

Augsburg, Ramadan, and ISIS

A little over two weeks ago, Ed Schroeder sent us the following piece on the occasion of the (then imminent) anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. We're pleased to bring it to you today, with a few small edits to account for the fact that we're publishing it two weeks later than Ed had hoped.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Colleagues,

June 25 was the 484th anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession to the potentates of the Holy Roman Empire. The year was 1530. And June 28 of this year, 2014, was the beginning of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. Already by that date an estimated 500,000 Iraqis had been displaced by the recent weeks' surge of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) from Mosul toward Baghdad. [See the June 29 infographic at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/29/world/middleeast/a-reignited-war-drives-iraqis-out-in-huge-numbers.html>] Any connection between those three events? Maybe. At least in my head.

For way back then at Augsburg in 1530, almost half a millennium ago, there was a definite Muslim component. Namely this: Suleiman the Magnificent (1494-1566) was bringing Islam to the West. By 1529 he was outside the gates of Vienna, having just scorch-earthed his way through the "Christian" Balkans and now laying siege—with 600,000 troops!—to Vienna, the eastern outpost of "Christian" Europe, the Holy Roman Empire. That was the major reason—yes, politics—for Charles V, the emperor of the HRE, to convoke a council, the Diet of Augsburg.

The agenda for the consultation: Is Suleiman unstoppable? If not, how can we stop him? Especially now that messy Martin Luther has loused up the Christian unity we once had throughout the HRE?

So first off, let's gather at Augsburg. Let's try to restore that frazzled Christian unity. You Luther-followers [N.B., all of them political leaders in the various segments of the empire, none of them clergy], you present a statement of what you think the Christian faith is and we'll get the establishment church folks to do likewise and we'll see if we can scissors and paste the two of them together. Then, with the empire reunified, we can get on with the business of Suleiman.

The item I want to raise here in linking Augsburg and Islam is their intersection not in 1530 but today, focusing on all the current kerfuffle in the West about what we are going to do about ISIS storming its way toward Baghdad.

Isn't ISIS itself the Sunni side of the thousand-year-plus confessional fight within Islam? Don't Sunni and Shia need an Augsburg conference? Isn't that what we Westerners are telling them?

How on earth—yes, on this earth—can we in the West get “them” to have their own Augsburg consultation and scissors and paste together a peaceful co-existence? Consider the following plausible parallel.

The parallel, so it seems to me, would be for Suleiman, way back then, to have invited himself to the Christian gathering at Augsburg—it's 251 miles between Vienna and Augsburg (St. Louis to Kansas City)—and presented himself as arbiter and “disinterested third party” to scissors and paste together a Christian unity in the HRE. Wouldn't everyone call that madness on his part? True, that would be living up to his name: Suleiman

= peace-maker. But, but, but...

Well, then....

But Europeans, at least until recent decades, and we Americans unendingly, have an addiction to applying the “omni-” adjectives to ourselves. “Omnipotent, omniscient,” all-powerful, all-knowing—and, especially today for American military presence, “omnipresent” throughout the globe.

But those adjectives are proper only for the creator, never ever for the creature. Building towers of Babel to take over the realm of heaven was a mistake, a calamity, the very first time it was attempted. And every subsequent attempt since then.

Isn't that what the American adventure in the Middle East has been, right from the git-go? An American version of a Suleiman trying to create peace at Augsburg? Madness. The madness of hybris. The madness of a “Stormin' Norman,” not simply stormin' into Baghdad, but stormin' the gates of heaven. Playing god. First-commandment stuff.

And so it is fitting that the currently stormin' Sunnis—quite likely equally mad—have chosen a name whose English-translation acronym designates a deity.

Isis is a goddess of Ancient Egypt, whose worship spread throughout the Greco-Roman world. She was worshiped as the ideal mother and wife as well as the patroness of nature and magic. She was the friend of the downtrodden, but she also listened to the prayers of the wealthy, maidens, aristocrats and rulers. Isis is also known as protector of the dead and goddess of children. The name Isis means “throne.” Her headdress is a throne. As the personification of the throne, she was an important representation of the pharaoh's power. [Wikipedia]

Through those four letters of 'ISIS', the Sunni blitzkrieg has, willy-nilly, sent us a signal. Gods are in the mix in the chaos in the Middle East. Deep down it's a conflict between worshipers of deities. [Yes, ISIS advocates aren't promoting Isis. She didn't make it into the Quran. She's a no-no there, for sure. Furthermore, the 'ISIS' acronym stems from just one possible English translation of the Arabic name that the group chose for itself.] The conflicting theologies are not just the Muslim theologies of the Sunni and Shia. Deeply in the mix, (vortexed in the mix?) are the Babel-benighted brains of so many in the once "Christian" West. "So it would take God to solve this one? Okay, let's do it."

Can we not see the handwriting on the wall? We are creatures; therefore we are not god-enough to solve the Middle East conflict. It may be that true God is "solving" his own problem with Islam. Feisty Old Testament prophets said that sort of thing when God "solved" the problem of faith-less Israel by calling in the Assyrians and then the Babylonians as the "rod of my anger." And then he "solved" the Babylonian problem by sending in Cyrus of Persia, who even gets the title "messiah" in the Hebrew scriptures.

And is God "solving" our Westerners' problem by making our helplessness "perfectly clear"?

"You are not god. So if you don't stop pretending that you are, I'll do it for you. Remember my mysterious hand writing these words on the wall of Belshazzar's palace [in Babylon! just a short stretch from present-day Baghdad]. The words were: *Mene, Mene, Tekel Upharsin*. You have been weighed and found wanting."

Playing God is not simply playing with fire. It's Russian roulette with all the pistol chambers loaded.

So what to do? Just nothing? No. Well, first of all, do nothing

based on those self-assumed “omni-” terms. That already signals a turnaround. But then do something unthinkable. Clean contrary.

The Biblical word is ‘repent’.

That was Luther’s own proposal back there with Suleiman on the scene. Yes, to solve the political threat of 600k soldiers at the gates of Vienna. That Luther topic has shown up more than once in past Thursday Theology postings. Google “Luther/Suleiman” on the internal search system on the Crossings homepage for the data. E.g., the opening paragraphs of <https://crossings.org/thursday/1998/thur0625.shtml> .

And for the idea of a whole nation repenting, there’s also stuff on the website. Google “Lincoln/repentance” to see how he did it 150 years ago. Classic is the post by Crossings president Steve Kuhl: <https://crossings.org/thursday/2001/thur1018.shtml>

Repentance is not the whole ball of wax, of course, in Christian theology. Repentance and faith constitute the full ellipse. But without the former, the latter can’t happen. These Crossings past posts link the two. Check ‘em out.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder