



Forthcoming 13th Biennial International IRTI Conference

The Calling of the Church in Times of Polarization

Hosted at Vrije Universiteit and Protestant Theological University

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In many societies all over the world an increasing polarization between various groups can be observed. Tendencies of polarization extend from the political to the economic and from the religious to the social sphere. Polarization is often motivated by prejudices about differences in ethnicity, race, religion, culture, gender, sexuality, economic or social background. Driven by fear about losing what is regarded as valuable, particular groups become to demonize other groups as cause of imagined or real threats. On the political level polarization becomes manifest in populist movements with the explicit aim to polarize against and distance themselves entirely from any political establishment, as for instance in new political parties in many European countries. In some cases, populists succeed in occupying important positions in traditional democratic countries. In other cases, nationalism is promoted as counterforce to a globalizing world. Different but related is the polarization of groups of native inhabitants towards newcomers, for instance native inhabitants of European countries who fear the arrival of large numbers of migrants from the African continent, often suggestively associated with the worldwide danger of Muslim extremism. In other cases, violence of majorities to religious or ethnic minorities is sanctioned because the minority is regarded as not belonging to the national identity and therefore marginalized, as for instance in Indonesia. Sociologists observe an increasing tension between high-educated people, often living in the cities and with a global orientation, on the one hand, and less-educated people living in the country or poor neighborhoods in the cities and oriented to the local, on the other.

All these instances of polarization affect the church as well. The church worldwide and locally is often deeply divided on highly contested issues, as for instance on how one judges about same-sex relationships, gender or migrants. There is a great gulf between the so-called 'main-line' (or ecumenical) and the so-called 'evangelicals,' a gulf which can be experienced within one church community. The churches themselves are part of, and internally experiencing, polarization.

Given this increasing (or at least ongoing) polarization of various groups within societies as well as within the churches, what may be the calling of the church? How can the church contribute to a viable society or community where people of different backgrounds and convictions live together peacefully? What should be the role of the church in society? How to cope with polarization within and between the churches and their theologians? How may Bible and tradition shed light on these questions?



The 13th biannual IRTI conference will be devoted to these and other questions. Answers to these questions depend on the particular contexts and situations, socio-political conditions and how local congregations understand themselves and their role in society. In all this, congregations should find their way in faithfulness to the Lord of the church. Being Reformed means that the context of every church and its membership is acknowledged as an important factor in the way discernment will take place. For our reflection we also hope to be inspired by the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dort, which in itself showed the transnational character of the Reformed identity. In a similar spirit we invite theologians from all over the world to share their concerns and reflections. The theme asks for both analyses of particular contexts and profound ecclesiological reflection, as well as theological-political reflections on the relationship between church, state and society. Therefore, three subthemes in particular are to be addressed.

1 The church in times of polarization

This sub-theme addresses the issues of polarization, populism, nationalism and radicalization from local and global perspectives. Attention is to be paid to the various contexts and situations in different countries. What is precisely at stake in a particular society? How is polarization manifesting itself? Given these specific contexts, what is precisely the challenge for the church in these situations? How do societal developments influence how the church understands herself? Does the church play herself a role in processes of polarization? In what way is polarization affecting the church community or interchurch/interfaith relations as well?

