THE PRAGMATICS OF DEFINING RELIGION

Contexts, Concepts and Contests

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PREFACE

The problem of the definition of religion is studied in this volume from many angles and by different disciplines. Apart from papers on the history of the concept of religion, methodological reflections on its definition are presented, as well as explicit definition proposals and their relation to research programmes. In addition, the volume contains analyses of the pragmatics and polemics of defining religion in modern societies, in both academic and extra-academic contexts. In the courts, for instance, the question is debated which groups may, or may not, count as 'a religion' and claim tax exemptions. Some of the contributions to this volume address such legal and political controversies. The focus of this collection is, however, on the pragmatic instrumentality and strategic intent of whatever concept of 'religion' is being proposed. We argue in favour of an anti-essentialist, anti-hegemonic and multi-dimensional approach, for religions are immensely varied and complex phenomena, which need to be studied by several academic disciplines from many different perspectives. A broad variety of definitions of religion may, therefore, be legitimately developed and proposed.

This collective volume stems from a working group in the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions (LISOR), in which scholars working in the fields of the Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy, and Anthropology of Religion, and the Science (or History) of Religions co-operated. Other scholars, representing these various disciplines as well as a large range of approaches, were invited to contribute to this research project too. The Leiden participants intensively discussed the drafts of the contributions on many occasions. That, we hope, improved the quality of the final articles.

We thank all the contributors for joining this 'conference on paper', as it was once called, and the great efforts they spent in writing these chapters. We are especially grateful to Danièle Hervieu-Léger and Ernst Feil, who both—although it was agreed that they would write in their mother tongues—delivered their final contributions in English. The papers by non-native speakers were checked by Mrs. Sylvia Dierks-Mallett, and Dominique de Boer assisted in the