

Endowed chair "Orthodoxy, Human Rights, Peace Studies"

Regional Focus: Russia, Ukraine, Post-Soviet Space

Since as early as 2012, activities of the endowed chair are devoted to the conceptual debates between Orthodox theology and the concept of human rights on the one hand, and to an exploration of the Eastern Christian traditions concerning questions of war and peace on the other hand. Though avoiding too narrow a regional focus, due to the scientific background of the professor particular attention is given to developments of religion and society in Russia and Ukraine. Generally, activities consist in scientific research on related topics, further in valorization activities such as comments on current events in the media, advice to NGOs, Think Tanks, professionals, and in the organization of workshops and conferences.

Activities of the endowed chair (*bijzonder hoogleraar*, according to the Dutch model) started with its inception as a joint project of IvOC, VU University Amsterdam and Protestant Theological University (PThU) Amsterdam in 2012. By then, Alfons Brüning, was appointed as holder of the chair, and at present continues to work in this position.

In an initial phase, the chair was sponsored by IvOC and the two Dutch NGOs, Stichting Vredeswetenschappen and Kerk in Actie, partly also by the foundation Porticus. After 2017, the chair and its activities continued in cooperation of IvOC and the PThU. Thereafter former sponsors retired, leaving IvOC currently as the single supporter.

Although not limited to this area, a certain regional focus of the chair's activities since its establishment has been on Christianity in **Russia, Ukraine and East Central Europe**.

Given the obvious relevance of the chair's research and valorization activities, against the background of recent developments in Russia and Ukraine, we are actively searching for new sponsors. The profile sketched here below might be able to give further insights into these activities.

The chair in previous years has organized several conferences on topics related to the main subjects, in Nijmegen, Amsterdam and Kyiv. Further below you can find a list of publications, both scientific and journalist, which resulted from research activities so far.



[Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Church_in_Kharkiv_after_shelling_\(2\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Church_in_Kharkiv_after_shelling_(2).jpg)]

Orthodox Theology and Human Rights

One of the Chair's main focus points of research is the exploration of conflicts, differences, but also intersections and potentials for mutual enrichment between the concept of human rights and patterns of the Orthodox theological tradition. Human rights are still often – inappropriately – perceived and treated as a Western project, nurtured by both Christian tradition and particular

Western traces such as Renaissance, Enlightenment. Orthodox Christian tradition, on the other hand, is a Christian, but not Western tradition.

Human Rights in Christian, both Eastern and Western perspective are, within the chair's activities, being scrutinized in a certain framework: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." Holy Scripture, equally important for Eastern and Western Christian traditions, on various occasions repeats these two commandments as the cornerstone of Christian ethics (according to **Matthew 22: 37-40**). There is little, if any, priority given to just one of them. Although for experts in theology and history this might be contested in detail, the impression often occurs that the Christian East has put a greater emphasis on the first of the two commandments, whereas the West has primarily focused on the second. The result is Eastern asceticism and Western "exclusive humanism" (for example in Charles Taylor's framing, but also expressed in Human Rights' concepts).

In fact, for a common Christian tradition both commandments are equally binding and important, and they are even interconnected. This provides the general framework for a discussion of human rights in contact with the Christian East, and vice versa. In recent years, this has been spelled out in the chair's activities especially in studies on **theological anthropology and "Human Dignity"**, next to more general analyses of the dialogue about human rights, as it has evolved in recent decades.

Peace Studies

A second focus of the chair's scientific and public activities is connected with the teaching on war and peace in both the Eastern and Western tradition. There is obviously more than a mere theoretical relevance to such studies. **Eastern Christians, for example in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, Armenia and, last but not least in Russia and Ukraine are finding themselves in the midst of the conflict zones of today's world.** More often than not there is a historical dimension to these conflicts, which needs to be known for an appropriate understanding.

Religious traditions with regard to war and peace are generally ambivalent. Religions, including the Eastern Christian denominations, in conflicts can take the role of either peace builders or fire accelerants. They can be used and misused, and all this can be witnessed and analyzed. As a result of preparational studies carried out so far, the question behind the mentioned ambivalence – more complex than public opinion often wants to have it – is that of **"religion and ideology"**. Studies, lecture activities and publication activities of the chair in recent years have been devoted to this theme.

