

PACS - Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies

Newsletter No. 7 – November 2021



Minor “Peace and Conflict Studies” in 2021/2022

Contribution by dr. Lenneke Sprik

Like previous years, we again welcomed about 80 students to the minor Peace and Conflict Studies. Since the COVID-19 measures have been lifted, we are slowly starting to see students more on campus, although a majority of the classes are still taught online. With the uncertainty of not knowing how the autumn and winter would affect our return to campus and with international students joining the programme, we had to make sure that our education remains accessible for all our students. At the time of writing, late October, we seem to have found a middle way by organising some sessions on campus, while offering others online. We realise that we are unable to cater to the needs of all students, but this hybrid model will have to do for now.

We also welcomed a new staff member, Willemijn Born, who is an alumna of the programme, and now works as a junior researcher for the Centre for International Criminal Justice. Willemijn will co-teach ‘Political Violence and the Human Condition’ with Maartje Weerdesteijn. By the end of this calendar year, I will leave the Vrije Universiteit, which means that the coordination of the minor will be taken over by someone else. I would like to use this opportunity to thank my colleagues in the minor programme and the VU Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies for the opportunity to fulfil this role for almost three years, which has been a very rewarding and enjoyable experience. It was a pleasure to work with so many enthusiastic colleagues who are all very committed to teaching on peace and conflict.

Last but not least, we have again appointed three student representatives, who will help us in dealing with any issues or questions that may arise with regard to the minor. We would like to thank Afra Knaap, Merel Gerritse, and Daniella Paulin for taking up this role. They are happy to share their experience in the minor on the next page.

Student experiences with the minor

"I've chosen a minor that is quite different to my background in Architecture. Although the work-ethic and conceptual language varies, the ties between both disciplines are clear to me. Most of all in the realm of development policies in post-conflict areas, an academic background on peace and conflict studies will certainly serve well when designing and planning the practical side of the matter. Understanding the needs of the ones you design and plan for has always been a key point in my Bachelor.

Reviewing both the historical and more current questions on ethicality in human relations will give more depth to the methods for physically implementing order and peace by measures of planning. An example would be creating a floor plan for a refugee camp that guarantees peaceful transfer for everyone from one side of the camp to another.

Nevertheless, I have also learned the art of noninterference as one opposite side, and the Do No Harm approach as a middle ground. I am intrigued to see what the minor will further bring me in both the real of international development and topics I am unfamiliar with.



Afra Knaap

I would say that is the greatest potential of this minor, offering an unbelievably broad scope of information in which you can look for that what really motivated you."



"Peace & Conflict Studies is an interdisciplinary approach at trying to understand the violence that has dominated our society for centuries. As a history student myself, I've learned about these conflicts during my years at the VU; from ancient to contemporary history, my academic discipline has allowed me to learn about both the beautiful and the ugly.

Enrolling in this minor has further enriched my knowledge in the history of the world, since it's allowing me to understand why these conflicts begin in the first place. A human perspective is introduced; with courses that delve into the human mind and the fluctuating nature of ethics, I feel myself gaining further insight into how conflict is so dependent on human nature.

Additionally, since I'm also an international student, I can also apply the things I have learned to some of the things I have witnessed growing up. Being half Swedish-half Ecuadorian, and growing up mostly in Quito, Ecuador, I have quite literally witnessed the two opposite sides of the spectrum; locations filled with both peace and conflict, tailored exactly to the measure of the country's situation. Not only does this minor expose the student to different types of conflicts around the world, it also provides a deep understanding of these situations that can ultimately lead to possible prevention for future conflicts to come."

Daniella Paulin

“As a student from the ‘Law in Society’ bachelor at the VU, I was already used to an interdisciplinary approach when it comes to complex topics such as migration and climate change. I have been able to use some of my legal knowledge in this minor, but I have also been confronted and challenged by my lack of knowledge in many other fields of study.

The minor Peace and Conflict studies has so far enabled me to further develop my interests in specific conflicts and in the inner workings of humanitarian aid.

It has also familiarised me with other disciplines such as criminology, political science and ethics.

Overall, I enjoy the way in which the Peace and Conflict studies minor makes me question my perspective and assumptions.



I look forward to seeing what else the minor will have to offer.”

Merel Gerritse

Roundtable event Peace and Conflict Studies in the Netherlands

Contribution by [Boyd Pander](#)

On September 23rd, PACS invited attendees both at the VU and online to learn more about the current state of peace and conflict studies in the Netherlands. After a warm welcome by prof. Wolfgang Wagner, a brief speech was given by Frans van Drimmelen, the chairman of the VU Vereniging that generously funded this event.

As part one of the event, Nour Gjaltema (VU) and Rosanne Anholt (Radboud Universiteit) presented their research report “Mapping Peace and Conflict Studies in the Netherlands”. Their work had traced the academic origins of current Dutch peace and conflict studies, including the historic nuance hidden in the term ‘*polemologie*’, and indexed the current areas of focus of the universities and research institutes who study peace and conflict.



[Rosanne Anholt](#)



[Nour Gjaltema](#)

After some attention to its history and the current state of peace and conflict studies in the Netherlands, PACS invited academics and practitioners to a roundtable to discuss the future of the field in the Netherlands. Prof. Jolle Demmers (UU) and prof. Jaap de Wilde (RUG) were joined by Marjolein Wijninckx (PAX) and Geert Kuiper (Dutch Ministry of Defence) in a conversation moderated by Wolfgang Wagner and Rosanne Anholt. Among the topics covered were: the attention of researchers for the exceptional, but not the silent successes in peace building; the need for the exchange of research methods between academia and the field; and the question of how to introduce a new generation of scholars and enthusiasts to the field Peace and Conflict studies.



Roundtable guests: Jolle Demmers, Jaap de Wilde, Majorlijn Wijnincks and Geert Kuiper
Moderators: Wolfgang Wagner (left) and Rosanne Anholt (right)

The audience was able to ask questions to the panel, but also give suggestions on how to strengthen the field. One suggestion was through collaboration between Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. Another notable suggestion was on the methods could be used to inspire students to take on the mantle in the future.

The presentation and roundtable can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/event/1263229/embed>
PACS once again thanks the VU vereniging for their financial support for this event.

Mini-Conference: “Public Theology and Postcolonial Hermeneutics”

Sept. 23&24, 2021 | Contribution by prof. dr. Fernando Enns & dr. Andrés Pacheco Lozano

For some years, researchers of the VU-Faculty of Religion & Theology, together with an international team has been developing a research project titled “*The Role of Religion in the Construction of Narratives and Practices of Polarization and/or Transformation in Post-Conflict Societies.*” A first Expert Meeting had been organized in November 2018—for which the seed-funding of PACS was key. Since then, more researchers have become involved, led by the VU-faculty’s Research Group “Peace, Trauma, Religion”, coordinated by Prof. Fernando Enns and Dr. Andrés Pacheco Lozano. The proposal is now at a stage that it can be submitted to different funds.

The main goal of this proposal is to explore how religion—both, institutionalized and lived by different communities—functions in the construction of narratives and practices for either polarization (exclusion, othering, etc.) or transformation (reconciliation, forgiveness, and peacebuilding) in so-called “post-conflict” societies. Five contexts have been chosen for this research: Indonesia, Colombia, South Africa, The Balkan region, and The Netherlands.

The key hermeneutical approach to this research project is informed by postcolonial studies. To explore this further, a mini-conference on “Public Theology and Postcolonial Hermeneutics” was held on September 23-24, 2021. Researchers from the five contexts, VU-students of the Master-specialization program “Peace, Trauma and Religion” and international exchange students of the “Bridging Gaps”-program of the Faculty of Religion & Theology participated actively. The goal of the Mini-Conference was to understand how this common hermeneutical approach of a postcolonial lens could be applied to the five chosen contexts.



In the case of *Indonesia* (Prof. Binsar Pakpahan), the conversation circled around the existence of different understandings of forgiveness, based on guilt—mostly coming from the Western Christian tradition—or shame and honor—which are perceived as key principles for different communities in Asia. Thus, a postcolonial lens helps to re-interpret the concept and vision of forgiveness in a framework of creating harmony in society, rather than a confession of guilt.

For *Colombia* (MA Maria Camila Posse), the analysis involved the self-perception of the elites in the country, the “poor” others (which can be even framed as ‘dirty’), the history and genesis of armed conflict, and the peace-building process itself. It became clear how the narratives of this elite are deeply rooted in the colonial history. While these narratives have profound consequences in society, they are often bypassed or ignored.

For post-apartheid *South Africa* (Dr. Demain Solomons), the focus was on how black liberation theology can be envisioned considering the latent existence of white domination / “White theology”. Emphasis was given to see the process de-colonizing theology, not as a deviation of the norm but as a key task of “un-west-ing” theology and research, stressing the need to “un-think” the West.

In the case of *The Netherlands* (Prof. Ruard Ganzevoort), attention was given to the colonial heritage, and how it is still present in academic spaces as well as in the dominant narratives of self-representation of Dutch identity. It was key to see that acknowledgment of Whiteness and the colonial past are not enough without considering the question of reparation.

Finally, *The Balkans* (Prof. Gorazd Andrejč) was reflected as a region where the intersection of different empires of different times can be observed, creating different forms of divisions, leading to ethno-religious and ethno-nationalistic identities, which mark today's tensions. In addition to these key lectures, discussions deepened the reflections.

Some voices from international student participants:

"'Postcolonial' means the aftermath of colonialism and the situation that resulted from it. Many would argue that the term 'post' refers more to a situation after the colonialization rather than after the independence from it. It is about a new way of reading and interpret data and literature."

"During the mini-conference, it struck me how religion, in different ways and in different contexts, has such a profound effect on people's daily lives. Especially in the (post-) conflict situations we talked about, religion often is both one of the instigators of the violence, and a very interesting tool for doing research."

"In-depth postcolonial studies are needed as a tool to reform the academia itself. Scientific discussions are repeatedly centered on Western Science, Philosophy, and Theology, or usually use a Christian lens and understanding to examine other world religions/revelations. Accordingly, the typical phenomenon such as the struggles of black women/men facing injustice, religious minorities, oppressed communities, corrupt economic systems of Third World countries have become not more than just the objects of research. Therefore, postcolonial studies are crucial to the extent of our epistemology being devised to get a fuller picture of the world. It is vital to enrich our cognition with postcolonial consciousness."

The Mini-Conference was hosted by the Amsterdam Center for Religion and Peace & Justice Studies, VU-Faculty of Religions and Theology, and the Doopsgezind Seminarium – with the support of PACS.

About the Peace and Conflict Studies Centre

PACS, the Peace and Conflict Studies Centre at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, is an inter-faculty scholarly network for research on the causes of political violence, on strategies to build peace and on the governance of conflict. These issues require an interdisciplinary approach. Researchers from five faculties – law, social sciences, behavioral and movement sciences, religion and theology as well as humanities - collaborate in PACS.

PACS is managed by a team of seven researchers: [Wolfgang Wagner](#) (chair), [Tanja Aalberts](#), [Arno Akkermans](#), [Marijn Hoijtink](#), [Ronald Kroeze](#), [Paul van Lange](#) and [Srdjan Sremac](#). More information on PACS can be found [here](#).