

“God-Sized” Task to Tame Fallujah

Colleagues,

That was the headline in THE STRAITS TIMES, Singapore’s flagship newspaper, a few days ago: “GOD-SIZED” TASK TO TAME FALLUJAH. They were quoting a US Marine commander on site addressing Navy chaplains. “The Marines have been given a ‘God-sized challenge’ to bring security and stability to the Sunni Triangle.” If he only knew what he was really saying, there might be hope. My pessimistic hunch is that he was using “god-talk” deemed appropriate for chaplains. Even more pessimistic is my hunch that although the dilemma was indeed “god-sized,” he was confident that the Marines would pull it off. That’s their tradition. They major in doing the impossible—which in Biblical days was reserved for God alone. But they speak for all of us Americans. “The difficult? Done right away. The impossible? In just a few minutes.”

One respondent to last week’s ThTh, with its passing reference to a Marine WWII vet whom I quoted, forwarded to me a chaplain’s Good Friday update about his Marine unit in Fallujah. It’s grim. And not clear whether the chaplain is commending, or repenting, the idolatrous hype. You decide.

” I don’t know how the Marines do it, but the Combat Operation Center is loaded with strack looking Marines. The senior NCO’s all look like NFL lineman. The junior officers look like marathon runners and the mid-grade officers look like NFL halfbacks. The senior officers are lean, tanned and serious, deadly serious. The place exudes the warrior spirit. If you are a civilian I can’t explain it and won’t apologize for it. If you are a veteran you don’t need to have it explained. The warrior spirit.... These Marines are in a street fight. They don’t have

the word “lose” in their vocabulary. They’ve been bloodied and their anger is up. The intensity in the COC is contagious. This is a tribe of warriors. They exist to close with and destroy the enemy. They have their tribal mores, rituals and rites. Their enemy has desecrated members of the tribe and taunted the Marines. They’ve asked for a fight. The Marines are in full pursuit and absolutely determined to annihilate their foe. I’m sure that sounds harsh to politically correct ears and those for whom this type of violence is anachronistic. It does not sound foreign here. It is status quo. We are in a violent land, with an evil element and they are having violence visited upon them. There is no room here for half measures. This is a test of wills. One side will prevail. That is clearly understood and never discussed. It is obvious. We aren’t playing paintball. We are at war.”

Comment—

The Marines speak for all of us citizens of the USA. They are confessing the fundamental “faith of Americans.”

“They don’t have the word ‘lose’ in their vocabulary. . . . Our side will prevail.”

It’s THE American faith, FROGBA, the Folk Religion of God bless America. It’s fundamental to being an American.

And it’s a false gospel. That’s what makes it a “God-sized problem.” Crossings veterans may remember that Irmgard Koch—of blessed memory—coined that term in our midst years ago when she came upon this Aha! “Step #3 in the Crossings text-study matrix pinpoints the “God-sized problem” confronting people in this text. It is always and only—so says the gospel—the crucified and risen Christ who can solve such God-sized problems.”

The God-sized problem at Fallujah is not the “Yankee go home” Iraqi warriors. It’s the American false gospel that the Marines—and who all else of us—are trusting. For false-gospel

trusters, Jesus's opening words in Mark's Gospel are his opening words to us: ""Repent. [Scrub your false gospels.] Trust THE Good News. [Me, the only solution to God-sized problems.]"

God notoriously opposes false gospels and false-gospel peddlers. All the more so when they say "No" to repentance and persist in hanging their hearts on their false gospels. Check the Bible for case studies—or dreadful quotes. Spurning repentance "they pile up God's wrath," says St. Paul (Romans 2:5), for the day when God pulls the plug and it all comes tumbling down, "when the righteous judgment of God will be revealed."

With God our enemy, even with the Marines doing the impossible, we WILL lose. God will force that word "lose" down our throats and into our dictionary. Although even then we just might paste that page shut. Paste it shut again as we did when God put "lose" ["lose big!"] in our dictionary back in Vietnam.

If we aren't hearing that message from "called and ordained ministers of the Gospel" in the USA today (I'm not sure. At 12K miles distance I don't get any such signals), perhaps we can hear it from an "outsider" voice.

I pass on to you Robert Schmidt's thoughtful essay about such a voice "from the other side." You've read Schmidt before in ThTh postings. [ThTh #162, July 19, 2001, "Ninety-Five Theses on Church Control"] Bob is Dean of Theological Studies (Emeritus) at the Portland, Oregon campus of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod's Concordia University. What he says makes sense to me. See what you think.

