

Position Paper

Forthcoming 12th Biannual International IRTI Conference

Public Theology in Plural Contexts

Hosted at the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong

June 15-18, 2017

In many countries on all the continents of the world, Christian churches confess their faith in situations of deeply felt plurality. This plurality may have different faces: economic, social, ethnic, cultural and racial plurality are challenges for Christian communities. In most cases these forms of plurality are also intertwined with religious plurality. In South East Asia, Africa and the Middle East, for example, churches live in situations of Muslim or Buddhist majorities – in some cases even overwhelming majorities – which have all kinds of social and political effects in the public square. Many Christian communities are suffering from serious repression in their witnessing the gospel to fellow citizens. Indeed, the oldest Christian communities, those in Iraq and Syria, are facing extinction. In other contexts Christian religion coexists with other religions in a precarious and vulnerable equilibrium, as in Indonesia, where religion plays a pivotal role in public life. Elsewhere, as in China, churches have to deal with a government that finds it self-evident to have some control over churches and theological education. In other contexts, as in the USA and South Korea, religion may play an ambivalent role in the public square or become part of a seemingly nationalistic agenda, as in some Eastern European countries. In West European countries, like the Netherlands, the challenge of plurality often has more to do with a dominant liberal ideology, which would like to push religion into the background. These situations affect theologians and pastors as well. How should churches and faith communities react and what can theological reflection contribute?

Public theology facing the challenge of plurality should acknowledge that no situation and no context is the same. Indonesia is different from mainland China, mainland China is different from Hong Kong or the Philippines, Germany is different from the Netherlands, the Netherlands are different from South Africa, Texas in the USA differs from Wisconsin. Also, solutions applied in one context cannot simply be imposed on other contexts, nor can Reformed theology be exported as if it were a product with universal flavor. All these different situations and contexts are a challenge to a living Reformed theology. How should we react and relate to our particular contexts? What are the challenges and limitations, what is the scope of a public theology? How is postcolonial criticism to be processed in Reformed theology?

The aim of the IRTI Conference 2017 is to reflect on and to contribute to dealing constructively with religious, economic, social, cultural and ethnic plurality in different contexts from the perspective of the Reformed tradition as a source of public theology.

The focus on Reformed theology is meant to connect to a specific tradition in particular, but not to exclude other traditions and theological points of view. Like other theological traditions, Reformed theology and spirituality have always emphasized the importance of faith for public life. The

confession of God as the sovereign Governor and Lord of the world has implied the claim that, somehow, social, cultural and political life should be gathered under obedience to the gospel. The themes of the sovereignty of God, the distinction of law and gospel, the doctrine of the two reigns, the relations between Church and State, the place of the Sermon of the Mount in ethics, to mention only a few topics, they all point to the fact that Reformed theology did not neglect the public significance of theology. On the contrary, in various ways and contexts it tried, in trial and error, to contribute to peace and welfare in society, to strive for 'public justice', to summon resistance against ungodly and unjust powers, to build up social practices and institutions and to serve God and the neighbor in all spheres of life.

Admittedly, through the ages, these contributions were also disrupted by oppressive theocratic aspirations, Western/Northern superiority, and cultural and social dominance of privileged groups like male, Western and white people over others, resulting in oppression and exclusion. In our times we are challenged, again, to develop a viable public theology and, most of all, an embodied practice of Christian life that does justice to both the implications of the Christian faith for public life and the concrete social, religious, political and cultural local contexts. How should a helpful public theology be constructed and proceed in the plural contexts of our times? How should this be practiced and embodied in our communities? What are criteria and viable ways for doing theology that foster the good life for all in our contemporary societies, as proclaimed in the gospel?

Public theology should be *realistic* theology. This means that the term 'public' should not be restricted to politics or any other center of meaning. The conventional distinction between public and private, too, should be critically assessed. Modern society is characterized by a functional differentiation of subsystems, such as education, health care, industry, business, religion, media, and sports. All these domains are more or less independent and at the same time interconnected. Public theology should be realistic and help people to analyze and understand their situations and discern the spirit of the times. How should theology support investors, politicians, employers, employees, engineers, teachers, sportsmen and sportswomen to promote justice and the honor of God, each in their particular field? No situation is the same and no country is the same as the other. Therefore, the help and effort of theologians from all over the world is needed and their input to the conference is warmly welcomed. Reformed theology will be living and viable when we take our different contexts and situations seriously, when we address issues of power structures, and attempt to reflect on our situation in the light of Scripture and in conversation with former and contemporary theological voices.

Keynote Speakers

We are pleased to confirm the participation of the following keynote speakers:

Dr. Zhibin Xie, Professor of Christian Philosophy and Ethics, Department of Philosophy, Tongji University, Shanghai, China

Dr. Mery Kolimon, Lecturer in Contextual Theology at the Theological Faculty of Artha Wacana Christian University, Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia

Dr. Richard Mouw, Professor of Faith and Public Life and Emeritus President of Fuller Theological Seminary, USA

Dr. Carver Yu, Abundant Grace Distinguished Professor and Emeritus President of China Graduate School of Theology, Hong Kong, China

Dr. Stephen Tong, Pastor, Evangelist and Teacher Reformed Evangelical Church of Jakarta, Indonesia

Call for papers

The theme of 'public theology in plural contexts' raises various questions that may be addressed during the conference, for instance the following issues:

- *Doing theology in the public square.* What is the scope of doing theology in the public square in the specific contexts you have to deal with? Which concrete situations of economic, social, cultural, religious or ethnic plurality do you as a theologian actually face in your context? What are the subsystems that are important in your situation and what are the criteria by which you propose to address these situations adequately: doing justice to both the concrete context and the theological perspective?
- *Ways of doing public theology.* Which ways of doing public theology ('methods') can be distinguished, like engaging in debates, analyzing situations, criticizing practices and theories, witnessing the gospel, translating Christian meanings in secular terms? Which 'strategies' are adequate in your own situation and context?
- *Reformed theology as public theology.* Which notions and concepts, derived from the Reformed tradition and its theology, can offer viable perspectives on dealing with pressing issues in the public arena? What are relevant biblical, theological and contextual resources? In what respect does the concept of public theology challenge Reformed tradition and theology to think differently?
- *Christian faith communities as public entities in plural contexts.* How do particular Christian communities manifest themselves as public entities? Which roles can they play in plural contexts? What are the implications for the content and method of public theology?
- *Justice and the good life for all.* Since many questions of plurality raise, at the same time, the question of how human beings can live together peacefully, attention could focus on the question: how to promote justice and to contribute to the good life for all in local contexts of plurality?

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