

In Retrospect

Gerrit Deems: an eternal student

On April 19, 2011 Gerrit Deems defended his theological dissertation on the priest Alfons Ariëns. This citizen of Nijmegen is older than the university where he received his PhD. Deems was born in 1921, the Catholic University was founded in 1923. Because Radboud University keeps no records of candidates' ages, it cannot be determined whether Deems is in fact the oldest candidate in Nijmegen's history, yet he most likely is.

In Press asked Deems why he still wanted to do a PhD at his age. "That was not really my intention," says Deems. "I never pursued it, in any case. The former deacon of Enschede asked me to investigate Ariëns, because the man always has been underexposed (my thesis shows that that is indeed the case). But the thesis actually grew gradually. And I was very happy to work on it, because I love studying".

Alfons Ariëns (1860-1928) was a priest in the Archdiocese of Utrecht, but not only that: he was also a reformer of human and social conditions. He founded the Roman Catholic labor union (*rooms-katholieke arbeiders-vereniging*) in 1889, which he transformed into the first Catholic union in the Netherlands in 1891 (for factory workers from Twente). He was also the founder of four journals: *The Catholic laborer (de katholieke werkman)*, *Unitas*, *The Cross and Banner (De Kruisbanier)* and *Sobriëtas*. The former two had the labor movement as subject, the latter two Catholic temperance. Ariëns also played a major role in the emancipation of Catholic women, initially through the path of the temperance movement (via the so-called Marian Associations [*Maria-verenigen*]), but also in ways less concerned with that mission. Gerrit Deems devoted his thesis to these 'other' Ariëns, rather than 'just' the priest.

When *In Press* asked Deems if he and his advisors are satisfied with the end result, he responds that a thesis by an eighty-nine year-old has different requirements than a book by a forty- or thirty-year-old. "If you are this old, the book has to be a disciplined expression of

"The thesis epitomises the entire development you've gone through in your life."

And indeed, Gerrit Deems' life seems to culminate in the dissertation on the 'social' Ariëns. Deems was born in



Gerrit Deems (89) defending his theological PhD thesis on the priest Alphons Ariëns. (Image by Paul Rapp [via Villamedia].)

what the candidate has learned. Of the work of an eighty-nine-year-old you can expect that it takes the material to a higher level. The thesis epitomises the entire development you've gone through in your life. Both academic and extracurricular experiences are to be processed in a harmonious way in the thesis. It contains your life's development."

Blesdijke on 26 November 1921. In his early youth he actually would have liked to study Dutch Literature, but after finishing grammar school at the College of St. Damian in Sint Oedenrode (1934-1941) and World War II he worked as a representative in business until 1956. He was – among other jobs – national representative for a pottery factory in Schoonhoven. This he did with much pleasure "because you travel all around the country,

and you come into contact with all kinds of people.”

From 1956 on he attended training and worked as a teacher and researcher in various sectors of social work. Deems graduated from the Social Academy (sociale academie) in Amsterdam in 1959 and studied Social Pedagogy at the Institute Hoogveld where he graduated in 1962. He then worked as an advisor for the Council of Child Protection (Raad van de Kinderbescherming), where he surveyed domestic situations and gave advice to the judge. He encountered many problems that are still current today, like sexual abuse.

Up to that point, Deems had always been educated at institutions that had been built on Catholic foundation. However, he wanted to study some of his thoughts and ideas more profoundly and enrolled in the Philosophy program at the protestant Free University (Vrije Universiteit) in Amsterdam.

"This course – philosophy – was not a breeze. It was an eight-year program in those days and you were required to know both Greek and Latin." Deems obtained his master's in philosophy in 1975 (aged 54) and got a job as a philosophy teacher at a high school in The Hague. He could work and study at the same time, because he always demanded from his employers one day off every week to study, and they agreed. Deems wrote his philosophy thesis on the basic ideas of social work (social ethics).

After graduating in Amsterdam, Deems began to study theology. Why? "I actually wanted to learn more about social ethics and I could go to Munster to do that, but that would have caused some difficulties at home. And then I ended up in Nijmegen to study theology."



Gerrit Deems. Foto: Do Visser/De Gelderlander

“I've never had so much fun in my life!”

Deems graduated from his fourth course in 1990, at the age of 68.

Around the year 1995 it became clear that a promotion might be an option. The route wasn't always easy. Deems' wife got ill and passed away and he himself had to undergo surgery three times during his PhD project. He had expected to finish a bit earlier when he started, but is happy with the way his dissertation turned out. Caring for his wife was more important than rushing his dissertation.

In his *laudatio* Professor Peter Nissen praised the way in which Deems demonstrated the

intrinsic coherence of Ariëns' vision, in which social justice, Christian faith, and Christian love formed an indissoluble trinity. He also praised 'the young doctor' for his youthful enthusiasm and perseverance.

Every single step in his life and career –

his social studies, his work in social work, his study on social ethics, philosophy and theology – led to the gestation

of *The Doctrina Socialis of Dr Alfons Ariëns*. Deems: "I would now like to call myself a 'theologian of justice'. In that description everything I've done and learned comes together."

Deems now lives a couple of streets behind the Erasmus building, which he still visits often. For PhD students who are nervous about their defense, Deems has some encouraging words: "I've never had so much fun in my life! There was a professor who always speaks very softly. That was my only fear, that I wouldn't be able to hear him. But I could, and enjoyed every minute of my defense."

And Deems is not finished yet:

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“I’ve been studying all my life and I feel good about it and will carry it with me in the future. Now I’m studying Hebrew. I want to be able to independently translate from the language. I think that’s just fun.” Besides studying Hebrew, Deems is working on his next publication. *In Press* wonders how old he will be when he finishes this, and what will come next? After all, Deems states, “I’m not going to sit back and relax afterwards. I want to die on the battlefield... and not just yet!” Inspirational words from an eternal student.

By Sophie Reinders

Incoming: Foreign PhD candidates at Radboud University

In Press regularly features contributions from Radboud University PhD candidates from abroad. Although it is not clear how many of the 280 doctorates awarded by our university annually are obtained by candidates who aren’t originally from the Netherlands, there are foreign PhD candidates in many departments.

Doing a PhD in the Netherlands is very attractive for aspiring scholars from many countries. The main reason for this is very banal: the Netherlands is one of the few countries worldwide where PhD candidates are usually waged employees rather than fees-paying students (with the exception of external candidates). PhD candidates receive a monthly salary, are given their own office or workspace, and are entitled to many of the same benefits other employees get.

This is a far cry from the situation in countries such as the UK or the US, where PhDs are often treated as cash cows. Unlike bachelor and master students, PhD students require relatively little tuition, yet they pay the same tuition fees as taught students. The going rate in the UK is £9,000 per annum, while many US universities have no qualms about charging a yearly fee of US\$35,000-40,000. If I were to do my PhD at Harvard, I’d have to pay over US\$36,000 a year – excluding insurance fees. Of course, you can always apply for scholarships and financial aid, but such schemes are very competitive. As a result, most PhD students would be paying through the nose for a qualification which might not even be of great value in the current job market. The Dutch system is in many ways a lot fairer than this.

Julia Hilevych came to Nijmegen from the Ukraine to do a PhD in the Department of History. Her project is part of the NWO-funded research programme *The Power of the Family: Family Influences on Long-Term Fertility Decline in Europe, 1850-2010*, led by Dr Hilde Bras. Before starting her PhD, Julia studied sociology at the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv. Why did she decide to apply for a PhD position in the Netherlands?

“In my field, scholars from different countries use different approaches. In the Netherlands, it is more common to do interdisciplinary research, while in the Ukraine scholars are more inclined to work within the boundaries of their own field. Here I get the chance to combine various approaches. My research involves a lot of quantitative field work (some of which I will undertake in the Ukraine), but also has a strongly qualitative element which is focused more on anthropology and historiography. Therefore, when I saw the advertisement for my current project, I decided to apply, as it ties in with my interests and ambitions in several ways. >>>