

Press release, 12 Jan 2016

## **The 18th Nordic Conference on Systematic Theology Ecumenical and Interreligious Challenges, Helsinki, 7-10 Jan 2016**

Nordic societies have often been depicted as rather homogeneous entities shaped by Lutheran religious and cultural inheritance. Even if there has been some truth to this claim since the times of Reformation, today's Nordic societies are highly pluralistic. In addition to secular ideologies of various kinds, a wide array of Christian denominations and world religions alike have become part of the Nordic socio-cultural landscape. In Finland in particular, Islam has just recently become the second largest religious affiliation (70-75 000 affiliates) after the Evangelical Lutheran one (ca. 4 000 000 affiliates). The third and the fourth largest groups are the Orthodox and the Pentecostals.

The conference program was structured around four key themes:

- God and secularism
- Christ and ecumenism
- Reformation
- Service and advocacy

Each of these themes was explored with particular attention given to ecumenical and interreligious challenges to systematic theology in today's rapidly changing societal circumstances.

The speakers of the conference included its four keynotes Olav Fykse Tveit (General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Geneva), Jaana Hallamaa (Professor of Social Ethics, Helsinki), Mattias Martinsson (Professor of Systematic Theology and Studies in World Views, Uppsala), and Risto Saarinen (Professor of Ecumenics, Helsinki), more than ten other invited speakers, doctoral students through a call for papers, and special guests Archbishop of Sweden Dr. Antje Jackelén and Bishop of Porvoo Dr. Björn Vikström. There were ca. 100 participants in the conference, speakers included.

Among the central issues discussed by several speakers, as well as by the conference participants in general, were the impacts of multicultural development on the Nordic societies, on systematic theology, and on the very identities of Nordic people and Europeans. As a most topical challenge, the influx of asylum seekers was addressed on many occasions. Also religious radicalism as well as many subtle changes in the Nordic cultural landscape, to a large extent conditioned by secular ideologies in addition to religious ones, were keenly analyzed. Classical topics such as the uniqueness of Christ and God's grace were covered rather broadly and various models of reformation, taking into account both Christian and non-Christian contexts, were discussed. The importance of hope in the face of current European and global practical challenges was affirmed and elaborated further as related to concepts such as faith, service, and righteousness.

In the excursions (especially to the Orthodox Uspenski Cathedral), representatives of several faiths brought forth their insights as regards the theme of the conference. In the Sunday events (particularly in the Sermon in the Cathedral of Helsinki by Archbishop Jackelén from Uppsala and in the subsequent Open Discussion event) topics such as the healing character of faith, the nature of salvation, faith-based advocacy for justice, the unity of Christianity, and the need for continual reformation were reflected upon further.

The conference was organized by its Nordic Planning Committee (chaired by Assistant Professor Ville Päiväsalo) and the Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki, with the Porthania building of this university as its main venue. It was followed by a one-day student conference on Dimensions of Tolerance, organized by the conference course students who also contributed to the practical arrangements of the Nordic Conference.

Further info: <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/nord-conf/>.