

# Part 2: One Lutheran's Agenda in Today's Homosexuality Discussion

Colleagues,

These comments, from good friends, continue the discussion of last week's ThTh 34.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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I. A Lutheran pastor in mid-state Missouri writes: "Ed, you say:

Let us acknowledge that in human sexuality, some folks are 'wired different' [=the term one gay member of Bethel used for himself] from heteros, and that God is the electrician doing the wiring." Okay. Let us begin there. Let us say some folks are "wired different." Genetically, there seemingly are countless ways of getting wired. I have Type II diabetes and I suffer from petit mal epilepsy. How is it that my wiring is from God? Why is it not an expression of a fallen creation in which random bad things happen for no apparent reason—except that a fallen creation is a creation in which random bad things happen? Dominus tecum.

## **MY RESPONSE:**

*I have had Type I diabetes for now 50 years. Something like 50,000 insulin injections up till now. If I do not link this given in my life to God the creator of the allegedly healthy parts of me, to whom shall I link it?*

Respondent III below raises the same question in terms of his daughter. I intend to do go into that in responding to him. So check there, please. Also check there the fact that I wasn't intending to be talking about "wiring" merely as genetics. God's "wiring" me, so I believe, started with the union of an egg and a sperm cell, but didn't stop there. In fact, hasn't stopped yet. To your alternative: "Why is it not an expression of fallen creation...a fallen creation in which random bad things happen for no apparent reason?" That sounds to me like abdicating the theology of God's "creatio continua," running headlong into the caveat of the Deuteronomist when he (I'm guessing) says: 32:39 "See now that I, even I am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand." Seems to me that the Canaanite religion being thumped here is wrong, says the writer, not only for naming the wrong god as the good god, but for thinking there was a second god behind the "bad things for no apparent reason." The Greeks had a name for this god of "random happenings," as did the Romans. When they encountered "mere chance," they divined a god, a power, behind those events of no apparent reason. Tyche and Fortuna, if I remember aright, were the names they gave respectively to their encounter with chancy power. They were half-right, I'd say.

A needed caveat in all of this, also with the "wiring" metaphor, is that God's work as creator dare not be cast in cause and effect categories. As my mentor Elert taught us:

1. God is not to be seen as the cause of the world, since cause and effect stand in a relationship of mutual necessity to each another. As first cause

*God would only be the first in a series of other causes and thus only a part of the causally connected web of the world.*

*2. Calling God creator (Hebrew verb "bara," which is not easily translated into English) signals author, originator, source—maybe even Tillich's "ground of being." It affirms that God in absolute freedom creates out of nothing.*

*3. Faith in God the Creator (author, source, ground, etc.) rests on my awareness of my own origin. I am, because God has called me. For by calling me God makes me his creature. The immanent causality of my physical descent is not contested by this fact.*

*Thanks for the Dominus tecum. My response: Et cum spiritu tuo.*

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II. An Anglican priest in British Columbia writes: Much appreciated was the today's arrival of Thursday Theology. If someone leaps to fill the lacuna you decry in the Lutheran discussions & attempts to respond to your theses, please let me in on them. You'd hardly expect an Anglican to be able to discern such answers with any degree of clarity! Particularly with reference to #3 and #6. I hope it is OK that I am passing these theses on to my lesbian friend who is also on the Human Sexuality Commission.

**RESPONSE:** Of course.

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III. A Lutheran pastor in Indiana writes: (N.B. His paragraphs are the ones with Arabic numbers.)

1. Thanks for all the Sabbathology we get over here. I have friends in the conference who read it every

week, since being introduced to Crossings at a retreat I led for them last year this time. A couple of them insist on calling it "Sabbathology." A quick follow-up to your ThTh of yesterday. Your first thesis is one I can't accept at present, with what I know. It's the one that makes the others "necessary."**RESPONSE to par.1**

*"With what I know," you say. It's not so much the clinical data that prompted my first thesis, but my (and yours too, I trust) theology of creation. See below. Nevertheless some of the clinical data that I do know, plus my own associations with gay/lesbian Christians over the years, corroborates the metaphor of "wired different." Many of them, seminary students when I got to know them, wanted to be LCMS pastors. Therefore wanted to be "wired straight," couldn't imagine "choosing" to be "wired different," since that would close the LCMS pastoral vocation, the one future they dearly desired. But it wasn't that which grounded my first thesis. It is creation theology.*

2. [Our youngest daughter] . . . was wired different [with a very dicey heart condition] when she was born, too. "Multi-Factorial Inheritance" they called it, and since they could correct it, they did. God did that wiring, too. But the sexual wiring of all of us is also done by our family and friends, and by ourselves, as are so many aspects of our cultural/interpersonal world. See Freud. See Social Construction of Reality. And just because one can't change something, does that make it part of creation and not any longer a part of what we have done with creation? As, for example, my lambent nervousness.