2 The calling of the church

Whereas the first sub-theme starts its reflection from society and its challenges, this sub-theme addresses similar questions but starting from the church's self-understanding, i.e. from ecclesiology. What does it mean for the church to be church? What is, theologically speaking, the calling of the church, given the challenges of our time? This asks for profound theological explorations of how the church should relate to society. Particularly in the Western world religion is conceived as especially or even exclusively restricted to the private sphere of life where one may choose to relate to a church or other religious community. At the same time, governments and civilians often ask for the support of churches because of the binding potential of religion and its contribution to civil society. How does this relate to the church's self-understanding? Should the church contribute to civil society and the 'common good'? Or should the church rather form a 'counter culture' as opposed to the powers of the world? Should the church adopt a prophetic role and be ready to criticize political and societal injustice? Or should the church perhaps be present in a more 'priestly' way, fully aware of her marginalized role 'after Christendom' but still devoted to the wellbeing of the world? In post-communist societies, the church is often a primary player in a rather weak civil society. How should the church handle this responsibility, how does the church understand the calling to serve the common good? What is the calling of the church in countries and regions where the church has a minority position and is permanently at risk to become the victim of societal polarization between groups of different religious backgrounds, sometimes ending up in violence? What is the calling of the church in African or Asian countries that are still deeply marked by ethnic, religious and social-economic polarizations, regularly exploding in violent conflicts?



3 Church, state and society – in particular in the light of 400 years Dortian Church Order

The position of the church in a particular country depends on how church, state and society are related. In turn this affects how the church may respond to processes of polarization. For instance, the role of the church and its contribution to society are dependent upon how much space the government gives to societal initiatives and associations in general and religious communities in particular. Traditionally, in Western countries there is much space for such initiatives. The separation between church and state precisely intended to save the church from governmental interventions in religious affairs. This created many opportunities for churches to contribute to civil society. When the freedom of religion or the freedom of opinion is under pressure, this requires from the church a different approach.

How the church relates to the state and to society and what this means for her calling with regard to the various phenomena of polarization to a great extent depend on historical backgrounds and developments.

In this respect a more or less shared historical background of Reformed churches worldwide is how the Synod of Dordrecht 1618-1619 operated in society and dealt with issues of increasing religious and political polarization. In times of tribulation it contributed to national and social unity, thanks to the privileged position of the church in the Netherlands. In 2019, it will be 400 years since the Reformed Synod of Dordrecht agreed to the so-called Dortian Church Order (May 28, 2019). During centuries this Church Order influenced to a great extent not only how the Dutch Reformed Church was organized internally, but also how the church related to society as a whole and to the government in particular. Moreover, this influence was not limited to the Netherlands. In more or less revised form the Dortian Church Order is still used in various Reformed denominations in North-America, South Africa, the Netherlands, Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand. Interestingly, it contains regulations about the relation between church and government as well as all kinds of public affairs such as marriage, charity, education, funerals, and disciplinary jurisdiction (which, in fact, were directed to internal church affairs but because of the privileged position of the church had great impact on mutual relationships within society as a whole). Almost every Reformed Church Order reveals how the church relates to society, although the extent to which attention is paid to this issue varies. The same holds for a Church Order like *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government* (Westminster, 1645).

The Dort Church Order allows for great difference within a church. It is very elastic. However, the order can be, and has been used as a political tool as well. The same holds for the Canons of Dort. The Canons themselves have been used as instruments of division, polarization even. Against this background relevant historical and theological questions arise: can the Canons be read differently, for instance understanding election as a doctrine of inclusion? How did the Dortian Church Order influence society and vice versa; how do we evaluate these influences? What is its relevance to nowadays challenges, in particular challenges of political, social and religious polarization?



Call for Papers

We invite theologians from all disciplines interested in the theme of 'The Calling of the Church in Times of Polarization' to submit their proposals for a paper presentation at the 13th international IRTI Conference. You can send your abstract of no more than 250 words to the secretary Albert Nijboer: a.s.nijboer@irti.nl.

Deadline for submitting the proposals is **February 1, 2019**.

Keynote Speakers

Nadine Bowers Du Toit, PhD, Associate Professor in Theology and Development and Director of the Unit for Development and Religion Research at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University

David D. Daniels, PhD, Henry Winters Luce Professor of World Christianity at McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago

David Fergusson, PhD, Professor of Divinity and Principal of New College, University of Edinburgh

Rev. Andreas Yewangoe, PhD, Senior Fellow of Leimena Institute, Jakarta, and former Chairman of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI)