



Forthcoming 15th Biennial International Conference

International Reformed Theological Institute

Peace among the Nations
Reformed Theology and Geopolitical Conflicts

27-30 June, 2024

Duta Wacana Christian University, Yogyakarta

Call for Papers

Throughout the ages, Christians have reflected on how they should relate to the magistrate or state, what their political responsibility might entail, and whether and under which conditions the use of military force is justified. Given the geopolitical nature of conflicts such as the Russian invasion in Ukraine and the Chinese claim on Taiwan, and given the many ongoing inter- and intrastate conflicts around the globe in which religion often plays an important role, these questions take on new urgency in our time and ask for profound theological reflection.

How are (geo)political violent conflicts, including their religious dimensions, to be understood theologically? How can political theology, theological understandings of the relationship between church and state, and ethical views on peace and war contribute to the clarification of what is at stake in actual conflicts and the moral deliberation about concrete responsibilities in these conflicts? What has the Reformed tradition specifically to offer concerning these issues? Are traditional understandings of the relationship between church and state still viable or should they be revised? How would a Reformed political theology after Christendom look like? And what does the eschatological vision of 'peace among the nations' mean given the (geo)political conflicts we face in our time? These and other questions will be addressed at the forthcoming 15th international conference of the International Reformed Theological Institute, to be held at Duta Wacana Christian University in Yogyakarta. Three subthemes in particular will be addressed: geopolitics and theology, church and state, and peace and war.

1 Theological Reflection on (Geo)political Conflicts

Nowadays, national and international conflicts often have a global political, economic, and social impact. Although other countries are not directly involved in the war in Ukraine, the strong political and military support of many countries to the Ukrainian resistance against the Russian aggression demonstrates the geopolitical dimensions and impact of this conflict. The threat of a nuclear escalation of this conflict seems to bring us back in the era of the Cold War with its delicate balance of opposing nuclear superpowers in the world. The position of China in the world cannot be overstated in this respect, which concerns not only

its relationship to Russia, but also its worldwide economic power and political influence, which increasingly extends to the global south. Meanwhile, we face the continuing threat of terrorism and postcolonial conflicts at many places around the globe.

In all these conflicts and wars religion is a crucial factor. On the one hand, religious motives serve as justification for aggression and terror. The Russian invasion in the Ukraine is strongly supported by Russian Orthodox Church leaders, who justify it in terms of a 'holy war'. Islamist terrorism, i.e., terrorism of which the perpetrators and supporters claim to carry it out in the name of the Islam, is still threatening the world. On the other hand, religion motivates for peace building and reconciliation between enemies and across national or ethnic borders. Religious traditions and beliefs function as critical sources for ethical and political deliberation about (non-violent) resistance against oppression or the need to protect innocent people from violence by using (military) force. Against this background we seem to need sound 'political theology' that, moved by and involved in social issues, institutionally and substantively liberates the church from any instrumentalization and political abuse.

2 Church and State and the Use of Military Force in the Reformed Tradition

The religious dimensions of geopolitical conflicts also reflect various theological views on the relation between church and state, in particular with regard to the use of force. In the long tradition of theological reflection on this relationship, the Reformed tradition represents a view which still seems to be relevant. In this view the distinction between church and state is primarily to be understood as a repudiation of mixing the spiritual task of the church with the worldly task of the state, particularly the use of power and force in the spiritual realm. Reformed theologians stressed the duty to obey the state as a God-given authority which has the right to use force in order to restrain evil and that therefore even 'un-Christian' governments should be obeyed. The backside is that the government should respect religious freedom.

The Reformed tradition understood obedience to the government on the basis of Romans 13 not as an endorsement of limitless power of the monarchs, but the plural "powers" in this Biblical text as also including inferior magistrates, who had their own divinely appointed duty to govern well and to protect the people from a tyrannous monarch, with the ultimate consequence of political resistance. Moreover, the distinction between church and state means that the church respects the specific task of the state as 'sword power' and therefore is not indifferent towards the question whether the state does its task well or not. This implies that the church as 'watchkeeper over the state' may be called to remind the state of its task to protect people under threat and promote justice and peace for all. Is this still a viable approach? What would this mean concretely in various political contexts in our time?

3 Ethics of Peace and War

In the Reformed tradition the right to resistance was closely linked to the idea of 'just war,' which not only is to be waged from a king against rebels, but also was interpreted as lawful resistance from cities and (church) communities to a tyrannical king. For Reformed theologians of the sixteenth century, magistrates might be obliged to fight wars in defense of religion, but they didn't see any mandate for offensive religious wars. In general, they stood in the broad tradition of Christian just war thinking (*bellum iustum*) stemming from

Ambrose and Augustine and clearly distinguished themselves from the idea of 'holy war'. They followed the main principles of this tradition (*ius ad bellum* and *ius in bello*), founded in natural law and biblical teachings, which showed them a path between the justification of a 'holy war' on the one hand and Anabaptist pacifism on the other. Wars are to be fought by appropriate authorities (*right authority*) and only for defense, not for glory or any other interest (*just cause*), and in order to (re)establish peace and justice (*right intention*).

In our time the ethical principles underlying the just war tradition have become an integral part of international humanitarian law. The question is whether it is sufficient to understand justice only in such international legal terms. Aren't we in need of an understanding of justice as social justice? How could the Reformed tradition help to understand justice in such broader social terms? What would theological understandings of reconciliation and peace building add to just war thinking, including recently developed *ius post bellum* discourses that are aimed at the promotion of peace and justice after conflicts?

Keynote speakers

Hanns Lessing, PhD, Acting General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, Hannover, Germany

Eric D. Patterson, PhD, President of Religious Freedom Institute, Washington, USA

Marietta D.C. van der Tol, PhD, College Lecturer in Politics, Lincoln College, and Postdoctoral fellow, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, UK

Paulus S. Widjaja, PhD, Associate Professor in Christian Ethics and Peace Studies, Faculty of Theology, Duta Wacana Christian University, Indonesia

Call for Papers

We invite academic theologians from all disciplines to submit their proposals for a paper presentation at the 15th international IRTI Conference. Presentations will be no longer than 15 minutes. You can send your abstract of no more than 250 words to the secretary Albert Nijboer: a.s.nijboer@irti.nl.

Deadline for submitting your proposal is **January 15, 2024**. After review of your proposal, you will be informed, at least before March 1, 2024.

Registration

Online registration will be open after April 1, 2024 on <https://www.pthu.nl/irti/> and will be announced by the IRTI Newsletters. If you do not yet receive the IRTI e-letters, you can subscribe to these newsletters by sending an email to Albert Nijboer: a.s.nijboer@pthu.nl.

On behalf of the IRTI Management Team,
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