So it is claimed. **RESPONSE to par.2:**

*“Multi-factorial Inheritances” that you and your spouse passed on to your daughter, as well as the “cultural/interpersonal” stuff that shapes each of us after our birthings, are still all creation stuff, aren’t they? Stuff with THE creator’s hand definitely in the mix. What else is “creatio continua,” which is always predicated to God in Christian theology? If these are not linked back to God, then we run afoul of the condemnation of Augsburg Confession Art I “God” where the Manichaen heresy is scored because it had to have a second deity to explain all the bad stuff. Ditto the condemnation of the Deuteronomist (32:39) cited above. All of your daughter, her original wiring plus the reparative re-wiring must come from the only God there is. If not, the di-theist Canaanites were right. There is Baal and there is Muth, two powers in the cosmos, one for good stuff and the other for the other stuff. The same is true about your “lambent nervousness” (and maybe even a couple other things I’ve noticed about you!) Either the “one God creator” is at work here, or Erasmus was right and Luther wrong in their epic wrestling match on God’s all-pervasive hand in the mix of human freedom and bondage.*

3. This month’s Atlantic Monthly has an article about an evolutionary biologist who claims to be showing that all major chronic diseases are the result of infection, not of genetic problems, because if they were genetic they couldn’t be so common. See the author’s paragraph on homosexuality (which he doesn’t exactly label a disease, but, well, his

logic makes it one). Since homosexuality reduces one's (Darwinian) "fitness" for reproduction by 80% (males) or 50% (females), there shouldn't be more than about one homosexual male in 50,000 if it were due to a genetic fault. Oops, he says, people don't want to hear this. **REPONSE to par.3:**

*I was not in ThTh 34, nor am I here in ThTh 35, asserting simply the genetic realities, "wired different genetically." 'Fact is, I didn't even mention that. My pitch was for God's overall engineering, for God's overall wiring (via heredity and environment, via nature and nurture, via genes and Sitz-im-Leben) in the lives of homos and heteros. Thus the A.M. article initially doesn't seem to be germane. But I haven't read it, so I might be mistaken and change my mind later.*

4. The question of "legitimizing" homosexual relationships will really have to be resolved without using the Bible, which usually just presumes those people have it right who think it is an abomination for people to use for this what is meant for that. Romans 1 argues from, not to, the cathexis of improper object. **RESPONSE to par.4:**

*No matter how many times I read these lines, they come out sounding snippy. Was "cathexis of improper object" some lingo you picked up at U. of Chicago? Apropos of Romans 1: For alternate readings of the NT texts often rendered "homosexual" in English translations, see Fred Danker's now-in-the-press new edition—umpteenth years in the making—of Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker-Danker: Lexicon to the Greek N.T. Fred's hardly the one, as you well know, to say "Oops, people don't want to hear this." One*

thing, for sure, that the Bible can help us “resolve,” unless it’s read Biblicistically (which I hope you’re not doing in par. 4) is the following, a new appropriation of the Reformation take on the orders of creation. To wit: first of all they are historical, i.e., malleable, so that what was once the case in some time and place is not necessarily the case at this time and place. Same God and creator, different products from his creative hand. Easiest example is the “order of marriage” from polygamy, concubinage, etc. in ancient Biblical days to the (well, sortuv) monogamy of our world today. Same thing is true of the “order” of the state, which never ceases metamorphosing.

Why not the same with something as patently creaturely, as much reality of God’s left-hand regime, as gender consciousness? Suppose for a moment that there really weren’t any folks “wired” as homosexuals in the Biblical world. I imagine that this can no longer be proved or disproved. But suppose there weren’t any at all, at least not in the Hellenistic world of NT times. If so, then those who did what Paul abominates were really living counter to God’s “ordaining” (=the “order” God had placed them in), as Paul maintains. But is it impossible to envision that God could be “wiring different” than once he did, wiring via chromosomes and contexts that are not the same pattern they once were in days gone by? God’s wirings in political governance have changed, economic orders ditto, legal systems and family configurations likewise.

*The ones “wired different” whom I know best, who like you have imbibed and thrived on Augsburg catholicism, claim that one element of their manifold God-ordained locations is homosexual. How can anyone operating with the same Reformation theology of God the creator refute that? Remember in this talk about orders of creation, I’m taking Luther’s angle that these orders are not boxes where God puts us, but specific locations in the world where God plops each one of us down in his creation to live out our biography imaging him. It’s like being placed at shortstop in baseball. The agenda is: play the game as God’s team member at shortstop. Homosexuality for me—for about 60-plus years—was no place where God could possibly put anybody to play shortstop on his team. But I was mistaken. And Rick and Mary and Tom and Alice and more, Christ’s teammates all of them, have made that plain to me.*

*Now back to Paul. It could also be that Paul was wrong, if in those several spots he did excoriate people who today understand themselves as homosexual. He was not exactly on target about slavery. And at best he’s a mixed-bag about women. And then Luther was wrong about the Jews. None of which diminishes the power, wisdom, glory, to use the terms of last Sunday’s second lesson, of the theology of the cross that both of them pass on to us.*

5. The case for “beatification” will rest with the Beatitudes, which give us not a technique for acquiring happiness (pace the whole damned self-

improvement section at Barnes and Noble) but an offer of blessedness to those who will quit fighting for felicity, look up, and open their mouths. And ears. **RESPONSE TO par.5.**

*I too preached on the Beatitudes last Sunday. My take was: Our addiction to Superbowl Theology*

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# One Lutheran's Agenda in Today's Homosexuality Discussion

Herewith a copy of a letter I wrote yesterday (Jan 27/99) to a bishop in my church, the ELCA.

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Hi!

It's been 2 months since you sent me that packet of 3 readings on homosexuality. You asked for "input." So I'm long overdue in my response. For me it seems that getting older means getting slower. There doubtless are other weakenings. Probably I should first remind you what those 3 essays were:

1. a "Report to the ELCA Division for Outreach Board from the Gay & Lesbian Outreach Study Team,"
2. "Pulpit Fiction: The Gifts and Burdens of Gay Men and Lesbians Serving in the Ordained Ministry," and
3. "Non-Heterosexual Clergy Experiences and Issues in

Ministry.”

This topic continues to be prominent in my life. For one thing, Marie and I recently participated in the formation of the St. Louis Gateway chapter of Lutherans Concerned. We meet monthly at Bethel. #2 Both of us (for a couple of years already) have been on the board of OTHER SHEEP, an int'l Christian ministry with and for “sexual minorities” as our brochure says. And then #3, even tho the pope was in town yesterday and today, we ELCAers had former ELCA bishop Herb Chilstrom and his wife Corinne here doing a workshop on this topic for the eastern section of our Central States synod. About 50 folks showed up.

The two of us didn't attend the Chilstrom thing because of family complications. Robin Morgan did and summarized it this way: “Yesterday with the Chilstroms was interesting/frustrating. Their stories about people they've met and learning about homosexuality they've acquired as they ministered were fascinating. But the theology [in the discussions] is always so shallow at these things.” Her last phrase capsules my thoughts after reading the three pieces you sent me. No one of the three explicitly proposes to “do” theology per se, but theology is there aplenty, especially when the word “Lutheran” is dropped—as it often is. It's usually specified as “the Lutheran emphasis on grace, grace alone” and that then gets slimmed down to “God's unconditional love and acceptance” punkt!

If it were just bureaucrats or sociologists promoting such shallow theology, it would be bad, but not SO bad as it is when, as in #2 and #3, the respondents are all ELCA clergy, a number of whom say things like “Move to another denomination? Impossible. I couldn't be anything else than Lutheran.” But look at what passes for Lutheran. When that “unconditional grace, love and acceptance” gets mentioned in these pages, I don't think there ever is a Christ-connexion made for grounding God's

favor toward sinners—gay or straight. God is always generically—by definition—gracious. A nice guy. That's it. Now I'm not saying that we ought to give equal weight to God not being "nice guy." Not at all. But you know what's missing: there's no "necessitating Christ" in order to get access to that divine acceptance. Forget about being Lutheran. Is this even Christian?

Throughout these pages the term "Lutheran" centers on the epithet you've heard from me before: "God's sloppy Agape." I don't think I once read in those umpteen pages that THE Lutheran pivot is faith alone, faith in Christ alone. It's always grace alone with no mention of faith. One exception is the brief quote from one respondent [p20 in paper #2] "In spite of all these problems, Christ is there for me, and most importantly the hope of resurrection. So I suppose if you go deeper [into my theology] it's the theology of the cross." That is the most evident piece of Lutheran theology I found in all those pages, a real breath of fresh Gospel air. (I wonder if that was a Seminegrad. One of the respondents mentions being at Seminegrad [p.23 in paper #3].)

While reading these pages I was listening for words like those from a gay member in our local Luth. Concerned chapter: "You know, I wonder if we're not just reading those Bible passages to make them say what we want them to say, and not letting the Bible call us gays & lesbians to repentance?" Brilliant, I thought. But there's scarcely any such theology in these three documents.

