Q&A with Tom and Dawn Wolthuis

NEW PRESIDENTIAL TEAM DISCUSSES CHANGE, CHALLENGES, DISTINCTIVENESS AND TRADITION

Perspective: Are you settling into your new offices and home all right?

Dawn: I’m loving it here – we’re loving it here. There’s something really interesting at this point in our careers, with my husband and I working together. I’m changing countries, I’m changing careers, I’m changing a lot of things all at once. It’s quite the adventure.

Tom: It’s definitely a different setting for us. We’re settling into the facilities here and working to help dress them up as well. It’s a wonderful location in terms of access and activity.

(continued on page 2)
ICS is a unique academic environment. Do you see any particular strengths or challenges arising from its uniqueness?

Tom: Having a graduate school without an undergraduate school connected to it is different, because there aren’t many like that. And focusing on Reformational, interdisciplinary philosophy and theology as its key focuses is unique in many ways. That’s part of our distinctiveness, but that’s also part of the challenges: How does a unique institution like this function? What are our goals? What’s our support base?

I taught mostly at the undergrad level, where it’s much more focused on the classroom and the students. I had multiple classes to teach, which left little time for research, so I’m really glad our scholars have the time and opportunity to do research and then develop and refine their scholarship in the classroom.

Dawn: I’m very excited about working with the people here. It’s a vibrant group. I love it when people ask questions and don’t presuppose the answers.” – Dawn

“We’re called to be servants in this world now.” – Tom

We have people discussing scholarly things from a Christian perspective and talking with other scholars. And that mission— that ministry in the world—is important.

Dawn: I came from the Christian Reformed denomination, and that community has always valued Christian education in seeing things as everything being under God’s domain. We have the “every square inch” thing going, right? That’s the lens through which I see Christian studies. The tradition from which I come and from which ICS originates values Christian education from pre-school through graduate school.

Tom: We’re called to be servants in this world now. That’s been a significant message of the Reformed tradition, and that’s why it has gotten engaged with political, social and cultural elements.

Now, the challenge has been that it’s done that only in some limited sectors at times, or it has looked too much as if it’s a colony unto itself. How do we take the strengths of that tradition and engage some of the wider audience, so that it’s not just an in-house tribal activity? And yet how do you take the strengths of that and work with others? That’s what excites me about why I’m here. I accepted the call because I see tremendous strengths and ways we can continue to develop them. The CRC has a distinctive tradition. One of my concerns is I hope ICS can help the CRC, and the Reformational movement overall, keep that distinctiveness.

Dawn: I’m very excited about working with the people here. It’s a vibrant group. I love it when people ask questions and don’t presuppose the answers, and you don’t have to go along with the exact answer that everybody has taught you since you were in pre-school.

What gifts do you see ICS having to offer the world, and does being rooted in the Reformational tradition make those gifts unique in some ways?

Dawn: I’m delighted that ICS is from my community and that we have a graduate education where people can delve into questions that are broader than what you might ask at an undergraduate level. We have people discussing scholarly things from a Christian perspective and talking with other scholars. And that mission—that ministry in the world—is important.

Tom: In many ways that’s our distinctiveness. Do you see any particular strengths or challenges arising from that connection?

Tom: There are definitely strengths and challenges because of the distinctiveness of our tradition, which has always seen itself as engaged in the affairs of this world. Our calling is not a “calling to get to heaven.” That’s a part of the story, but it’s not what we’re called to do. We’re called to address this world now. We’re called to be servants in this world now. That’s been a significant message of the Reformed tradition, and that’s why it has gotten engaged with political, social and cultural elements.

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By the Numbers: Facts about ICS in 2012–13

20 courses offered
47 Junior Members in degree programs
37 additional Junior Members in courses, primarily from the Toronto School of Theology
10 faculty presentations at church and community conferences
6 student sessions at church and community conferences
7 articles in popular or professional venues
4 scholarly articles from faculty
2 books from faculty
3 book manuscripts
2 book proposals
16 papers at scholarly conferences
2 articles in magazines
4 forewords
4 refereed manuscripts
2 successful Junior Member grant applications
2 Junior Member scholarly papers published
9 graduates at the 2012 Convocation
2 honorary doctorates conferred
2 major events, with collaboration in many others
4 interfaculty colloquia with participants from the University of Toronto and elsewhere
1 blog, Ground Motive, with many articles and discussions
29 educational and informative videos on our YouTube channel
168 issues of our newsletter Perspective (back to 1967) available online
316 people “like” us on Facebook
”Unemies” [sic]

