



Imagining the future study of religion and spirituality

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

To cite this article: Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2020) Imagining the future study of religion and spirituality, Religion, 50:1, 72-82, DOI: [10.1080/0048721X.2019.1681103](https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2019.1681103)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2019.1681103>



© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 20 Nov 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4593



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 5 View citing articles [↗](#)

Imagining the future study of religion and spirituality

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

Faculty of Humanities, History of Hermetic Philosophy, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands


ABSTRACT

Having learned many useful lessons from the movement of deconstruction over the previous decades, it is high time for our discipline to move forward and begin *reconstructing* the study of religion as a whole on new and better foundations. If we want to have our voices heard and have an impact on the wider public debate instead of being marginalized and defunded as irrelevant, we need a positive and convincing, even inspiring new narrative about religion that demonstrates its great importance not just to societal but to general human concerns. The article outlines one possible direction for such a new narrative, focusing on the key terms ‘experience,’ ‘consciousness,’ ‘imagination,’ and ‘spirituality.’ Far from implying a new kind of religionism along the lines of the Eranos or Eliade schools, this means that we should move such topics out of the taboo sphere for secular scholars and reclaim them for critical non-religionist methods and approaches.

KEYWORDS

Study of religion; deconstruction; grand narratives; religious experience; imagination; spirituality

It may be a truism that the future of the study of religion in the academy cannot be considered apart from the future of the humanities and the social sciences. *That* future, in turn, obviously cannot be considered apart from the future of higher education; and of course, the latter is ultimately inseparable from the very future of human culture and civilization as a whole. To frame the problem in such a comprehensive manner might perhaps seem unnecessary or exaggerated at first sight, but actually means following in the footsteps of all the original classical founders of our discipline. None of them were modest in their intellectual ambitions and most of them were inspired by a deep concern about where human culture and civilization as a whole were going or should be going. This is true regardless of who one might want to pick as one’s personal favorite: whether we think of Edward B. Tylor, Friedrich Max Müller, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Mircea Eliade, Clifford Geertz, or Jonathan Z. Smith (to give just a few examples), none of the major pioneers and leading scholars in our field were thinking of the study of religion as a somewhat limited pursuit for specialists who just happen to have a personal fascination for religion. On the contrary, they typically saw the field in much broader terms and considered it to be no less than *essential* for any adequate understanding of the history of human culture and society as such. The first point I would like to make is that somehow,

CONTACT Wouter J. Hanegraaff  W.J.Hanegraaff@uva.nl

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

our field seems to have lost touch with that original ambition and that original agenda. Most of us have become much more modest than we should be. Too often, we already seem satisfied if our department is spared in the latest round of budget cuts and reorganizations so that we're allowed to survive a bit longer. It would seem that few of us today still believe what the founders of our discipline believed: not just the modest proposition that the study of religion should have a right to exist, but rather, that it is and should be *front and center* in the study of the humanities and the social sciences because human culture and civilization are simply incomprehensible without a deep understanding of religion.

Our public absence

Against this background, I find it deeply ironic to observe how many highly influential public intellectuals from *other* disciplines than ours in fact insist, much more than we do, on the absolute centrality of religion to human culture and civilization. I will give just a few examples. In a mega-bestseller that has given him direct access to politicians and decision-makers on the highest level world-wide, the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari places the human capacity for inventing fictional religious narratives at the center of the cognitive revolution that made human civilization possible (Harari 2014). However, his ambitious concept of religions as 'imaginary orders' makes no explicit reference to current scholarship in religion and would seem to be his own invention (a very good one, as I will be arguing below, regardless of one's opinion about other aspects of his work).

Some years earlier, the American philosopher and militant atheist Daniel Dennett made large sales arguing that 'Breaking the Spell' of religion over the human mind is absolutely necessary if we wish human civilization to progress from superstition to science. In his own words, he could think of 'no more important topic to investigate' than religion (Dennett 2006, 7, 14–15). Nevertheless, his actual familiarity with advanced research in the cognitive study of religion turned out to be insufficient, partly because of his open contempt for the 'dreary aura of low prestige, backbiting, and dubious results' that he associated with the academic study of religion (Dennett 2006, 33–34; Geertz 2008, 10–11).