The chair devotes particular efforts to the reconstruction of an Eastern Christian tradition concerning questions of war and peace. Eastern Christianity, different from the West, does not have a teaching comparable to concepts of a "just war" in Western Christianity. "War" in the Eastern tradition is always evil, and cannot even be just, although in exceptional situations it might be impossible to evade. And yet, despite pacifist overtones especially in its early phase in late Antiquity, and despite numerous prayers, liturgical texts, theological treaties invoking peace as both the goal of Christian activities and a state to be maintained, the Eastern Christian tradition is not purely pacifist. That concerns a mainstream in tradition, but also exceptions from the rule. Recent statements by the patriarchate of Moscow are but one example of a line of use and misuse of religious and theological patterns, also for the sake of justifying violence – and large scale violations of basic human rights. Accordingly, there is the necessity to understand

the details of the tradition, and the political and social mechanisms that decide on its application for the purposes of peace, or of war.

Current directions in research, projects

Orthodox Tradition and Human Rights

As for human rights and Eastern Christian tradition, efforts are made to both define and defend a core supply of (first, second, third generation) human rights. Defense, in this context, is directed against the double threat emerging from overstressing rights claims on the one hand, and countering populist concepts (like “traditional values”, particularly fostered i.a. by the Moscow patriarchate) on the other hand. Part of the related questions concerns the role religion, and (Eastern and Western) Christian tradition in particular can aid in this purpose.

This programmatic direction seems to be of particular relevance in the current Ukrainian context, where **the dispute between (allegedly) Western human rights and alternative “traditional values”** has been virulent, and at times painful before the current war, and will remain an unresolved issue probably still after its end. The very fact that parts of the Russian Orthodox Church spare no efforts to sell the ongoing war as a “war of ideas” or “values” along exactly these lines, gives additional proof for the necessity to clarify, and to possibly reconcile the actual conflict lines now and in the near future.

Peace studies

No one by now could legitimately claim to know the “road to peace” in a conflict like that in Ukraine. Many are yet looking for such roads. Activities of the chair, by research and discussion, are devoted to competently participating in this search. That might include to help avoiding seductive errors and dead ends where they might occur.

The current war against Ukraine has repeatedly been framed as a **“war of ideas”**. **Most of these ideas include patterns presented as religious.** Finding ways back towards peace, however difficult this might seem, presupposes an adequate understanding of these ideas and their potential for either peace building or escalation of conflict. A current task of the chair is in analyzing existing conflicts and motivating ideas, debunk distortions and exaggerations, indicate potentials and possible partners for dialogue. That includes, next to scientific research, also – as far as possible – a participation in public debates and media coverage.

Discussions about the legitimacy of Ukrainian defense, in terms of international law regulations and commonly accepted norms, but also in application of central terms of Eastern and Western Christian tradition, have become even more intense since the outbreak of the Russian invasion in February 2022. Within such debates, classical pacifism and related options for categorical non-violence, as once brought about, not in the least, by adherents of Eastern Christianity (as Lev Tolstoy) have come under scrutiny again. Guiding questions emerging from this conflict with more urgency than before are: Do classical concepts of pacifism and peace keeping need an update? What does a legitimate “struggle against evil” actually mean?

Valorization, Public Relevance

The competence of the chair has found an expanding market in the Dutch public sphere in recent years. Next to scientific research itself, the popularization of achieved insights and new perspectives among a broader circle of recipients has always been another field of the chair’s activities.

In cooperation with Dutch (partly also international) media and journalists especially since February 2022, a series of journalistic articles of explaining and orientational character has been published concerning Eastern Christian tradition, religion in Ukraine and beyond, and backgrounds of the alleged “war of ideas”. They appeared in newspapers and on websites such as *Trouw*, *liberaalchristendom.nl*, *nieuwwij.nl*, *platform-oc.net* and others.

Public lectures by invitation of, among others, the Radboud Reflects program at Radboud University Nijmegen, the NOSTER study group, the Rotary Clubs in Nijmegen and surroundings have added to these activities. Further invitations for 2023 in the Netherlands and Germany have arrived and will be followed up on.

