

Leo Polak Master Thesis Prize 2014

I am very pleased to stand here on behalf of the jury of the Leo Polak Master Thesis Prize 2014. Before we start the award ceremony, let me say a few words about the prize and about its name giver.

The prize is named after Leo Polak, a Dutch legal philosopher who lived from 1880 until 1941. Polak was a polemic writer, a freethinker, and a humanist. In his view, ethical norms and values are per se independent from religious beliefs, to mention one of his principles. Polak's field of interest was criminal law. He had become well-known for his philosophy of retribution (*vergelding*). The focus of his thought concerns the character and the good & bad intentions of the individual. The selfish tendencies in the character may not succeed, Polak stated. An immoral perpetrator should never enjoy the satisfaction of an action that from the legal order (the rule of law) point of view, and consequently from the point of view of a decent-minded human being, would be regrettable or disgraceful. To the extent of this deplorability suffering by the punishment should be proportionate, according to Polak. (That is interesting: Polak connects the legal order to decent-mindedness; he really was an optimist)

In 1928 Leo Polak became professor in Groningen, as the successor of the philosopher and psychologist Gerard Heymans (1857-1930), whom he admired much. In 1940, he as a Jew was disqualified by the Nazi regime that occupied the Netherlands (*beroepsverbod*). In 1941 he was taken into captivity in the concentration camp Sachsenhausen in Germany, where he died on the 9th of September 1941.

By the name of the Master Thesis prize we aim to honour Leo Polak and his legacy. The Leo Polak Master Thesis Prize is annually awarded to the best master thesis written under the supervision of a scholar from a Dutch or Belgian university, on a theme that has previously been assigned by the jury. This year, the themes were Rituals of Life, The Moral Boundaries of the Debt Crisis, and The Pressure of Pressing Business (*De druk van drukte*). The award-winning thesis was on the field of Rituals of Life.

The jury of the Leo Polak Master Thesis Prize 2014 has awarded the prize to Madeleine Kievits, for her thesis 'What I had to say more' ('*Wat ik nog zeggen wilde*'), written under the supervision of prof. Bob Becking and dr Wim Smeets, from the Department of Theology of Utrecht University. The research conducted for this master thesis is on the so-called 'books of intention', in Dutch, '*intentieboeken*' (the thesis is in Dutch) – I really don't know if the English equivalent is 'books of intention' ('heart-pouring' books?). You find these books of intention for instance in meditation rooms in hospitals. In such books, patients, relatives, as well as hospital staff, write down, anonymously or signed in one way or another, what they have at heart: expressions of emotions, hopes, fears, prayers, etc.

Let me explain why this thesis has won the prize.

The theme of this thesis fits perfectly into one of the requested themes for this year's prize Rituals of Life. The research exploits a field that has not been previously mapped. For that reason alone, the researcher is to praise, according to the jury. Having analysed several

books of intention from two academic hospitals composed in 1993 and in 2012, Madeleine Kievits pictures the changing meaning frames as they are illustrated by the deeply felt expressions written in the books. She examined the texts from a perspective of intertextuality: which existing poetic, religious or other texts resound in the texts studied? The investigation into the messages, the needs, the wishes and dreams that are expressed can be of great importance to the spiritual care in hospitals. Humanist and pastoral counsellors can learn a lot from the, so to say, indirect communication through the intention books. Indeed, meaning is best communicated indirectly. The ritual character of the books intensifies the indirectness of the communication, and by that enhances the meaning.

The jury has had some discussion about the ethical aspects of this research: to what extent may these (often highly personal) texts be used for scientific research – without the consent of the mostly anonymous ‘authors’, even though it would be practically impossible to obtain this permission because the authors cannot be traced? According to the jury, Madeleine Kievits has carefully and sufficiently accounted for these ethical aspects, at least within the scope of a master thesis. The ethical topic deserves a thesis of its own!

The excellent essay written by Madeleine Kievits explores a very interesting field and takes a first step that is of great importance to both pastoral and humanistic spiritual care. Therefore, the Leo Polak thesis prize is fully deserved.

On behalf of the jury,
Joachim Duyndam