At this very moment, the Canadian psychologist Jordan B. Peterson is attracting enormous audiences – and enormous amounts of criticism – with a psychological and educational message grounded in Jungian and Eliadian 'Eranos' traditions about the indispensability of archetypal myths and symbols to the human search for meaning (Peterson 1999). Trained as a psychologist in the cognitive-behaviorist tradition, Peterson does not seem to realize or care that these 'religionist' approaches are very much out of touch with current critical scholarship in the study of religion.

Finally, another media darling, the feminist art historian Camille Paglia, has been repeating for decades now that the comparative study of religion should be the central core curriculum in the humanities (Paglia 2018, 547, 566, 567–573); however, her understanding of comparative religion comes clearly from her 1960s and 70s education and bears little resemblance to the poststructuralist and deconstructionist approaches that have become increasingly dominant in our field, and that she heartily dislikes.

So what we have here is a historian, a philosopher, a psychologist, and an art historian. Of course the list could be expanded easily. Each one of these authors makes impressive book sales and commands the attention of popular audiences at a scale of which scholars

in the academic study of religion can only dream. As none of them is a specialist in ‘the study of religion’ as understood by readers and contributors to *Religion*, nothing is easier for us than to dismiss much of what they have to say about religion as the opinions of well-meaning amateurs who just aren’t familiar with what the study of religion is *really* all about – as we do! It seems to me that we cannot afford such an attitude. As long as we are not up there on the big podium telling a *better* story about religion and its centrality to human culture and civilization, we have absolutely no reason for arrogance or complacency. Nor should we be surprised at seeing our discipline marginalized in academia and scholars of religion losing most of the battles for media attention about our own field from theologians, scientists, or philosophers.

Like our colleagues in other fields of the humanities, as scholars of religion we do have perfectly legitimate reasons to complain about the gradual but ongoing marginalization of our discipline that is currently taking place (see e.g., British Academy report 2019). It is both easy and factually correct to put much of the blame on such important factors as the neoliberalization and corporatization of the universities, a general decline in understanding of and respect for the humanities in education and general society, or polemical attacks by rightwing media and politicians on what they enjoy portraying as a left-liberal ivory tower culture full of radical-leftist academic activists. Again, we have excellent reasons to complain about such factors, but making ourselves comfortable in the victim role is not going to do us any good. We need to examine what part we may have played in this development ourselves, and what we can do to improve our situation.

On having a story to tell

In my opinion, the most urgent question that we need to ask ourselves is a very simple one: *what is our story?* For about three to four decades now, in the study of religion as in the humanities more generally, we have seen a very strong drive towards deconstructing all metanarratives and exposing any claims of ‘knowledge’ as veiled ideological moves that are ultimately not about the intellectual search for truth (which, after all, is metaphysical and hence illusory, so the argument goes) but about social battles for hegemony and power. I am obviously aware of the extreme intellectual complexity of these issues and grateful for many valuable insights that we owe to various poststructuralist, deconstructionist and related approaches (whether we choose to call them ‘postmodern’ or prefer to reject that label in favor of some alternative terminology). However, it is time to ask the question that Kevin Schilbrack placed on the table some years ago: *after we deconstruct ‘religion,’ then what?* (Schilbrack 2013). It seems to me that the answer should be obvious: *reconstruct* it, of course! (Hanegraaff 2016) We can and should take into account what we have learned from deconstructionist critiques directed at previous constructs; but having learned those lessons, it is high time for us now to move beyond deconstruction towards a positive and convincing new narrative about religion and its importance to the humanities, to culture, and to society. That this is far from easy is an obvious understatement. Nevertheless, if we cannot find our way towards such a narrative, or (worse) if we think we *should* not have one, then let us not be surprised and let us not complain if wider audiences, politicians, or policy makers conclude that, by our very own admission, we have no story, nothing of great interest or importance to tell them. Let us also not be surprised

then if theologians, philosophers, or scientists of various stripes take our place to tell whatever stories *they* want to tell about religion.