Pp. 28 – 31 in paper #3 captioned "Lutheran Identity" and "Faith Anchors" provide similar discombobulating quotes: "I'm Lutheran. It's an identity thing. . . I'd say I stand in the center of Lutheranism in terms of the core theology of being saved by grace. That is what has sustained me. So in that sense I'm just

dead-centeredly (sic!) Lutheran.” [You can guess my nasty question: just how dead is it?] Apparently this respondent doesn’t know that the Pontifical Confutation (1530), seeking to refute the Augsburg Confession within days after it was presented, states “No one of all the Catholics has ever disputed sola gratia [the doctrine of grace alone].” So being “saved by grace,” was not the “Lutheran thing” that the Reformation was all about. But I don’t have to tell you that.

On the two pages of quotations captioned “Faith Anchors” not one ever mentions the name of Christ, even though some of the things said are patently Christian and even winsome. But about “the faith that justifies” they are not, nor about that faith’s object, the crucified and risen One.

John Douglas Hall has that jolting statement—we’ve talked about it before—in his first big splash book years ago about the theology of the cross, “Lighten our Darkness,” when he says: Theology of the cross has been a “very thin tradition” throughout the history of the church. If “faith alone” and the proper distinction between law and promise also are inside the wineskin of theologia crucis (and they indeed are), then it’s also a skinny/skimpy tradition (more accurately: an almost unknown tradition) in what we hear from these ELCA clergy too. But here again, I don’t have to tell you that either. And you can finish the analysis on your own, I’m sure.

If I were asked to toss out a few theses (only 7, not 95) for us to attend to in the ELCA, they’d be something like these:

1. Let us acknowledge that in human sexuality, some folks are “wired different” [=the term one gay member of Bethel used for himself] from heteros, and that God is the electrician doing the wiring.
2. Let us recognize the Biblicism (and its partner, legalism)

so prevalent in Bible-quoters, whether from the right or the left, on this topic. Then let us ask what Luther's criterion for Bible reading, "urging Christ," would do as a hermeneutic for "those passages."

3. After that, move to such items as: where and how do Old Adams/Old Eves manifest themselves in the hearts and lives of those "wired different?" Where and for what do they stand in need of repentance? To answer such questions, those wired different would have to take the lead, I would think, so that the "conversation and consolation of the siblings" [SA III.5] might begin. In specific Lutheran lingo: what forms of "unfaith," of incurvature into oneself, bedevils them?
4. Are there "common places" in both gays and straights where Old Adams/Old Eves take up residence?
5. Are there distinctive/unique ways for Christ's Good News of forgiveness to cross over into the lives of folks wired different?
6. What is a "right(eous) tune and right text" for gays & lesbians when they sing the New Song as New Creatures in Christ's New Creation? Ditto for their living out his New Commandment in New Obedience? Etc.
7. What might Christ-trusting gays & lesbians model in their lives—partnered or celibate—that would edify the straights—partnered or celibate—in living an ethos under promise, by faith alone, with Christ as Lord and Master at this time in our culture?

I trust that all of these data do not first of all have to be created, but already exist in Christ's people among today's "sexual minorities." But I know only hints of what the answers might be. These three papers don't do it. Although they are replete with testimony from such voices, they do not even get close to these issues, these Lutheran agenda items.

You'll not be surprised that I think these are the primary "Lutheran" questions. And that conviction of mine, which I know is yours too, is probably also a "thin tradition." But we still ought to pursue it with gays and lesbians who claim "Lutheran identity," or even more pointedly, as one does in these pages saying that he is "disgustingly Lutheran." What else could the ELCA be doing on this topic that would be more "Lutheran" and more useful for church and society right now?

I'm not sure what you were hoping for when you sent the stuff down to me end of November. But what you see (here), is what you get.

Pax et Gaudium!

Ed

P.S. I hope you—and your synod too—will properly celebrate Katie Luther's 500th birthday on Jan. 29. The students – 15 of them ages 25 to 70 – in my Thursday evening class on the Lutheran Confessions are planning a wingding birthday party tomorrow [it'll already be Jan. 29 in Wittenberg!] in her honor. I hope we'll also get some theology done.

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# Theology of the Cross in the Holy Land

Dear folks,

Here is my last piece about our trip to Palestine/Israel. Ed will be back next week with something completely different.

Enjoy,

## Theology of the Cross in the Holy Land

This last piece about our trip to Palestine/Israel will finally give you the essence of what I experienced and how it has impacted my life. I have avoided writing this piece up until now for two reasons. First, my jet lag addled brain wasn't capable of meaningfully articulating for you what I was aware of inside. Second, I know that if you are unwilling to follow my thoughts all the way to the center where deep joy resides, this short essay will seem unnecessarily negative, as theology of the cross is wont to seem on the surface.