Cooperation with public institutions, NGOs and think tanks, include working with Amnesty International, PAX Netherlands, more recently the REKA-network (Rusland-Europa-Kennis-Alliantie, together with the platform *raamoprusland.nl*), and the Clingendael-Institute Den Haag paved the way for functioning as an advisor, on questions of “value debates” or “religion and the war” for the named institutions, but also for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since 2019, lectures and written contributions were part of a cooperation with the Dutch Ministry of Justice.

Recent media presence (selected)

- “Nu toch geen eenheid, maar “kerkvervolging”? Nieuwe ontwikkelingen OeOK” - Platform Oosters Christendom, 10 januari 2023

<https://platform-oc.net/2023/01/10/nu-toch-geen-eenheid-maar-kerkvervolgingen-nieuwe-ontwikkelingen-bij-de-orthodoxe-kerk-in-oekraïne/>

- “Afscheiding van Moskou – of toch niet? Ontwikkelingen in de Oekraïense Orthodoxe Kerk (OeOK) “ – Platform Oosters Christendom, 9 juni 2022

<https://platform-oc.net/2022/06/09/afscheiding-van-moskou-of-toch-niet/>

- (also in *Trouw*, 22 mei 2022:

<https://www.trouw.nl/religie-filosofie/hoe-kon-de-russische-patriarch-kirill-een-verwoestende-oorlog-rechtvaardigen~b3c5147f/>)

- “Kirill’s vertekende versie van Russisch Christendom” – *liberaalchristendom.nl*, 13 mei 2022

<https://liberaalchristendom.wordpress.com/kirills-vertekende-versie-van-russisch-christendom>

- “Kyiv of Kiev: de vrijheid waarvoor Oekraïners eigenlijk strijden - Over de inzet voor gezamenlijke Europese waarden” (samen met Heleen Zorgdrager) – *NieuwWij*, 17 maart 2022

<https://www.nieuwwij.nl/opinie/kyiv-of-kiev-de-vrijheid-waarvoor-oekraïners-eigenlijk-strijden/>

Interviews, Consultations

- “De Russische Orthodoxie is in crisis” – *Volzin*, mei 2023, pp. 38-41

<https://www.deroerom.nl/nieuws/2022/03/orthodoxie-pacifistischer-dan-het-westen/>

- “Orthodoxie pacifistischer dan het Westers Christendom” – *De Roerom*, 14 maart 2022

- Further contacts for consultation with i.a. The Washington Post, *NRC-Handelsblad*, *Katholiek Nieuwsblad* etc.; participation in workshops organized by PThU Amsterdam, Nederlandse Akademie der Wetenschappen (KNAW), Doopsgezind Seminarie etc.

(Selected) Scientific Publications

Edited Books:

- (with Thomas Bremer, Nadia Kizenko) (eds.): *Orthodoxy in Two Manifestations? – The Conflict in Ukraine as Expression of a Fault Line in World Orthodoxy* (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 2022) [Erfurter Studien zur Kulturgeschichte des Orthodoxen Christentums, vol. 21].

- (ed.) *Human Dignity and Patristic Legacy* (Leuven: Peeters, 2019 [Special Issue Journal of Eastern Christian Studies 2019, no. 3-4]).

- (with Evert van der Zweerde) (eds.): *Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights*. (Leuven: Peeters, 2012).

Articles, chapters in books:

Orthodox Theology and Human Rights

- ‚Übersetzungsprobleme: „Apophatische Anthropologie“ und politisch-soziale Konzepte von Menschenwürde in der Orthodoxie,‘ in Daniel Munteanu, Sorin Șelaru (eds.): *Holding fast to the Mystery of the Faith. Festschrift for Patriarch Daniel of the Romanian Orthodox Church* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 153-172.

- ‚Can theosis save Human Dignity? – Chapters in Theological Anthropology East and West [Introduction],‘ in *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 71, 2019, no. 3-4, pp. 177-248.

- ‚De orthodoxe kerken en de mensenrechten in de 21ste eeuw,‘ in *Tijdschrift voor religie, recht en beleid* 10, 2019, no. 1, pp. 94-115.