If we want people to listen to us, we must have something to say, which brings me back to the question of what our story is. Why do we consider our work important? (In fact, *do* we all find it that important, really, or is it just what we happen to enjoy doing?) Why should anyone listen? Of course there will be many different answers to those questions, and they will come from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives; some of them will be mutually conflicting, and I certainly do not mean to suggest that we should all be speaking with one voice. If any new *metanarrative* is to emerge, by definition it cannot be plotted or planned in advance – otherwise it wouldn't be meta. Rather, it will have to emerge out of the free competition between various ideas and proposals within the wider context of cultural and intellectual change. For the present, it seems to me that new *narratives* rather than metanarratives will be more than sufficient. But they'd better be good. I want to propose that, in order to have any chance of success at all, they will have to satisfy at least three basic requirements: (1) they must be *positive* and *constructive*, that is to say, they must be *inspiring* in some sense; (2) they must address *humanly important issues* that have a wider resonance not just in academia but in our wider culture and society; and perhaps most important of all, (3) we ourselves must actually, really, *believe in them* ourselves. Our hearts and our souls must be in them.

As for the first point, let me quote a humorous yet serious remark by Jeff Kripal:

A few years ago, I stumbled upon the secret criterion of truth in the humanities. Do you want to hear it? Here it is: 'If a truth is to be declared in the humanities, it must meet one criterion: it must be depressing'. (Kripal 2017, 359)

The point, it seems to me, is well taken. Zooming in on our own particular field of research in the humanities: do we really have nothing uplifting and constructive to say about religion, nothing that inspires enthusiasm, nothing that invokes new perspectives and horizons to which we may aspire? Do we only know how to break down everything that came before? Could it be (as I sometimes suspect) that most of us are driven by our private personal fascination for this-or-that particular topic of research – something that we just happen to like, so that we naturally enjoy sharing it with our students – but are not *really* that enthusiastic anymore about the study of religion as such? Maybe.

As for my second point, it is simply not sufficient to deconstruct religion as a patriarchal Western-colonialist hegemonic construct invented by dead white men, as part of our laudable efforts to push liberal progressive and emancipatory agendas against right-wing or conservative opponents, imagined or real. We urgently need to have a better, more positive and constructive story to tell, not just about the 'societal relevance' of religion, but about *its human importance* in a world that is dominated increasingly by such major dehumanizing factors as (for instance) neoliberal globalization and new public management, or the evident increase of popular apocalyptic fears inspired by climate change, global corporate control, or the effects of new technologies. Human importance. Stuff that human beings find important.

The third point seems particularly relevant for younger generations of scholars who are struggling to secure funding and academic positions in an increasingly forbidding or even hostile environment. Counter-intuitive as it might seem at first sight (some may even find it absurd), we must be perfectly honest about the fact that studying religion or any other

field in the humanities is *not* about making smart career choices or what might look like it. Nor is it about aligning oneself strategically with whatever narrative or methodology that seems most likely to lead towards a grant or a tenure perspective, or in other words: with whatever seems hot and fashionable at the moment or whatever one's professors or supervisors think is important. We all understand those pressures – they are very real and I do not mean to minimize them in any way. Nevertheless, true creative innovation in scholarly work (or anywhere else for that matter) never comes from such external pressures, serious and intimidating as they may be, nor from strategic calculation, but only from a scholar's personal inner resources. Intellectual creativity is not a collective but an individual phenomenon, and its source is some kind of deep intellectual fascination, inner drive, conviction, or intuition. By definition, innovative thinking does not mirror and confirm the status quo. On the contrary, it challenges its assumptions with new perspectives that may well seem outrageous or even offensive to the academic establishment at first, so that they may seem risky to pursue ('will this get me a grant?'), but can effect a paradigm change if – and only if – they have true intrinsic quality and are carried by deep conviction.

Experience and consciousness

In this spirit, with an emphasis on individual creativity and its potential for innovation, what follows is a brief sketch of the general direction into which I am personally looking in my search for a new grand narrative. One of the most common, unquestioned and almost unquestionable assumptions in much of the study of religion today is that religion or religions are *discursive formations*. I certainly do not mean to contest the scholarly value of this perspective, which is quite obvious in many respects and is now well attested; I do, however, consider it to be inherently limited and potentially limiting. If we think of religion *exclusively* in terms of discursive formations we are restricting our intellectual scope while blinding ourselves to extremely important dimensions that deserve our attention. Among the chief examples in the study of religion are *practice* and *experience*. Whatever one may think Derrida has said or meant, there *is* something beyond language: the truism that we cannot speak or communicate without language does not imply that there is *nothing* beyond it. As human beings, we do not just talk about stuff – we *do* stuff and we *experience* stuff (please note that I am not making any quasi-religionist statement here to the effect that people are 'doing religion' or 'experiencing religion,' but just claim that they are doing and experiencing stuff that is deemed religious; cf. Taves 2009). As for practice – stuff we do –, at issue is not just ritual or rituals, but human practice and behavior in the broadest sense, both collective and individual. As for the dimension of experience – stuff we experience –, we cannot allow ourselves to be held hostage forever by fears of getting confused with those well-known quasi-theological and religionist approaches that approach 'the' religious experience (not to mention 'the' mystical experience) in essentialist or quasi-essentialist terms. One needs no *sui generis* assumptions to study experiential dimensions of religion empirically and bottom-up, from perspectives informed by such disciplines as psychology and cognitive studies.

It seems to me that the most promising dimension here is to focus on what used to be referred to as 'altered states of consciousness' and is now defined more commonly as 'alterations of consciousness' (Barušs 2003; Cardeña and Winkelman 2011). Precisely the most creative and innovative events and developments in religious practice and

belief seldom if ever emerge in ‘normal’ and relatively sober everyday states of consciousness. Religious revelations, inspirations, or conversions are obvious examples of ‘life-changing experiences’ that typically happen in altered states induced by conditions of strong emotional excitement, deep passion, extreme stress, or extreme relaxation. Some of these states happen spontaneously (or rather, that is how it may seem to us because the underlying causalities escape us) while others are actively induced, either intentionally or unintentionally. To give just one example, a person (perhaps his name is Muhammad, perhaps Parmenides, perhaps it is someone else entirely ...) may decide to withdraw from human society to pray and meditate in the solitary seclusion of a cave, hoping for revelations or messages from God or the gods. That is the intentional part of what will happen next. The unintentional part is that the extreme silence and extreme darkness of the cave experience – which can reach levels of intensity that are hard for us to imagine in our image/sound-saturated world – will provoke his or her brain to compensate for its condition of sensory deprivation by producing highly realistic inner visions and voices. This is no speculation but straight neuropsychology: such hallucinations will happen to all of us, whether we like it or not, if we just stay in a cave long enough (Ustinova 2009).

The person who comes out of that cave (or any other person who has experienced milder or stronger alterations of consciousness under other conditions that are known to induce such effects) is quite likely to be deeply impressed by the experience, and his or her perspective on life may well be changed forever. My point is that whatever this person will do with such an experience, in his or her religious or spiritual life, cannot be captured and understood in a framework of ‘discursive formations’ alone. The new religion that s/he might create, or the existing religion that s/he might now decide to join, involves *doing* things and *experiencing* things (or trying to make others do new things and experience new things); it does not involve just *talking* about things or being talked about by scholars or other outsiders. Furthermore, it is not just deeply cynical but profoundly misleading to suggest that ultimately, what such persons are doing must always be about social competition over power and hegemony (e.g., Hanegraaff 2012, 361–367). Such discursive and quasi-economic models in the wake of Foucault or Bourdieu may seem intuitive to a generation raised under conditions of neoliberal capitalism, but religion is more than just a market of competing ideas and ideologies. Whatever else we may consider it to be, it is something done and experienced. While the systemic logic of economic discourse (for this *is* obviously a discourse) must by necessity reduce all things to marketable commodities so that they can be talked about and sold, this does not imply that that is what they actually are. Rather, religious experiences and practices (like other humanly ‘special’ experiences or practices, for instance music or art) are valued and are considered precious to human beings because of what they have to offer in and for themselves, regardless of their market value.

Imaginative formations

For these and several other reasons, I propose we start thinking about religion not in terms of discursive formations but in terms of *imaginative formations* (Hanegraaff 2016, 2017). Religion is not just about discourse: on a more fundamental level it relies on the workings of the human imagination. Please note that this is not some neo-Romantic or neo-religionist argument that will lead us back to luminaries of the old school such as Jung, Eliade, or

Corbin; on the contrary, my proposal is based on the profound but largely forgotten legacy of eighteenth-century *Enlightenment* analysis of the imagination pioneered by such philosophers as David Hume and Immanuel Kant (see references in Hanegraaff 2017, 133–135). This largely empiricist tradition of theorizing the role of imagination in human cognition was marginalized by the advocates of a dogmatic rationalism along the lines of American and continental analytical philosophy, who were determined to exclude figurative thought from what they called ‘core meaning.’ This legacy has held us back far too long, and needs to be corrected. As noted by the pioneers of ‘blending’ theory Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, this overly rationalist bias has made us blind to the *empirical* fact that ‘imaginative operations of meaning construction ... work at lightning speed, below the horizon of consciousness’ (Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 15). They conclude that ‘the next step in the study of mind is the scientific study of the nature and mechanisms of the imagination’ (Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 8).

In a very similar way, I argue that the next step in our field should be based on recovering the role of imagination in human cognition and exploring its relevance to the study of religion. This should imply a major shift of orientation, for at present the keyword ‘imagination’ is absent from all major contemporary introductions and reference books (Hanegraaff 2017, 132; cf. Traut and Wilke 2015). If there is any truth to Yuval Noah Harari’s claim that the imaginative formations known as ‘religions’ have been central to the cognitive revolution that made human civilization possible, that insight alone should be sufficient to bring religion back to the *center* of intellectual debate and inspire new research into its continuing role in the further cognitive revolutions that we are currently experiencing as a species.

Spirituality: rebranding the discipline

Finally, it seems to me that the new narrative(s) we need in the study of religion must have a central focus not just on the modes of operation of the human imagination, but also on the relation between religion and *spirituality*. Please note that in making that argument, I use the term not in a nominal or stipulative but in a *lexical* sense (cf. Hanegraaff 2016, 581–583), i.e., according to the actual meaning that it already appears to have in contemporary common discourse. A large-scale empirical study directed by Heinz Streib and Ralph W. Hood has demonstrated that the term ‘spirituality’ is broadly understood today as referring to the practice of what they call ‘privatized, experience-oriented religion’ (Keller et al. 2013; Streib and Hood 2011, 2016). Hence it refers to types of religion that (1) are focused on the *individual* rather than the collective, (2) are concerned with the cultivation of *personal experience(s)* more than with legal or doctrinal matters, and (3) emphasize *praxis* over belief. This evidently resonates with the emphasis I already placed on experience and practice above. To be perfectly clear: of course I do not mean to suggest that we should disregard the collective, legal, or doctrinal dimensions of religion! Any such suggestion would be ridiculous. However, we may consider placing a stronger focus on individual experiential praxis as a key dimension of the imaginative formations that we refer to as ‘religions.’

Apart from its intrinsic interest, a stronger emphasis on ‘spirituality’ along such lines might allow us to develop new ways of handling one of the chief PR problem that the academic study of religion has always been struggling with and that has made it very difficult

for our field to compete successfully with more or less confessionally-oriented theological approaches. The problem is quite simply that for the general population (obviously including prospective students) it still remains the case that if one uses the word ‘religion,’ this evokes associations primarily with ‘religions’ as commonly understood by non-specialists – that is to say, with more or less church-like religious organizations (whether larger or smaller) and their collective beliefs, traditions, and practices. The effect is made worse by the fact that as a discipline, we have been wholly unsuccessful in ‘breaking the spell’ of quasi-Protestant narratives based on the misleading assumption that religion primarily means ‘belief.’ As long as this is the situation – and I do not see it changing anytime soon –, it will remain extremely difficult to explain to prospective students and the wider public that scholars of religion are doing something very different from what theologians do, that this difference is all-important, and that they might well be surprised to discover the true fascination and relevance of studying religion *once they understand what it really means*. Students usually begin to find out only when they are already in our classroom, so how do we get them there?

‘Spirituality’ may be part of the answer. Of course this term has public relations risks too, but they are of a different kind and may prove easier to address. By way of illustration, try image-googling ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’. The former term will get you many symbols that look like commercial logos for the major religions: six-pointed star, cross, crescent moon & star, wheel of rebirth, yin/yang, and so on; the latter will get you meditating people *and* lots of burning candles. This is just a small example of what I mean by emphasizing the imagination: in the words of Fauconnier and Turner quoted above, here too, ‘imaginative operations of meaning construction ... work at lightning speed, below the horizon of consciousness,’ priming the human mind for certain associations rather than others. Apparently we imagine ‘spirituality’ as a light in the darkness. We’d better take that seriously. Many established academics still have a knee-jerk reaction of resistance against the word ‘spirituality,’ out of understandable but rather outdated fears of being seen as New Agers, but prospective students seldom do. Let’s face it – whether we like it or regret it (personally I very much regret it), the fact is that ‘religion’ has *not* served us as an effective brand over the past couple of decades. It might be time for us to recognize this, get over it, and start experimenting with something different.

Conclusion

In case these last recommendations might sound like a somewhat cynical piece of commercial advice, let me finish by repeating what I wrote above. Neither ‘imaginative formations,’ nor ‘spirituality,’ nor ‘alterations of consciousness,’ nor any other new perspective will save our discipline if we opt for them out of sheer opportunism, as part of a marketing strategy for attracting more students. We need to actually believe in their value. To begin exploring such new directions, it seems to me that we must ask ourselves deep and perhaps uncomfortable questions about why it *really* is that we do what we do and why it is that we find it important. If we aren’t clear about such questions in our own mind, then we cannot be clear about them to our students and the wider public. If we do not deeply believe in the value and importance of the stories we tell, our audience will not believe in them either – and rightly so. In sum, whatever the new vision will be, it needs

to be positive, constructive, and inspiring; its human importance must be evident; and our own hearts and souls as scholars and intellectuals must be in it.

Two points of clarification

A reader of this article posed some questions that might be important to address. Firstly, this reader wondered whether my call for positive and more ‘inspiring’ or ‘uplifting’ narratives (but perhaps also, one might speculate, the simple fact that I quote Jeff Kripal, known for his ‘neo’religionist vision of the discipline: see Hanegraaff 2008 and cf. Kripal 2017, 125–131) meant that I had become a religionist of the Eliadian type! The short answer is ‘no,’ for reasons that I hope will be evident to the careful reader of this article, in which I demarcate my approach from religionism at three different occasions (note that religionist scholars for their part sometimes make the opposite mistake of confusing me with representatives of what they call the ‘externalist fallacy,’ see Hanegraaff 2018). However, the very fact that this question even gets asked is significant, because it proves exactly the point I was making with reference to the Kripal quotation: apparently, this reader did indeed take it for granted that a modern non-religionist study of religion (and research in the Humanities generally) cannot possibly be positive and inspiring but needs to be ‘depressing’... The question also illustrates another point I am trying to make: I argued that we cannot allow our discipline to be held hostage forever by fears of getting ourselves confused with such religionist *sui generis* approaches. By no means does a focus on such topics as ‘religious experience,’ ‘the imagination,’ and ‘spirituality’ need to imply a religionist agenda; on the contrary, my claim is that it’s high time we start taking such topics out of the taboo sphere for secular scholars and reclaim them for critical non-religionist methods and approaches.

A final point made by this reader concerned the perhaps surprising absence in my article of any reference to my main field of specialization, the study of esotericism. The reason is that ‘esotericism’ for me is not a separate or independent issue. Its meaning depends on our understanding of ‘religion,’ which in turn depends on our understanding of the very ‘Western culture’ that produced both concepts. Very few readers seem to have noted that my monograph *Esotericism and the Academy* (Hanegraaff 2012) is ultimately not a study of esotericism but of Western culture (see the subtitle, *Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*). My project was to deconstruct the foundational grand narratives of ‘Western culture’ as based on dogmatic theological (especially Protestant) and rationalist prejudice, showing that they have always relied on deeply ideological normative strategies of discrediting, marginalizing, suppressing, or ridiculing (and thereby creating) their discursive ‘others.’ Those various forms of ‘rejected knowledge’ were written out of the history books, dropped out of acceptable academic discourse, and banished to a disreputable no-man’s land labeled ‘esotericism’ or ‘the occult.’ The reification of this field in the academic imagination as a ‘domain of its own,’ somehow distinct from ‘religion,’ is an artifact of these very processes of othering and rejection. From this, it follows with unavoidable logic that if we now *reject these ideological rejections of rejected knowledge* (as we should), our task is not only to work hard to recover its empirical and historical contents for serious research, but also to fully *re-integrate* those materials into the new stories we are going to tell about Western culture as a whole, including those cultural domains we refer to as ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ (both Western and worldwide). Evidently this

agenda is built upon a principled rejection of the old grand narratives of Western culture; but I see no reason why it should imply the rejection of *any* grand narrative. Along similar lines, as I have argued separately (Hanegraaff 2016), the end of traditional notions of ‘religion’ (which were produced by those same dynamics of rejection and marginalization) does not need to imply the end of *any* notion of religion. The necessary work of re-integrating what used to be rejected and excluded (similar in this regard to the recovery and reintegration of various other previously marginalized dimensions in such domains as gender or race, see Hanegraaff 2019) should lead us to thoroughly *reconstruct* both ‘religion’ and ‘Western culture’ truly from the bottom up, resulting in new and better narratives built on sounder historical and empirical foundations. In short, I am making an argument for radical innovation: after the necessary phase of deconstruction must come a positive project of reconstruction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Wouter J. Hanegraaff is Professor of History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Alongside numerous articles and seven edited volumes, he is the author of *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden 1996/Albany 1998); *Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447-1500): The Hermetic Writings and Related Documents* (Tempe 2005; with Ruud M. Bouthoorn); *Swedenborg, Oetinger, Kant: Three Perspectives on the Secrets of Heaven* (West Chester 2007); *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge 2012); and *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London 2013).

References

- Barušs, Imants. 2003. *Alterations of Consciousness: An Empirical Analysis for Social Scientists*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- [The British Academy]. 2019. *Theology and Religious Studies Provision in UK Higher Education* (Report). London: The British Academy.
- Cardena, Etzel, and Michael Winkelman. 2011. *Altering Consciousness: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Vol. 1: History, Culture, and the Humanities. Vol. 2: Biological and Psychological Perspectives. Santa Barbara / Denver / Oxford: Praeger.
- Dennett, Daniel C. 2006. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. London: Penguin.
- Fauconnier, Gilles, and Mark Turner. 2002. *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Geertz, Armin W. 2008. “How Not to Do the Cognitive Science of Religion Today.” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 20: 7–21.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 2008. “Leaving the Garden (in Search of Religion): Jeffrey J. Kripal’s Vision of a Gnostic Study of Religion” (Review Article of Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Serpent’s Gift*). *Religion* 38: 259–276.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 2012. *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 2016. “Reconstructing ‘Religion’ from the Bottom Up.” *Numen* 63: 577–606.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 2017. “Religion and the Historical Imagination: Esoteric Tradition as Poetic Invention.” In *Dynamics of Religion: Past and Present* (Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und

- Vorarbeiten Bd. 67), edited by Christoph Boechinger, Jörg Rüpke, in cooperation with Elisabeth Begemann, 131–153. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 2018. “Esotericism and Criticism: A Platonic Response to Arthur Versluis.” *Creative Reading* 16 June 2018. wouterjhanegraaff.blogspot.com.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 2019. “Rejected Knowledge ... So you Mean that Esotericists are the Losers of History?” In *Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions about Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Peter J. Forshaw, and Marco Pasi, 145–152. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Harari, Yuval Noah. 2014. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. London: Harvill Secker.
- Keller, Barbara, Constantin Klein, Anne Swhajor-Biesemann, Christopher F. Silver, Ralph Hood, and Heinz Streib. 2013. “The Semantics of ‘Spirituality’ and Related Self-Identifications: A Comparative Study in Germany and the USA.” *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 35: 71–100.
- Kripal, Jeffrey J. 2017. *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Paglia, Camille. 2018. *Provocations: Collected Essays*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Peterson, Jordan B. 1999. *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*. New York: Routledge.
- Schilbrack, Kevin. 2013. “After We Deconstruct ‘Religion,’ Then What? A Case for Critical Realism.” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 25: 107–112.
- Streib, Heinz, and Ralph W. Hood. 2011. “‘Spirituality’ as Privatized Experience-Oriented Religion: Empirical and Conceptual Perspectives.” *Implicit Religion* 14: 433–453.
- Streib, Heinz, and Ralph W. Hood Jr., eds. 2016. *Semantics and Psychology of Spirituality: A Cross-Cultural Analysis*. Heidelberg: Springer.
- Taves, Ann. 2009. *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Traut, Lucia, and Annette Wilke. 2015. “Einleitung.” In *Religion – Imagination – Ästhetik: Vorstellungs- und Sinneswelten in Religion und Kultur*, edited by Lucia Traut, and Annette Wilke, 17–73. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Ustinova, Yulia. 2009. *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.