When I was observing the multitude of pieties we came across on our pilgrimage, I did not, as Ed apparently was doing, look behind them for the theology that inspired any given response. Partly because I am always aware of the Ugly American Syndrome when I am abroad – the tendency we have to critique everything in the world by our standards of comfort and security. Partly because I have discovered in my short tenure as a theologian of the cross that it is, as Douglas John Hall says, a thin tradition. I rarely expect to find anything but theology of glory.

However, the last day of our trip, when I was getting tired and missing my family, two experiences conspired to thrust theological issues to the fore in my being and much of what I'd previously refused to look at directly crept through my weariness into my consciousness. The first stop on this day was the Great Synagogue in Jerusalem. We jumped off the bus and hurried into the building for the 8:30 Shabbat prayer service. The men in our group donned their cardboard yarmulkes and headed

for the door of the sanctuary. The women in our group headed for the stairs. We were not allowed on the floor of the sanctuary. We were not allowed to participate.

As I sat in the balcony listening to the beautiful men's choir that accompanied the cantor, occasionally picking up a word or two in Hebrew, I became more and more angry. At first I thought, how dare they keep women away from their God? As soon as the thought had formed in my head I knew that it wasn't true. No one can keep me from my God; no one can keep me from prayer. However, this segregation did brush away, as one thoughtlessly brushes away a fly, my call from God to offer leadership in God's community. Women need not apply.

Our next stop was the Temple Mount. Here are two mosques, the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa. During Ramadan when three to four HUNDRED thousand people pray here daily, the men pray in Al-Aqsa where the Imam presides over the service. The women must pray in the Dome of the Rock where there is no Imam and they can only hear the Imam's words over a loud speaker system.

These two experiences combined with the words of one of our traveling companions who had earlier told me with pride in his voice that he was sure his ELCA congregation would never call a woman pastor, that women should confine themselves to being wives and mothers and leave public life to men, led me to modify Karl Marx's definition of religion. I don't think religion today is the opiate of the people, keeping us docile. I'd say religion is the crack cocaine of the people. It gives us justification to do what we otherwise can find no other "moral" excuse to perpetrate on each other.

Those of you who are weary of "feminist tirades" are probably beginning to doze or are ready to click on the next piece of mail in your box, but bear with me for another moment. These

experiences were only the “straw that broke the camel’s back”. Earlier in our two weeks together, we had visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum. Even after all of the reading I have done and exposure I have had to this horror perpetrated on the Jews, I still stumbled out of that place with a pounding head and a sinking heart. The enormity of the suffering is beyond comprehension as is the evil within the hearts of the murderers who could carry out such unspeakable acts.

Yet, when we visited Gaza and I saw thousands and thousands of Palestinians forced to live in makeshift hovels without the most basic amenities of life (at one point we passed what looked, from a distance, like a pond, but which our guide told us was raw sewage), it occurred to me that the Israelis are now doing to the Palestinians what was once done to them. Not the Shoah, the attempted total annihilation of their people, but the shunning, the rejection and ghettoizing which has been the history of the Diaspora.

How can we make sense of all this? How can we even speak of peace in the midst of such contradictions?

Since I have been home I have already had a discussion about sacrificial atonement with a friend who no longer believes in it. He says that to attribute to God the need for blood to pacify God’s wrath is primitive and barbaric. He says that Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was an example to us of how, because of our gracious God’s love and care for us, we are able to give ourselves, even to the giving of our lives, in service to each other.

In the past I have found this argument, if not compelling, at least disturbing. It makes sense to me that the Creator of the universe would not be so petty as to demand blood like the Mafia demand “protection money”. As, say, the weather god might demand

in return for continuing to let the rain fall and the sun shine so that the crops will grow and we will have food to eat for another season.

However, after our visit to the "Holy" Land, sacrificial atonement seems not only right and salutary, but absolutely necessary to wrench humanity from the pit we have dug for ourselves. The raw horrors of what humanity is capable of stood out in bold relief for me there. Not that we in the United States don't do equally horrific things at times, but from the comfort of my Midwestern suburban home, they are virtually invisible. Who among us wouldn't be angry to watch the creatures we so lovingly created and carefully set on a beautiful planet destroy each other and the planet – in our name no less?

But it isn't just God's anger that must be dealt with in Jesus' sacrifice. The blood that needed to be spilled wasn't only human blood; it was also God's own blood. God knew full well that any action on our parts could never bridge the gap our evil had caused between God and humanity, so God became human and dwelt among us, died and was raised for us. Only blood can do justice to the blood that has been shed. Such extreme evil can be countered with nothing less. God in Christ took our horrors to himself and gave us his freedom to live in the light even when we are surrounded by darkness.

