

## LARSN Annual Conference Report

The Law and Religion Scholars Network (LARSN) held its annual conference at Cardiff University on May 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Approximately 125 scholars and students converged in the surprisingly sunny Welsh capital for the event, with delegates coming from as far afield as Qatar, Canada, and Australia. The conference formed the core of the Cardiff Festival for Law and Religion, which marked the twentieth-fifth anniversary of the University's LLM in Canon Law. The Festival also celebrated the work of Cardiff Law School's Professor Norman Doe, founder and Director of the School's Centre for Law and Religion, and his ongoing contribution to this burgeoning field of study.

As with previous LARSN events, conference panels were convened around a range of disciplinary perspectives, showcasing the theoretical and methodological diversity that characterises the academic study of law and religion. Papers presented on Thursday 5<sup>th</sup>

Friday also saw the launch of *The Confluence of Law and Religion: Interdisciplinary Reflections on the Work of Norman Doe* (Cambridge University Press, 2016). Editors Frank Cranmer, Mark Hill, Celia Kenny, and Russell Sandberg

The plenary speech was given by Professor David Little, retired T. J. Dermot Dunphy Professor of the Practice in Religion, Ethnicity, and International Conflict at Harvard Divinity School and current fellow at the Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace and International Affairs at Georgetown University, who spoke on 'Human Rights, Religious Freedom and Peace'. Prof Little offered a spirited defence of the pursuit of rights-based justice, and particularly the right to freedom of religion, in the modern world, arguing that 'there is strong empirical support for the proposition that human rights compliance in general, and religious freedom compliance in particular, expand the prospects for peace.' Taking as his point of departure the critiques of human rights discourse offered by anthropologist Talal Asad (2000; 2003) and religious studies scholars such as Winnifred Fallers Sullivan (2005) and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2015), who have both challenged the discriminatory ways in which rights-discourse is deployed in international law and have flagged up the implicitly Protestant assumptions underlying the kind of 'religion' most likely to be recognised and protected by the liberal state, Prof Little suggested that these arguments do little to undermine the idea that the legal protection of human rights contributed to peace both 'within and among nations'. Whether or not one accepts Prof Little's critique of rights critics – and it would surely be naive for scholars of human rights to ignore the moral inconsistency that, as Asad (2003: 128) and his followers have so deftly illustrated, often accompanies their exportation, including the disturbing rhetoric that justifies the mass violence perpetrated by liberal democracies under the guise of 'collateral damage' rather than as a violation of the 'human rights' they chastise foreign Others for failing to uphold – the pursuit of peace is surely something we can all support.

The next LARSN conference will take place in Cardiff in May, 2018, and will celebrate ten years since the launch of the Network. Enquiries to Dr Russell Sandberg at [r.sandberg@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:r.sandberg@cardiff.ac.uk).