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# PLURALISM AND IDENTITY
## STUDIES IN RITUAL BEHAVIOUR

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INTRODUCTION

# RITUAL RESPONSES TO PLURALITY AND PLURALISM

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## *The origin of this book*

The studies collected in this volume were presented as papers at an international conference in Leiden University on 14 and 15 January 1994. Except for Prof. Joseph Sadan, of Tel Aviv University, and Prof. André Droogers, of the Free University at Amsterdam, all the presenters were members of an inter-university research group, based in Leiden since 1992. It was established in order to study the role of religions in situations of religious pluralism. In what manner did religions respond to the presence of other religions in their societies, in ancient as well as in modern times? The need of a comparative study of the reactions of religious communities to religious plurality and pluralism[1] in diverse times and places, of their roles in these encounters, and of the changes these situations produced in them, had been brought home forcefully to this research group by the upsurge of religious movements which have pursued the reform of their societies as well as their religions with varying

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[1] The research group only used the term 'pluralism' in its discussions before and during the conference, stipulating its meaning in its programmatic statement as: *the co-existence of two or more communities of believers with a different religion in a specific geo-historical setting*. That situation of co-existence of religions is found in many societies in the past as well as in the present. Platvoet, in his two essays in this volume, however, terms the *situation* of the co-existence of two or more religions within a society 'religious plurality'. He reserves the term 'religious pluralism' for that cultural and/or religious *ideology*, or attitude, which positively welcomes the encounter of religions. This mentality is typical of community religions, of the most recent religions, and of a recent transformation of the major religions of the doctrinal, missionary type. That receptive attitude is, however, traditionally utterly foreign to 'orthodox' religions of that expansive type. They fostered, and foster, in their believers an attitude of competitive, if not aggressively militant, combat of other religions and reform of 'deviant religiosity' in situations of religious plurality by their exclusive claims to doctrinal truth and their missionary nature. They do so also in order to strengthen the identities, group cohesion and boundaries of their religious and/or ethnic communities. That attitude of watching over boundaries by the strict regulation and severe limitation of interaction *ad extra* is also a marked cultural trait, and ideology, of many 'plural', vertically or horizontally segmented societies. A further distinction, between (situations of) internal and external religious plurality, will be made below when the essays collected in the third part of this volume are discussed.

degrees of militancy in the past two decades; not to mention the all too-recent 'ethnic cleansing' atrocities perpetrated in the name of religious differences.

One project in the programme of this research group was specifically designed to contribute to the development of theory in an area of common interest to all the members of this research group. It was meant to serve as *trait d'union* between the other research projects which the members pursued within the programme. The aim of this project was to study how ritual, ritual injunctions and ritual categories were used for demarcating a religious community's boundaries and identity *vis-à-vis* other religions in situations of (religious) plurality. The conference and this volume of essays are the outcome of this joint research project.

The studies presented deal with a subject that has been severely neglected in the study of religions. The course of mankind's history has mainly been one of steadily increasing communication between its societies, both in amicable and profitable ways by the exchange of goods and ideas, and in hostile and destructive ones by prejudice, discrimination, plunder and war. Yet students of religions[2] have for a long time tended to ignore the role of religion in the encounters between peoples, nations, and religious communities. The major reasons for this omission were, firstly, their legitimate but virtually exclusive, and therefore one-sided, concentration on the correct representation of the insider views of the believers expressed in particular in scriptures and other religiously inspired texts[3]; secondly, their preoccupation with religions as well-articulated, structured systems of belief representations (or 'doctrines'); and thirdly, an ideologically inspired aversion against, and fear of, social-scientific, 'reductionist' explanations.[4]

Due to these descriptivist and systematizing bends, and fear of explanation, these scholars of religions paid little attention to the study of the ecological, social and other 'contexts' of a religion. That research may take two forms: study of the ways in which a religion has been shaped by its contexts, and that of the manners in which a religion has moulded its contexts by its functions, 'religious'

[2]  By which are meant here those in the historical and comparative disciplines of *Religionswissenschaft* as practised mainly in Faculties of the Theology in continental Europe and in Departments of Religious Studies in Faculties of Arts in the Anglo-Saxon world.

[3]  And also in myths, liturgies, devotional acts, iconographic and other arts, architecture, the organisation of the communities of believers, interviews, etc.

[4]  Cf. Platvoet 1994.

as well as 'secular'[5], in them. It follows that most of these scholars of religions have shown little interest in the study of the part a religion played in the shaping of identities in a person, group, people, or nation; in the functions of ritual behaviour in the social life of a group; in the rituals of boundary maintenance between ethnic groups, peoples, nations and societies with different identities, customs, cultures and religions which share a common public arena but are bent upon keeping their identities distinct and their communities separate; and in the processes of boundary dissolution and integration when there is no need or desire to keep groups apart or beliefs different.

It is only recently that this primarily notional approach to religions as systems of belief representations has begun to be complemented and corrected by ethological and contextual ones. The first takes religious behaviour as the central object of research; the second studies it as part of the believers' wider interests and goals, i.e. as not merely cult and devotion towards postulated beings, but as also part of social, political, economical, legal and other behaviours, including encounters, religious and secular, with outsiders and their communities and religions, and a religion's reactions to those encounters, and its reactions to internal religious diversity.

### Its structure

Five of the papers presented at the Leiden conference describe responses of religions to situations of religious plurality. They deal with processes of change internal in religions in response to the situation of religious plurality, internal or external[6], in which they find themselves. These mainly descriptive papers by van der Toorn, Beck, Kaptein, van Koningsveld, and Wiegers, form the third part of this volume. Van der Toorn's article deals with a religious group in ancient Israelite religion; the other four are islamological papers.

Three other papers deal, wholly or in part, with the ritualization of the encounter between religions. They are the essays, also mainly

[5]  The distinction between the 'religious' and the 'non-religious', or secular, functions of a religion may be made in modern western societies on the basis of the historical processes of institutional differentiation and separation which developed in the past few centuries and more recently in most other modern societies worldwide. That distinction can, however, be made only analytically, and not substantively, in many other societies and historical periods because religion is not found in them as a separate institution set apart from e.g. the prevailing ecology, economy, social structure, political order, etc.

[6]  This distinction will be explained below.