

"Religion in Colonization and Decolonization. Indonesian-Dutch Confrontation, Confirmation, Transformation", 7th Interfaith Dialogue, Den Haag, 9 June 2022

My name is Welmoet Boender and I am the director of the Bachelor programs of the Faculty Religion and Theology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Our faculty houses the seminaries of a variety of denominations, from various Protestant denominations to Muslim, and Buddhist to Hindu. I am a staff member of the Centre for Islamic Theology.

As a Dutch scholar of Islam, who studied at Leiden University in the 1990s, and who is now working at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, I have to deal with the legacy of two highly remarkable scholars of these two universities: Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936), professor of Islam at Leiden university, and Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), who founded the Vrije Universiteit in 1880. They lived in the same era and they even corresponded with each other. They both thought that Islam as a religion, and the practices and faith of Muslims, needed to be studied thoroughly by students trained at Dutch universities, be it Leiden or the VU, or elsewhere. Kuyper saw Islam as a riddle, a puzzle, a mystery – *"Islam als raadsel"* that needed to be thoroughly studied, in order to "pacify" the colonized land and their people. Kuyper had both political and missionary motivations to encourage the study of Islam. And we cannot underestimate the role of Snouck Hurgronje in the Dutch Indies, particularly in the "pacification" of Aceh.



In the 1970s and 1980s: awareness of persistent power inequalities of the colonial past in academics studies become well-versed by the influence of Edward Said and others. No scholar of Islam who is not aware of this.



However, although postcolonialism is widely engrained in contemporary religious studies, including the study of Islam, there is still much work to do at Western European universities, as well as for politics and society. One of the paradoxical reflexes of post-Saidian Islamic Studies in the West, has been a persistent idea that the solution against Orientalism, was to be 'neutral', by refraining from religious normativity or subjectivity. Islam and Muslims were to be studied as objects. Only very recently, Western European universities have opened academic space to Islamic theology, but often as programs that are set apart from Islamic Studies.

I think that it is important in our days, that current students in Religious studies and Theology, not just in the study of Islam, but also in studying other world religions, as well as in their Christian theological

studies, must be made very aware of these dynamics and persistence of what the organizers of today call “coloniality”. Students in theology and religion must be aware of a persistent *blind spot* for religion in the study of the history of colonization and of decolonization; they should be aware of the *legitimizing role of theology* in the colonial past, but also in the present; and they should be trained to critically reflect on this past and presence.

My **argument** for today's 7th interfaith dialogue is, that there is no such thing as ‘neutrality’ and ‘objectivity’ in theology and religious studies. Students must develop a critical-reflective, hermeneutical and dialogical attitude in order to become *engaged scholars*. To realize this, there is an important and responsible role for the **curricula** of faculties of religion and theology – in particular for my Faculty at the Vrije Universiteit.

We therefore recently renewed our Faculty Bachelor Theology and Religious Studies. It offers tracks in various Protestant traditions – varying from Orthodox Reformed, Evangelical and Reformed, Baptist and Mennonite, as well as tracks in Islamic theology and general religious studies. The students of all tracks follow core courses together, that train them in history of world religions, world philosophies, social sciences, and interreligious hermeneutics. This means that the program is on the one hand *profoundly interreligious* and *thoroughly multi-disciplinary*, training students to be ready for working in a plural society, able to critically find their way in a fast-changing world and global research domains. On the other hand, the program provides ample space for students to develop as theologians in *a specific religious tradition*, studying their faith tradition from what one often calls ‘*an inner perspective*’. We also prescribe studies beyond the Western canon of scholarly literature. And we foster dialogical learning, trying to educate people who are willing to discuss with each other highly sensitive issues that can be painful if one looks in the mirror: the history of slavery, Apartheid, gender inequality, the colonial past.

We invest in developing our curriculum in such a way that our students obtain a critical reflective hermeneutical attitude, both in academic skills as well as in dialogical attitude. We hope to raise hermeneutical aptitude among our students, so they realize how the past has affected present worldviews and epistemologies. We also hope that they realize that this does not release them from responsibility for the present, and for the future, because we should not think that the *awareness* of power inequalities in the past, would imply that we can stop thinking about coloniality. The legitimizing force of theology can be supportive in both negative and positive ways, in new forms and structures, that go beyond historical binaries of colonizer and colonized.

To conclude this very brief contribution: I hope that today I will get much input from our dialogue for how we best improve our efforts. Thank you very much.

