NOSTER Thematic Seminary

"TRADITIONAL VALUES" VERSUS "HUMAN RIGHTS" - EXPLORING THE DEBATE

Main organizer: prof. dr. Alfons Brüning, Instituut voor Oosters Christendom, RU Nijmegen/Chair
“Orthodoxy and Peace Building in Europe” at PThU Amsterdam

in cooperation with: prof. dr. Heleen Zorgdrager, PThU Amsterdam

Introduction

“Traditional Values” seems to have become a concept more and more popular during recent years, and in various parts of the world. But what actually are “traditional values” – except for, as one Russian critic put it, “the usual list of virtues an average schoolboy would enumerate in order to get good grades in behavior”? Although often invoked, the concept apparently does not carry with it a clear handling of its constitutive elements. What kind of “tradition” – except for a vague reference to “old age” and “long time relevance” – is meant? And to what extent are there “invented traditions” also at play? Further on, what is meant by “values”, beyond a further undetermined allusion to moral patterns which otherwise are just considered to be a matter of self-understanding, while their actual applications in sets of alleged “traditional values” in fact can differ significantly? Furthermore, what is the role of religion and theology in the concept(s)? Finally, is there a relation, perhaps a polemical, of concomitant debates to actual discussions concerning “human rights”? How do “values” then relate to “rights”?

Not restricting its investigations to mere polemics, the workshop also aims at a better understanding of both the concept and its obvious popularity. It therefore, in anticipation of a broader geographical focus, starts with a particular perspective, gathering experts from both Russia and the United States, next to observers of the debate from Eastern and Western Europe. With good reason we start with a particular focus. Current day Russia, and within it the Russian Orthodox church appears as one of the protagonists in establishing a debate about “traditional values”, while its activities and statements have found a worldwide echo, not the least, for example, in conservative circles within Europe and the United States. Addressing the above-formulated questions, the workshop wants to shed more light on content and function of “traditional values”, but also on contexts of related debates inside Russia, and beyond.

Date and Venue

Monday, October 1st – Tuesday, October 2nd, 2018

PThU Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam

(Provisional) program

Monday, October 1st, 2018

10.30-11.00 Coffee, tea

11.00-11.30 Welcome, introduction (Alfons Brüning, PThU Amsterdam/IvOC Nijmegen): Beyond polemics: What is “traditional” and what is “valuable” within “traditional values”?
Subject – Detailed description

1. The concept of "traditional values" in recent years has gained increasing popularity among conservative religious groups in Western Europe, the United States and Russia. A particular propagator of the concept is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which even has initiated a series of conferences addressing this concept since 2009, and stood behind a resolution of the UNHCR about the value of "traditional values" for the formulation of general ethical cannon of mankind in a globalized world. Furthermore, the concept has been taken up as an ideological guideline in Russian foreign politics, and has become a topic repeatedly referred to in presidential addresses and programmatic statements of president Putin. Elsewhere and probably either directly triggered by, or
welcoming the considerable support from the Russian Church, "traditional values" are being actively promoted also by Evangelical Christians in the U.S.

2. This apparently broad consensus and equally the large group of - at least potential - allies, however, rather disguise the fact that there is much unclear about the concept itself. No official or semi-official source is available that would help to clearly define what "traditional values" actually are. Although it might be possible to single out a certain amount of constitutive documents, speeches or by-passing definitions in interviews and the like, to gain a consistent overview about what belongs to "traditional values" and what does not is still a task to be fulfilled. Any effort, for the time being, has to timely end up with an enumeration of generally undisputed and fairly unquestionable paroles like "sincerity, humility, reliability", next elements of work ethics like "diligence, circumspection" or what might be summarized as communitarian values like "service to family, community, fatherland". And the vagueness does not stop here. Apart from an uncertain and volatile scale of values actually belonging to the concept, it remains equally unclear to what kind of "tradition" they would refer.

Variants in discussion allude to religious (currently predominantly Christian) tradition (which yet on a closer look can hardly be related directly to catalogues of "values"), national heritage (in a more or less broad sense, sometimes rather “civilizational” or “imperial” than narrowly “national”, as e.g. in connection with the "Russian World" concept, referring roughly to the post-Soviet space) or to some general, yet nebulously defined "timeless tradition of human values at force always and everywhere throughout history". The way history and tradition (usually in singular) is being invoked in these various contexts already more than once has led observers to suggest, that Eric Hobsbawm’s well-known statements concerning the "invention of tradition", and the creation of suitable pasts can be applied here more often than not. Furthermore, despite all evidence that there are ideas about "order" laying behind the sets of "traditional values" along the large scale of their variants, such "orders" also for themselves seem to differ significantly from one another, as they sometimes seem to culminate in reactionary political "law and order" concepts, sometimes claim biblical roots when reference to "the order of creation" are made, sometimes appear to go back to more culturally determined concepts like the Russian "pravda" or Orthodox ideas about “political hesychasm”. The list is incomplete.

