or three decades.

religion(s).<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, History of Religions will have to recognize its own blind spots, which are as I suggested a project of past alignments and processes of disciplinary consolidation. In my personal view and experience, ignorance of biblical studies and of current research in the history of 'ancient Israelite' religion is a major blind spot in the History of Religions as practised today in European countries. It may well be that if either side is ready to acknowledge its blind spots and deficiencies, and the detrimental effects of past organizational alignments and epistemic solidarities on the disciplines concerned, another future might be considered which would be one of partnership rather than dissociation.

I am personally convinced that an open, liberal and democratic, pluralist and multicultural society must preserve an intellectual space (and hence, some spare resources) for critical, academic research on ancient Near Eastern, Mediterranean, Jewish, Christian, Manichaeic and other religions' connected and entangled histories. Such research may be performed by theologians where no secular alternative is at hand, but the open society should also reserve more space for the non-confessional study of religion(s). This being stated, it will probably belong to another generation of scholars to discuss the terms of such a new partnership. The best that our generation can offer them in the process is open-mindedness.

24. Colleagues from biblical studies regularly claim that what they are doing is not any different from a historian of religion's work. But I do not encounter them at international meetings of professional historians of religion. Is not that one aspect of the problem?



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