- „On the moral content of ‘Human Rights’ and of ‘Theosis’ – a reassessment” in Diamantopoulou, Elisabeth A. and Christians Louis-Léon, (eds.), *Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights in Europe. Theology, Law and Religion in interaction* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2018), pp. 325-354.

- „Orthodox Theology in Dialogue with Human Rights: Some Considerations on Current Themes, Problems, and Perspectives” in *Exchange, A Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research* 45, 2016, no. 4. pp. 380-392.

- ‚Orthodoxie – Christentum – Demokratie“ – Orthodoxe Priester als Menschenrechtsaktivisten,‘ in Vasilios Makrides, Jennifer Wasmuth, Stefan Kube (eds.): *Christentum und Menschenrechte: Aktuelle Debatten in Ost und West*, (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 2016) (=Erfurter Studien zur Kulturgeschichte des östlichen Christentums, 11), pp. 103-120.

- ‚Different humans and different rights? On Human Dignity from Western and Eastern Orthodox Perspectives,‘ in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 23, 2013, no. 2, pp. 150-175.

- [Russian translation] ‚Разные люди - разные права? О понятии "достоинства человека" с точки зрения запада и восточных христианских церквей,‘ in *Государство, Религия, Церковь в России и за рубежом* 32, 2014, no 3, pp. 166-196.

- ‚"Freedom" vs. "Morality" – On Orthodox Anti-Westernism and Human Rights,‘ in Brüning, van der Zweerde (eds.): *Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights*, Leuven: Peeters, 2012, pp. 121-148.

- ‚Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights – an Ambiguous Relationship (Introduction),‘ in Brüning, van der Zweerde (eds.): *Orthodox Christianity and Human Rights*, Leuven: Peeters, 2012, pp. 1-15.

- 'Orthodoxe Werte und Menschenrechte – Hintergründe eines aktuellen Diskurses,' in *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 62, 2010, no. 1-2, pp. 103-152.

Peace Studies

- 'Heilige, Helden, Krieger – Zwischen Religion und Ideologie: Epilog' in Liliya Berezhnaya (ed.), *Die Militarisierung der Heiligen in Vormoderne und Moderne (Historische Forschungen, vol. 122)* (Stuttgart: Duncker & Humblot, 2020), pp. 310-327.

- 'Het probleem van de naastenliefde en de nuchterheid van tolerantie. Oosters-christelijke tradities over oorlog en vrede in verleden en heden,' in Kalsky, Manuela and Heleen Murre-van den Berg (eds.), *De prijs van de vrede. Geweldloosheid in een gewelddadige wereld?* (Heeswijk: Berne Media, 2017), pp. 43-57.

Religion and Church in Modern Ukraine

- "'Kyivan Christianity" and the "Churches of the Kyivan Tradition": Concepts of Distinctiveness of Christianity in Ukraine before and after 2019,' in Thomas Bremer, Alfons Brüning, Nadieszda Kizenko (eds.): *Orthodoxy in Two Manifestations? The Conflict in Ukraine as Expression of a Fault Line in World Orthodoxy* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2022), pp. 145-172.

- '„Einfach orthodox?“ - Ukraine: die Gläubigen und die Gesellschaft, in *Osteuropa* 68, 2018, no. 8-9, pp. 119-138.

- 'Orthodox Autocephaly in Ukraine: the Historical Dimension,' in Andrii Krawchuk, Thomas Bremer (eds.), *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), pp. 79-101.

- "'Project Ukraine" under threat – Christian Churches in Ukraine and their Relations 1991-2015' in *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 67, 2015, no. 1-2, pp. 103-142.

Other regions

- 'Nicht das Ende Europas – Zur Religionsgeschichte von Belarus,' in *RGOW [Religion und Gesellschaft in Ost und West]* 4-5, 2021, pp. 8-11.

- '“Beyond Politics?” – The Belorussian Orthodox Church and the Challenge of Civil Society' – IECS report 7 (October 2020) - https://www.ru.nl/.../report_alfons_bruning_-_belarus.pdf

- 'Pastoral Care and Citizenship: Orthodoxy in Belarus at a Crossroads,' – Berkley Forum, September 10, 2020 – URL: <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/pastoral-care-and-citizenship-orthodoxy-in-belarus-at-a-crossroads>.

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