3. A perspective probably much helpful in order to come to a better understanding of the actual substance of "traditional values" opens up, when they are seen as a concept first and foremost complementary to that of "human rights". Especially when looking on the agenda followed by main representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church (patriarch Kirill, metropolitan Ilarion of Volokolamsk and others) this hypothesis receives more than preliminary approval. Activities of the Moscow patriarchate in order to promote their ideas of "traditional values" started in 2009, not long after the release of a programmatic document concerning "basic teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church concerning human dignity, freedom and rights" in august 2008. (This document, on the one hand, contains a general approval concerning basic presumptions inherent in the "human rights" concept, but also on a number of significant points articulates a diverging standpoint, referring to the "Orthodox tradition"). It also happened at approximately the same time when pointing at art. 29 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights [UNDHR] (speaking, albeit in somewhat undetermined allusions, about human obligations next to human rights, especially with regard to the community one would be part of) becomes an increasingly frequent pattern in speeches and writings of patriarch Kirill and other high ROC hierarchs. Observing such developments leads to the conclusion, that on the one hand "traditional values" are indeed being invoked as a deliberate alternative to "human rights" and in many respects, therefore, can be better understood as what
they are not. The comparative perspective, on the other hand, on a closer look also needs to be specified. A simplistic black-and-white scheme, at any rate would perhaps provide a limited service in order to get deeper insight into the intentions behind the promotion of “traditional values”. If they aim at countering “human rights”, than this countering first and foremost targets a certain liberal interpretation of them, which puts, in the eyes of adversaries, an overdue accent on individual freedom and rights, at the cost of communitarian values and obligations. So “traditional values” are not meant to replace “human rights”, but to restore a balance that is considered to have been lost due to an alleged overemphasis on individualism and freedom.

4. Even this is yet a hypothesis still to be confirmed. What a further check of such hypothesis will necessarily have to take into account is the fact that a discourse around “values” is certainly of a nature different from a discourse about “rights”. Whereas in the former case the emphasis clearly lies on moral questions that would belong to, and bind educational and judging institutions (religious among them), in the latter case the debate addresses the shape of legal systems, and the question of implementation of rights and guarantees into states and political entities. The constant hints to be observed in activities and statements of the ROC to the importance of “morality” (both inside Russia and in a globalized world) seem to speak in favor of this observation. Such a shift of accents cannot but change the entire debate, not in the last place because it tends to hide the moral dimension also present, albeit in the background, in the “human rights” concept. So one further question would be how on the one hand the issues raised by appeals to “traditional values” can possibly be taken serious without automatically conceding the alleged weakness, or a distortion of the discourse on “human rights” that would already be going on for several decades? In other words, the seminar will have to avoid pure polemics, and instead try and go deeper into those patterns, that might cause the popularity and attractiveness of “traditional values” concept.

Aims and possible results

In accordance with the guidelines just mentioned, the seminar wants to undertake a first exploration of the new field opened by debates about “traditional values” and to further specify the questions that would both need and deserve a closer investigation. Examination of the concept and its implications will be done by an interdisciplinary group, joined by political scientists, historians, social scientists and theologians. In the ideal case, the seminar therefore will offer a starting point for more intensive research on the topics singled out. For the given moment, the investigation will concentrate on Russia, the ROC, and its recent activities. Furthermore, it will have to look at historical roots and current implications of the concept for a modern society in Russia and abroad. A follow-up of the current seminar is clearly envisaged. Next to more focused and specific research endeavors possibly encouraged by this seminar, a further step will have to include “traditional values” concepts applied and promoted elsewhere, as e.g. among American Evangelicals, Hungarian Reformed, Ukrainian Catholics. A publication of the main contributions within a “special issue” of one of the journals edited by corresponding institutions (like the Journal of Eastern Christian Studies, Nijmegen/Leuven), with due attention for further points raised at the discussion, will be considered.

Guests and speakers

prof. dr. Alfons Brüning, Institute for Eastern Christian Studies, RU Nijmegen/Chair “Orthodoxy and Peace Building in Europe”, PThU Amsterdam

prof. dr. Heleen Zorgdrager, professor of systematic theology, PThU Amsterdam
dr. Kristina Stoeckl, assistant professor and leader of the project *Postsecular Conflicts* at the Department of Sociology, University of Innsbruck.

dr. Dmitry Uzlaner, Director, Centre for the Study of Religion, Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Moscow/Research Fellow, Innsbruck University, Innsbruck

dr. Elena Stepanova, Institute of Philosophy and Law, Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia

Rev. dr. Anthony G. Roeber, Professor of Church History, St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary, Crestwood/NY, USA

The seminar is open for all NOSTER members. Students and PhD candidates from all participating institutions will be invited separately, especially NOSTER junior members.