One day in the middle of our trip we stopped in a town that had a large artist colony and we shopped (yes Virginia, it wasn't non-stop grimness and theology!). I found a black and white photograph that I intend to hang in my office to remind me of my time in Palestine/Israel. In the foreground of the picture is an old woman who looks like she's from Eastern Europe sitting on a fallen log. She is wearing a babushka and even though her lips are closed, the shape of her face is such that I would guess she has no teeth. Nevertheless, her eyes snap as she looks straight

at the camera and she smiles impishly as she points her right index finger at the photographer. "Chutzpah" is the word that comes to mind. Midground of the photo is completely dark. One assumes there is a forest behind the woman, but the absence of light keeps us from seeing even the shadowiest outlines. The background of the photo is what brings the whole piece together. Here we see on a hill above and behind the old woman a stand of trees with light streaming through them from the outside toward the camera.

I saw in this photo a symbol of life in this wonderful/fractured country. The people I met are alive and proud, aware of their ancestral rights and passionate about their ancestral dreams. But the clash of these dreams makes the future look bleak at best. Darkness seems to engulf the conflicts that rage between Israelis and Palestinians with optimism only an option for a fool. Yet beyond the darkness there is light streaming in from the outside. It is not the result of the darkness or the old woman's chutzpah. Rather it breaks through of its own accord, with a will not bound to circumstances or people.

Now after further reflection, I see that this is not just a photo of Palestine/Israel, but of all humanity, which I have had the privilege of understanding a bit better because of my experiences in the Middle East. We are, indeed, fascinating creatures. Lively and capable of so much good, yet bound to an evil that is beyond comprehension. Only from the outside is there light, which can ultimately make a difference in who we are. This is not a new story. Many people have told it for many years. I pray God that it continues to be told until Christ returns and makes all things new.

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# Living Stones

## From Robin Morgan—

Since last week Ed and I were, for the most part, less than complimentary about the “dead stones” of the Holy Land, this week I’d like to turn to one of the “Living Stones” of Palestine whom we met. As far as I can tell, if there is any temporal hope in that tinderbox country, it is because of “Living Stones” like Dr. Mitri Raheb who draw their strength and wisdom from the Eternal Hope who undergirds us all. Dr. Raheb is pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. He came to Talitha Kumi, the guest hostel where we stayed just west of Bethlehem, to talk with us about life on the West Bank and about how he and his congregation are trying to make a difference, a Christian difference for peace. Here’s what he told us:

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict has shifted from an East/West conflict (the U.S. and friends vs. the Soviet Union and friends) to a North/South conflict. Israel is a first world country with an average annual per capita income of \$17,000. Palestine is a third world “country” with an average annual income of \$1,000 and the gap between rich and poor in both populations is widening.

The cultural challenges for both Israelis and Palestinians are about vision for the country. What is it to become? Folded into this question is another profoundly theological question – Who is my neighbor? Not unlike many other parts of the world, every small group (whether Israeli or Palestinian) is only willing to support others who believe exactly as they believe. The checkpoints (guard stations on the roads that divide Israeli and Palestinian territories) which are most dangerous for everyone are the checkpoints in their heads.

What does all of this mean for the Palestinian Christian community? Palestinian Christians have, for the most part, always been middle class. However, with the advent of a free market economy, they are losing ground and he predicts that if things do not turn around soon, many of them will emigrate to North America robbing Palestine of a vitality that it can ill afford to lose.

Christmas Lutheran Church is doing its mission work through five projects that are part of its new International Center:

**First are women's studies.** Both the economic and cultural conflicts of the country are often first manifest in the lives of the women. The church is offering various kinds of training for women as well as opening a "Women's Cafe" where women can come together for conversation and fellowship. **Secondly,** the church is offering adult education with an emphasis on being an open public forum for discussing important issues.

**Third is authentic tourism.** It's important for pilgrims to the area to get the whole story about the country, which includes the Palestinian perspective. Many holy sites are not included in Israeli tour packages because they are on the West Bank. In addition, at the moment, 95% of tourist money goes to Israel and only 5% filters through to the Palestinians.

**The fourth and fifth mission areas of Christmas Lutheran Church are intercultural exchange and an international academy.** In both cases, the church is offering its congregational home as an international meeting place where people from around the world can come together, whether through the arts or academic study, to learn about each other while they also learn about a specific topic.

The church needs to acknowledge the changing complexion of the

globe and reach out with those changes in mind. “The world is now a supermarket,” he said and the church needs to keep this reality in mind as it does mission. Since our group was composed of Americans and Germans, he commented that the American church was good at creative change while the German church tended to hold to “As it was in the beginning, it shall be now and forevermore.” On the other hand, the Germans had a much better understanding of what was actually happening in the Middle East while Americans tended to be unaware and naive about international affairs.