by Drew Van’t Land

The prince of peace’s enemies
Backstabbed wounds infect with disease
Backlogged years of bureaucratic attitudes
Provincial insults and territorial disputes
Caught two rulers in futile feudal feuds
A revolution’s fuse blew as zealous Hebrews
Refused the refuse savior they abused
Their views confused by his good news
The messiah only sighed, no words belied a ruse
A simple savior, a rumor of bad behavior
Blew him to and fro, he’d come and go forth
before court upon court upon court upon court
Roaming between Roman rulers
The priests policed the Hebrew mob he brewed
Stirring crowds into fomenting
His blood fermenting
His flesh swelling like bread-yeast
This master’s peace was a masterpiece
His peace fared better than warfare
’cause all’s fair in love and war there
Where a love affair with an earthen breed
Dethroned an innocent God of his judgment seat
Disowning his own claim to the throne
Alone he cried for the will to abide
Inside the ravenous wars
Of principalities and powers
Cyclones of violence among high-ranking foes
Invested with the best of methods to scourge Christ from both
Sides, he was tried yet true, black and blue
Hammered by gavels on political anvils
Evils fragment and split; Rend and rip
The fabric of fallacious friendship
Until tripped up by the Son’s tightlipped responses
They found common causes
In mocking his losses
What did the taxing axis of the cross cost him?
Intersecting the sects
and connecting the eclectic
His life was exchanged
to unite the estranged
Fusing former foes, he left behind restitched
The patchwork patterns of battered relationships
The Son’s silence
Undoes violence
And in the end
Enemies befriend
Again and again
And again,
Amen.

Drew Van’t Land is a Junior Member at ICS in the MA program and a graduate of Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, IL.
We talk a lot about justice on this blog, and in this entry I want to talk about what justice is in relation to one’s faith or spiritual vocation. The thing that has occasioned this particular entry is a meeting I had in the summer where we talked a bit about concepts of justice and how, as Dr. Wolterstorff mentioned in his address at the Social Justice and Human Rights conference in April of 2012, justice differs from benevolence. During this meeting, someone raised the question of whether justice had any links to piety and to a sense of Christian calling. I thought that was a pretty good question.

It’s an important question for the Christian tradition, of course, because the answer will shape the way Christian faith is understood. This is not to say that other faith traditions don’t also have conceptions of justice as part of a spiritual calling – many do, and one of the greatest things about interreligious dialogue is the fact that we can learn from each other’s understandings. What, then, do we as followers of Christ bring to the proverbial table in terms of understandings of justice? And are such concepts linked for us not just to a moral imperative to do the “right thing” but to the very ground of our faith?

In thinking through this question, it struck me that both the Old and New Testaments have quite a bit to say on the matter, and many of the passages that could be cited use language that is quite striking. In Isaiah 59:15-16, for example, God is described as being “appalled” at the lack of justice, and at the fact that there was “no one to intervene” when the needs of justice were not met.

Interestingly enough, earlier in the same chapter, injustice is described in terms of spurious law suits and false witness, and while law during the time the book of Isaiah was written is certainly a great deal different than law today, they are part of the same tradition (very broadly defined) stretching across time. “Intervening,” then takes on a particular tone, and justice is linked with law – with what is required of one.

In the Gospel accounts justice does not appear in quite the same way, but Christ does issue a very specific call regarding “whatever you do to the least of these.” In that passage, he describes those who intervened in a different way: clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger and visiting the imprisoned. Furthermore, Christ draws a parallel with the treatment of “these” people and the treatment of his own person. He seems to make it clear that whatever we act to those in need is how we act to Christ himself.

If, then, God is appalled at injustice, as Isaiah describes it, and Christ issues a very pointed call to feed, clothe and otherwise care for those in need, it seems to me that acting justly – where such action is understood as intervening to help those in need, treating them as we would treat Christ were we to suddenly stumble across him in a similar situation – is in fact part of a Christian vocation and not just “what we should do.” (Which is in no way to detract from saying that acting justly is what we should do). Going out on a limb here, I would even say that we could call it a requirement of faithful living.

In the understandable rush to work for justice in this day and age, those of us who are already justice advocates of one kind or another can become enmeshed in structures that are not comfortable with spiritual language such as “calling” or “spiritual discipline” – another phrase I have recently heard used to describe justice work. And I think we do have to be aware of whether that kind of language can be alienating to some. But I also think, for those who consider themselves to be followers of Christ, that it is worth having a look at our own concepts of justice, and how they may be linked to our very vocation – how they may be linked to our commitment to be a follower of Christ. Can we see such a relation between justice and a life of faith?

Allyson Carr is Editor of Ground Motive, a doctoral graduate of ICS, and Associate Director of CPRSE

www.icscanada.edu Perspective Institute for Christian Studies

Kuipers composed the book during a sabbatical ICS awarded in the 2011-12 academic year. He describes Rorty as one of the most cited yet least understood philosophers of the 20th century. The book thus offers an overview and introduction to Rorty’s ideas, key writings and contributions to various fields of philosophy. It traces the development of Rorty’s thought and examines the key topics and controversies central to his work.

Kuipers introduces Rorty’s complex thought through the exploration of three Rortyan personas: The Philosophical Therapist, The Liberal Ironist and the Anticlerical Prophet. This exploration of Rorty’s multivalent yet deeply coherent intellectual identity is set against the background of his personal motivations for thinking about religion and politics. “Dartmouth College Professor of Religion Nancy Frankenberry claims that “Kuipers’ book provides the best introduction to all facets of Rorty’s work, for anyone who cares about the relevance of philosophy today,” and concludes that “the chapter on Rorty as Anticlerical Prophet is a tour de force.”

The Centre for Philosophy, Religion and Social Ethics will host a book launch on Friday, April 5, at Leonard Hall at Wycliffe College in the University of Toronto. For more information, contact CPRSE@icscanada.edu.
On Dec. 20, ICS PhD candidate Daniel Mullin successfully defended his doctoral dissertation in the Aula of the VU University Amsterdam. Titled *Democracy without Secularism: A Pragmatist Critique of Habermas*, his dissertation engages in a sustained yet sympathetic critique of Jürgen Habermas’ views concerning the issue of religious voices in the public sphere of pluralistic democratic societies.

Habermas is well known as a contemporary defender of liberal Enlightenment values, including the conviction that the reasons citizens proffer to support particular political positions should in principle be publicly accessible. For much of his career, Habermas accepted the assumption that, unlike secular rationales (which are assumed to be ‘neutral’), religious reasons are not publicly accessible, and as a result, unless they can be translated into secular terms, they must not be admitted into public discussion of particular political issues. Of course, this position has generated controversy among religious thinkers who doubt the neutrality of secular rationales and would also defend the legitimacy of the presence of religious voices in the public sphere.

Mullin’s dissertation deftly wades into these controversial waters, enlisting the support of the pragmatist philosophy of Jeffrey Stout to make a case for the legitimacy of religious voices in public political debate. In so doing, Mullin offers several practical suggestions, concerning how religious voices might play a positive role in future political discussions and also about how liberal politics might remain open to insights from religious quarters.

Interestingly, while defending the legitimacy of religious voices, Mullin maintains that the formal secularity of the political sphere is still a valuable aspect of liberalism. The language of the laws passed by state legislatures ought to be neutral and devoid of sectarian religious language, he argues, even if the reasons put forward for adopting such laws can include untranslated religious reasons. According to Mullin, one can thus affirm such “formal secularity” without adopting what he calls “naive secularism.”

Thus, while remaining sympathetic to Habermas’ criticism of religious dogmatism, Mullin urges Habermas to consider that there are other ways to imagine a public role for religion, including some that are in the spirit of Habermas’ project of redemptive critique (or diagnosing and attempting to heal the various “pathologies” of modernity). Throughout his dissertation, Mullin shares Habermas’ goal of transcending our current antagonistic political discourse. “Although we may never reach an ideal speech situation,” Mullin suggests, “we can learn to negotiate the politics of multiple identities without religious sectarianism or ideological secularism.”

On Dec. 7, Jelle Huisman successfully completed his MA thesis, titled *Translations of the Implicit: Tracing How Language Works beyond Gendlin and Derrida*. Jelle’s thesis asks how translations can do justice to the implicit side of language, a topic that arises from his work in the field of Bible translation. Lambert Zuidervaart was the thesis supervisor. External examiner Graeme Nicholson, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto, says the thesis shows a “thorough understanding of many of today’s important philosophers, and a constructive, creative capacity to illuminate a major problem.” Jelle works as a research and technology consultant for Roma Bible Union. He and his family currently reside in the Netherlands, where he plans to enter a PhD program in translation studies.
Perspective can now be viewed online. See perspective.icscanada.edu

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