

Aarhus Revisited – Theology Where the Rubber Hits the Road. From: Robin Morgan

Colleagues,

Fred Niedner and Dave Truemper [ThTh 241] did a great job of giving you an overview of the Aarhus conference (Jan. 15-19 in Denmark) as well as their theological critique of much that transpired while we were gathered. All I'd like to add are a couple of snapshots of our time together from my perspective and to solicit some feedback from you.

First, I learned most clearly in Denmark that I am a theological engineer, not a theological research scientist. I get antsy when the rubber doesn't meet the road and even though I know speculative research needs to be done, I'm just not the one who's going to do it. I appreciated hearing about the research that others are doing, but my recurring question through out the conference was "How does what you're saying connect to the people on the street and the folks in the pew as well as to the other theologians in this room?"

One of the most interesting conversations I had which touched on this issue was with a cultural anthropologist who was sitting with us. She is working with the Danish church, trying to help them figure out how to connect with all the folks who officially belong to the church, but don't participate regularly as congregational members. She claims that Danes don't just show up to be baptized, confirmed, married and buried. They come whenever anyone in their families is baptized, confirmed, married or buried. She said that the extended family is still the basic unit of community in Denmark and that the church needs

to acknowledge that reality by trying to connect to it if they want to reach people.

She also said that she believed Luther's genius in doing just that, reaching people, had to do with the way he communicated. Rather than articulating his theological breakthroughs in the Latin of the medieval scholastic jargon of the day, he spoke with the people on their terms. He started where they were. Her critique of Lutheran theological language today is that it operates more like medieval Latin scholasticism than Luther's folk-friendly language.

Another issue that surfaced in conversations over meals and builds on the previous comments was the need to push ourselves beyond the parochialism of our immediate geographic and ideological surroundings to understand how Lutherans in very different locales are struggling with the same issues or ones we can't even imagine. It's in this cross fertilization that we can get a wider perspective on the global scope of Lutheranism today and find solace, maybe even inspiration, from far-flung sisters and brothers. Listening to folks talk about the vagaries of doing ministry in a state church helped me get some perspective on and appreciate in a new way the volunteer nature of our church system here in the U.S.

To facilitate such dialogue, I'd like to ask you who read these Crossings posts to participate in some discussion about the future of Lutheran theology. Those of us at Aarhus have heard what the scholars say about it, now I'd be very interested in hearing what pastors and lay people think about the future of Lutheran theology. I want to hear what or how people who work in parishes, hospitals, businesses, schools, farms, homes, etc. see the future of Lutheran theology, or Christian theology in general since I know many readers of these pages aren't Lutheran. Where does what you hear on Sunday morning meet the

road? And for pastors, how do you use/translate what you read/hear from scholars? What does the future of such endeavors look like to you?

We'll post as many of your responses as we can and hope that such conversation can offer those who couldn't be at Aarhus an opportunity to participate in the dialogue. As far as I'm concerned, work on the future of Lutheran theology isn't complete until all interested parties are invited to the table.

Ed Schroeder's add-on.

Last week's ThTh 242 elicited this from a Lutheran pastor in Ohio. Question: Is theology hitting the road in this exchange, or not?

Dear Ed,

I reply to this ThTh 242 but I'm not even sure what to say. I struggle deeply with trying to find clarity concerning our nation and the war on terror. I had to write you because I find that you are one of the few people who is interested in serious theological struggle in the midst of all of this.

I am an ELCA pastor who has become a political conservative over the past 5 years (after much thought and prayer). I hope this does not cause you to discount what I have to say, for I find that among colleagues, conservatives are dismissed as idiots or immoral or just plain inferior. Standing before God I know that I am an idiot, immoral and inferior and for that reason, that worthlessness- I can only kneel before the cross. It is then under the mercy of God that you and I can even have this discussion together. But you already know this, you taught me...

Forgive my rambling, but I'm afraid it may take a while to get this out. Thank you for a thoughtful, critical discussion on our

nation that didn't resort to simply an anti-American theme, for I know what goes deeper in your thought is the anti-human problem of sin (God against us).

My struggle is that I am someone who deeply loves her country, and weeps for it. The "prophetic" voices I hear in the ELCA sound amazingly similar to those coming out of "left of center" Democrats and I find the critiques unsatisfying and missing the mark. I think those prophetic voices are misguided.

I weep for our country because I see our communal need for repentance, yet have a very hard time voicing that in ways that are not trite, or politically correct.

I struggle with the "two kingdoms." How do we live out a life where we recognize the need for Christ, and support the belief that a government that strives for freedom and representation of people is a good thing?

In a war fought by folks who target civilians (Not part of the Just war doctrine) what does defending oneself look like?

Finally, if you were a speech writer for President Bush, how would you have him talk about repentance? What would you have him say?

My struggle with this cuts to my heart because there is a very important part of me that wants to be "theologically correct" about this. I want to be "right" before God in my thinking. Maybe the heart of all is that I cannot be right before God even finally in my thoughts or what stance I take. Kyrie eleison.

On a personal note – I find I'm frustrated by email because it's hard to get across the depths of struggle and emotion that are behind these questions. If we were talking in person you'd see the tears streaming down my face, and the signs of angst that

are here.

Maybe these are not questions you can answer. Perhaps you have further thoughts. I would look forward to hearing them with fear and trembling and gratitude.

I appreciate the opportunity to even ask these questions in a thoughtful way. I certainly didn't expect to be writing you when I opened this email. I didn't know how much I needed to hear your words, and perhaps, how much I didn't want to hear them. Thank you again.

Which elicited this from Ed late last Saturday evening:

Dear

Thanks for your profound and poignant message. I could hear the deep personal anguish, pain and pathos in your words. Gives me lots to think about. Especially when you ask what would I propose if I were a presidential speech-writer. That makes me wonder if I should attempt that at all—or better leave it alone.

With your nudging me here are some thoughts already simmering. Maybe something like this:

"The state of our union in the USA these days is precarious. And it is not just Iraq. Today's Columbia catastrophe, along with the WTC horror of 9.11.01, and many other items of suffering in our land, carry a message. I shall be bold enough to say that it is a message from God, and add this that we Americans have difficulty hearing such messages. Three major religious traditions in the USA—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—all agree that God sends us messages through the events of history. Especially when the events are catastrophic, God is trying to get our attention. [See Amos 4, Luke 13, and parallel texts in Islam]."So said Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican(!)

president of the USA. He heard God trying to get our attention in the apocalyptic death and destruction of the War Between the States. He joined Congress in his day (right in the middle of that war) and told the nation that God was calling us to repentance. He then led the nation in doing just that. Now in our multi-religious nation, that might be difficult to do. Many might call it mixing church and state. Others don't hear that voice, and thus don't think we have need for repentance. Others among us have other perspectives. But for those of you who do sense this message from the Lord of history, I ask you to join me in repentance.

"The important thing about repentance is not so much to repent OF some specific wrong action, but to turn a whole life around. In calling to repentance God says: you are heading in the wrong direction. Make a 180-degree turn. You've seen signs on the highway "No U-turn." In calling people to repentance God says: "YES, YOU (Y-O-U) turn."

What might we turn away from? The items that Lincoln mentioned in his call 140 years ago are items still bugging us and we need to turn away from them. [Check out what his list was.] Prominent in the mix is our national pride. Even though such pride is cherished by many in our land, "pride" is not a virtue, but a vice in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim heritages. Its opposite is humility, which all religions commend. Humility puts all of us, all people throughout the world, on a common footing. We are all equally mortal, all equally dependent on others, all equally needing others to survive, all ..., all..., finally all have "fallen short," never meeting the standard that God has assigned us for living our lives in his world, nor the standards we ourselves profess. Already in Lincoln's day it was clear that God blessed America. But Lincoln had the insight, the courage, to ask: "And what have we done with all these blessings?" And in his answer to

that question, the United States didn't come out with a straight-A report card.

Many of you fellow-citizens are telling me the same thing. And I acknowledge that what you say is true. Every nation has an image of itself, a vision of what makes "us people" distinct in the family of nations. That's not all bad. But it can be when it leads to a superiority complex (just as destructive as an inferiority complex). There is one such element in our own American self-image which is not good. [Some say it even comes from Texas!] It is our American habit to see ourselves as "good guys," and people who disagree with us, who say "no" to our policies, as "bad guys." But that is finally a childish way to view the world and the 6 billion of us who live on this planet. There is good and bad in each member of the family of nations. We are all children of a fallen world (bad), and at the same time creatures carrying the image of God (good, very good). We all need help. In the language of the three religious traditions I mentioned above, we all need redemption.

In a fallen world with the good/bad mix in all of us, governments exist to commend the good and restrain (punish) the bad. Through both of those actions the "law of preservation" gets carried out. A fallen world is preserved from the elements present in it that would destroy it. And the principle of good government for preserving our fractured creation is the "law of equity justice," giving approval and reward to those doing good and punishing those who do wrong. Granted, that is often difficult to carry out, but it is the principle which good government seeks to practice. And in the 3 religious traditions mentioned it comes with God's approval.

Governments need to remember that they do not run world history. They are agents for the divine in carrying out the law of preservation and the law of equity justice. God runs world

history—even if there are many things that we cannot comprehend—and above all God is the JUDGE of world history. Also the judge of the USA. And therefore if we are in need of repentance, we also are facing God the Judge. “God bless America” has almost become our national anthem since 9.11. But we’ve almost forgotten that the God who blesses is also the God who judges, who criticizes, those peoples and those governments who are contradicting his concern to preserve creation and to administer reciprocity-justice within that creation. America has great resources for being “a healer among the nations.” For the moment we are the last remaining superpower. But that means we are even more vulnerable to self-pride. And it is harder to be humble. All the more is this maxim equally valid for us in the world of nations: “Physician, heal thyself.”

That’s right off the top of my head on a Saturday night when I’ve got chores to do tomorrow. After a nite’s sleep I may wish I hadn’t said it. But for now—and for you

Peace & Joy too!
Ed Schroeder