When asked what he foresaw for the future, Dr. Raheb answered, “Am I optimistic? No. But I am not pessimistic either. I am hopeful.” And then paraphrasing Luther he added, “Hope is planting an olive tree today even when you know the Final Judgment is coming tomorrow.”

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## **The Impact of Holy Land on Faith**

Colleagues,

We got back from our 2-week pilgrimage in Palestine and Israel—all 26 of us—just in time for Epiphany worship at home. Four “goldie oldie” Crossings people were in the bunch along with a kaleidoscope of relatives and friends and friends of friends—some Germans, mostly Americans. Age span: from a 20-year-old college Joe to two eighty-something women with marvelous wit and missionary histories of mega proportions. Half of the group were retirees. Presiding at our closing eucharist,

Robin Morgan noted that we had become a congregation by virtue of daily morning and evening devotions, reading of Biblical texts at their original venues (e.g., Matt. 5-7 in full out loud when on location at the Mount of the Beatitudes), our meals together, our debriefing evening conversations, the jokes, the shared strengths and weaknesses, and more.

Though most of us were Lutherans, that congregation included a Roman Catholic from Kenya with Opus Dei commitments, and our dear secular Jewish friend, who wanted to hear the stories and see the places that were his heritage, but never his personal life. None of us will forget his words as we boarded the bus after going through the Holocaust Memorial: I found my grandmother.

As we left Tel Aviv this past Sunday, Robin and I discussed how to pass on to ThTh readers what we had seen and heard, without it being another Holy Land travelog. Sure, we were tourists, but there was a twist: we were doing theology daily. First and foremost because we were hosted by Palestinian Lutherans for all but the two days in Galilee. The bishop and three other pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and Jerusalem spoke with us at length on their callings to cross Palestinian daily life with the word of God. With them as hosts that means we lived in the West Bank. Our digs were the guest hostel of the century-old German Lutheran school for Palestinian children just west of Bethlehem in Beit Jala. Initially a girls' school, it still bears the name it had at its beginning, "Talitha Kumi" ["Little girl, get up." Mark 5:41]. We even spent a day in the Gaza Strip.

We got theology too from Jewish sources, e.g., a Rabbi-politician with commitments to negotiate with Palestinians about land. He showed us the resources his group finds in the Hebrew scriptures for the political agenda they have. Muslim theology

was in the mix as well during our visit to the Temple Mount, and in daily practice of our endearing bus driver, Ahmed. For him it was Ramadan. So from sunrise to sunset he took no food or water. Every day shortly before 5 p.m. (we were usually on our way home to our guest hostel at Talitha Kumi) he turned up the volume on the radio just in time for all of us to catch the signal from the muezzin that the sun had set. He then stopped the bus, reached over to a box, took out the water bottle and a big pita sandwich and took his 5-minute “break-fast.”

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**Our focus (Robin’s and mine) for this ThTh 31 is the impact the holy places had on our own faith and piety.**

**For me the answer is:**

not much. And I really wonder why. One reason, I think, is the clash between my interiorized image of a Biblical place—yes, starting from those Sunday School leaflets of 60 years ago—and the “edifice complex” that meets the pilgrim at every turn. Every sacred site now has a church built over it—even Peter’s house in Capernaum where Jesus healed his mother-in-law. That is also true of the Shepherds’ Fields outside of Bethlehem where several denominational options are available—not only the ancient Christian traditions, but even a Methodist Shepherd’s Field sanctuary!

Frequently these churches are covered with artifacts from centuries of religious veneration, and are still in use by present day congregations. Most extreme for artifacts of veneration is the holiest site of all, the Church of the Resurrection, which itself has 4 or 5 distinct denominational

sectors—including the Ethiopians on the roof. Such artifacts, of course, are “at home” in the piety of the many Christian traditions maintaining the sites—Greek, Armenian, Russian, Coptic, Syriac, Roman, and more. Even though my head comprehends that, I too can’t crawl out of my own skin, nor the cultural wineskins of my Christian heritage. Thus the impact on me (even when I “tried hard”) was unedifying. More than once I swallowed hard not to say “kitsch.” Granting the subjectivity of such judgments, the sites that did speak to me were the ones architecturally and artistically “chaste” to my sensibilities. Here the impact was not that Jesus did such-and-so here, but that the space, the forms, the symbols proclaimed core Christian themes.

This attachment to the turf where some holy event happened, though it crosses most all Christian denominational lines, is rooted, I think, in bad theology. Muslims may have theological grounds to support their need to “have” the Dome of the Rock, the foot-printed spot from which Gabriel raptured The Prophet into heaven. Orthodox Jews may think they need to “have” Hebron lest God’s promise of land suffer disrepute. But do Christians need to “have” any of the “Christian” holy places? I think not.

That was the bad, bad theology, that drove the Crusaders of the Middle Ages to such incredible extremes of dedication and sacrifice—and finally pillage and massacre once they got to the Holy Land. The patron saint of the town where I live, St. Louis (=King Louis IX of France), along with the multitudes that he and other leaders took with them, was just plain wrong to think that the “holy places” needed to be wrested from Islam or else the honor of the Christian Gospel would be discredited. Even the simplistic current fad “WWJD”—What would Jesus do?—is sufficient to negate Crusader theology.

Such fixation on turf, then or now, surely is idolatry when

screened by the Christian Gospel. It's people, Christ-connected people, who are the dwelling place of God, the place where God's honor dwells. They "have here no abiding city," but seek a homeland up ahead. They have no substantive grounds for revering any piece of geography, even those where Jesus walked and talked, even where he died and was raised again. At the first Pentecost the "holy places" are forever transferred to places from which that international first Christian congregation came and to which they returned—Phrygia, Pamphilia, Parthia, and Pontus, et al.

Seen through that glass our pilgrim group's worship on December 24 at Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem was a holy place. Not because Jesus was born (possibly) a few hundred meters from where we were worshipping, but because his Gospel was ricocheting among us in the liturgy. It would have been even holier if we had feasted on the sadly absent eucharist that evening, and if the guest preacher for the occasion, an American (sob!), had had an inkling of what the Christmas gospel was all about. But even so the lessons, the prayers, the singing—in Arabic, English and German—were Gospel-enough to sanctify the congregation, making us a "holy place," a spot on this earth where "holying" happened.

It was in the people, especially those Palestinian Christians we encountered, that holiness epiphanied to me. In them a theology of the cross shone forth vis-a-vis the theology of glory at many of the official sacred sites. In some future number of ThTh we want to tell you more about them and their theology.

Peace & Joy!  
Ed

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## **To this theme Robin says:**

When I think of how this trip impacted my faith life, I'd have to say positively in a negative sort of way. Positively in that the end result has enriched me. In a negative sort of way meaning that often what we experienced in the Holy Land didn't match my perceptions of holy.

I was never more conscious of my own northern European/upper Midwestern piety than the day we walked the Via Dolorosa through the Old City of Jerusalem amid shops selling anything from chasubles to "authentic" Scandinavian knick-knacks. Buy figs, change money, get a "Holy" Rock Cafe t-shirt – the way of sorrows, the way of capitalism.

The last stop on our pilgrimage there that day was the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in which, supposedly, were entombed – I mean enshrined – Golgotha and Joseph of Arimethea's cave. It is a large Greek Orthodox church given to elaborate iconography which memorializes these two most sacred places. Entering the sepulchre itself took some time because the space was so small; only five people were allowed in at once. A priest monitored our ingress and egress while he stood on a ladder refilling oil lamps and doing general cave maintenance.

I tried to fend off my growing cynicism by heeding the words of our leader, Paul Hoffman, who told us that Orthodox piety was about being in a holy place, at a holy time, with a holy person. So I contemplated an icon of Mary and Jesus in the Church of the Nativity (again Greek Orthodox) in Bethlehem (on Christmas Eve no less!) trying to see the divinity behind the image, but all I felt was a penetrating look from Mary, "Lady, this isn't your piety."

Even the Protestant version of Golgotha and its adjacent tomb, which are situated about a block outside the Old City walls in a

beautiful garden, left me wondering. This garden tomb was much closer to what I'd envisioned, but when our guide pointed out the most likely spot for the crucifixion to have taken place, it was over the garden wall down in a bus station parking lot. I felt something less than religious ecstasy.

But it was Mary, again, who finally helped me understand that our universal Savior can be worshipped in a multiplicity of ways. One of the last days of the trip we traveled to Nazareth and visited the Church of the Annunciation (where Gabriel came to Mary with THE NEWS). Inside this church and even spilling out into the courtyard were mosaics, paintings and sculptures from around the world depicting the Madonna and Child. From every continent and many, many countries I saw how we all need to be able to express our love and devotion for our Lord in the way we are inspired to do so. The French Mary was very sophisticated, the African one was exuberant, the one from the United States looked like a Borg (non-Star Trek fans, ask a Trekkie friend what this means). The whole was greater than the sum of the parts.

Our God is one, but we are many.

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### **P.S. (from Ed again)**

At one of our morning devotions in Talitha Kumi, Marie was the leader and opted for using the newer translation of the Lord's Prayer. After the benediction our ebullient "college Joe," really a dear guy, told her emphatically that his preference was the old version, the one he'd grown up on and loved. That evening one of the "80-something" sisters told Marie how much she appreciated her choice of the newer wording. Marie then relayed to her the comment she'd received earlier, which elicited this response: "Well, well. He's older than I am."