

Call for Papers

Religions and their Despisers: Criticism and Vilification of Religions and Believers

International Autumn Conference of the
Dutch Association for the Academic Study of Religion
and NOSTER Thematic Symposium

Kontakt der Kontinenten, Soesterberg (The Netherlands), 4-5 November 2011

The Dutch Association for the Academic Study of Religion organises their international autumn meeting in conjunction with a **Thematic Symposium** of the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER) on *Religions and their Despisers: Criticism and Vilification of Religions and Believers*.

Outline of the theme

Criticisms and attacks (both verbal and iconic) directed against religion, religious groups and their core symbols are inextricably part of the history of all religions. Verbal and iconic attacks may include a wide range of utterances, varying from 'mild' forms of criticism to polemic, insult (sometimes perceived as 'blasphemy' and 'dishonouring') and cursing. They may originate from insiders (believers, e.g. in the shape of prophecy or calls for reform) as well as from outsiders (people who do not adhere to the religion under attack, e.g. criticisms directed against particular religious beliefs, traditions etc.).

In recent times, 'outsider' verbal and iconic criticism of religion, especially Islam but also other religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Modern Religious Movements, has attracted much attention in public debate. The Muhammad cartoons, films like *Submission* and *Fitna*, or announcements to publicly burn the Koran may serve as examples. The same holds true for the reactions of believers to forms of criticism and vilification of their religious beliefs, traditions, symbols, etc.

Nowadays, we witness discussions about the tension between two fundamental rights – freedom of opinion and freedom of religion – in many parts of the world. Recently, the Dutch High Court (Hoge Raad) ruled that insulting religion and insulting religious believers should be distinguished, with only the second form being punishable under the law. While this may be justifiable and sound from a juridical point of view, the concept of religion underlying the rule seems to be constructed on the basis of secular notions, viz. of religion as a belief system which can be accepted or rejected freely and consciously.

The conference addresses the topic of public criticism and vilification of religions and believers' reactions to them in a broad sense. This includes sophisticated artistic or scholarly expressions (e.g. S. Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg Lecture) and religious-critical or outright polemical statements made by politicians as well as the vilification and destruction of religious symbols, sacred texts and so on in contexts that are explicitly and visibly related to violence and inequality of power (e.g. prisons).

Keynote speakers:

Prof. Dr. S. Brent Rodríguez Plate, Hamilton College, Clinton (NY).

Prof. Dr. Anne-Marie Korte, University of Utrecht.

Dr. Sipco Vellenga, University of Amsterdam.

Participants are invited to address the topic of criticism and vilification of religions with regard to the following focal points:

a) Concepts and conceptual presumptions

What is the aim and purpose of (certain instances of) criticism and vilification of religion, and who is the target? Is the criticism meant to be political, moral or theological? Is it directed at practices and/or beliefs?

On which grounds can criticism of religion claim to be warranted? What is the 'legitimate authority' in this context and how is this authority justified (e.g. tradition, 'true religion', moral or political views)?

Which concept of religion (e.g. sets of belief to which believers give assent; embodied practices; living relationship of the individual or group to the supernatural entity or entities) underlies certain forms of criticism and vilification of religion? How would criticism of religion, viz. our take on criticism of religion and evaluation of criticism of religion change if the presumed conceptualization of religion changed?

Do critics of religion explicitly refer to *religion* or do they possibly deny the object of their criticism the status of religion? (cf. Wilders' statement that Islam is not a religion but a political ideology).

How is the addressee of criticism of religion construed? Is criticism directed at a specific religion or at believers (individuals or a religious group)? Is it possible to make this distinction? And what happens when beliefs and believers (and/or non-believers) are essentialized?

Which concepts of (democratic) citizenship underlie criticism and vilification? What is presumed and does it change in the course of the debate?

What role does the Academic Study of Religion play in analyzing and framing criticism and vilification? To what extent can criticism of religions and religious groups be said to be part and parcel of the Academic Study of Religion?

b) Form and media of criticism

How do we deal with genre issues concerning verbal attacks? Historically, we see that the genres of curse-oath-satire-blasphemy may overlap while the aim of these genres ranges from protection to destruction and may be closely related to honour and shame. How do we describe the impact and the power of such words; how do they depend on certain media and the perceived authority of the critic, in tandem with the reactions of believers and the wider audience?

Why do images often turn out to be especially powerful? Is this true in all times and contexts?

Does the character of criticism of religion change (e.g. in the perception of believers) if it is brought forward in the form of art or explicitly artistic settings (museum exhibitions, opera and theater performances, novels etc.)?

c) Reception of criticism

How do believers react? We may think of protests, the development of 'religious reform' or 'religious fundamentalism'. Do criticism and vilification provoke or stimulate participation of 'criticized believers' in public debates?

What is the influence of transnational religious movements and authorities?

What forms of reception and evaluations of criticism of religion in society and the public sphere can be distinguished?

Is criticism perceived in religious or literary terms ('blasphemy', satire) or rather in moral and political terms ('religious racism', social exclusion, discrimination)?

Paper Submission:

Papers are welcomed from the fields of religious studies, history, cultural anthropology, social sciences, media studies, critical theory, philosophy, ethics, and other disciplines.

Deadline for paper proposals (500 words): 20 July 2011.

To submit a proposal, please contact a member of the organizing committee: Dr. Christoph Baumgartner (c.baumgartner@uu.nl)

For queries concerning the conference, please contact the Secretary of Dutch Association for the Academic Study of Religion: Prof. Dr Kocku von Stuckrad
c.k.m.von.stuckrad@rug.nl

Conference fee: €155 (this includes accommodation, meals, coffee and tea).

Conference fee for NGG senior members: €135

Conference fee for NGG junior members: €105 Euro.

NOSTER-members receive a discount of €25 Euro on the conference fee (for two days' participation).

It is also possible to participate only one day, in which case the conference fee is: €50.

One-day participation of NOSTER-members is free (but €25 Euro has to be paid for meals and coffee and tea).

Conveners / organizing committee:

Dr. Christoph Baumgartner (Utrecht University)

Dr. Jacqueline Borsje (University of Amsterdam)

Prof. Dr Gerard Wiegers (University of Amsterdam).