Even in these days of Apocalypse Now—especially in these days,
Christ's Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Al Qaeda and Us

By Robert Schmidt.

As we look at the struggles within our church bodies we may need to put them into a broader perspective of what is happening in our world. Even as the reaction against the excesses of the late sixties helped propel the conservative movement in the 70's that also changed our synods, there are movements in our world which will have profound implications for our theology, our church bodies, and our nation.

As Others See Us

It may be time to explore some of these forces and, if possible, deal with some of their theological implications. Behind much of radical Islamic fundamentalism is the theology of Sayyid Qutb. Qutb was an Egyptian intellectual who studied briefly in the United States. He was imprisoned by Gamal Nasser and while in prison wrote a 15-volume work, "In the Shade of the Quran." He was hanged by Nasser in 1966. His brother escaped to Saudi Arabia where he taught many students, one of whom was Osama Bin Laden.

Much of Qutb's work focuses on the failures of the Christian faith. He believed that western civilization has suffered through the years from a profound disjuncture between religion and morality on one hand and the world of politics and economics on the other hand. He traced this bifurcation to Constantine who continued the libertine lifestyles of his predecessors with his nominal Christianity. At the same time the Christians who were serious about their faith became hermits and monks. According to his reading of western history that same separation permeates life throughout western

civilization.

Religion is about “spiritual stuff” while the real decisions of life involving business, government, foreign policy, and even the institutional church are made on the basis of the values of the institution. As a result he sees in western, “Christian” people a terrible schizophrenia of seeking to be religious with part of their lives while actually making real life decisions according to those values which promote institutional survival and aggrandizement. Qutb reasons that this is why western people are so alienated from real life and depend so much on drugs and alcohol. This is why their marriages are so fragile and they glorify and export their sexual promiscuity – it’s good for business; it’s good for America.

While none of us would agree with Qutb’s prescription for joining church and state under Islamic law, his analysis of what’s wrong with western society begins to resonate with some of us. Yes, we are disturbed by the immorality that threatens our society and our institutions. Even though it is clearly manifest in the crimes of Enron and ill-gotten government contracts, it also permeates our church bodies. No, Qutb isn’t right, but neither are all aspects of western civilization.

Religion and Capitalism

Did David Benke pray with idolaters at Yankee Stadium? He sure did. Most of us pray with idolaters every Sunday in LC-MS churches as well. To put this into a wider context, let’s go back to Al Qaeda and us.

How shall we understand the events of 9/11 in New York? By this time a number of perspectives on the event have emerged. Even prior to Sept. 11th Samuel Huntington in his *Clash of Civilizations* hypothesized that the next wars would be wars between religiously oriented civilizations. This would put

Islam against Jew and Christian, Hindu vs. Muslim, Protestant against Catholic in N. Ireland. If there were Muslims or Jews in Yankee Stadium, Dave not only prayed with idolaters; he prayed with potential enemies.

Another perspective is put forth by Karen Armstrong in her Battle for God. All religions at one time or another have their violent times. 9/11 should be understood as one of those excesses of Islam which we have also seen in other religions as well. The implication is that over time such violence will fade into the background as it has in other faiths.

A third perspective is that of Benjamin Barber in his Jihad vs. McWorld. Barber argues against Huntington and says that there are not many civilizations; there is only one. That global civilization is dominated by multi-national corporations he calls "McWorld." The countervailing powers to this global capitalism are religious sensibilities. "Jihad" does not just stand for Islamic violence. Instead it represents the fervent belief that there is more to life than consumption of things, most of which we really don't need.

Building on the thought of Barber, is Al Qaeda really the violent vanguard of a world-wide movement of religious people against an idolatrous capitalism? Nearly every significant social movement has its violent precursor. Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland had the IRA. The African National Congress in South Africa had its Umkonto we Sizwe. The peace movement had its Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Yes, socialism had the communist revolution.

Isn't it interesting that the planes of 9/11 did not have St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York as their target? Neither were they headed for the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. There was a reason for targeting the World Trade Center. That was the

symbol of the enemy; that was the symbol of false religion.

If Al Qaeda does not merely represent an extremist Islam but also, to some extent, the sensibilities of many religious people the world over, it will not go away soon. Instead, it may well be the violent face of the anti-globalization movement around the world. And in our prayers, even in the privacy of my closet, we are probably praying with an idolater.

Why the Violence?

Why did Al Qaeda attack the World Trade Center and kill so many innocent people? Here it is interesting to read Bin Laden's long letter spelling out his reasons for attacking the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. To my limited knowledge Sayyid Qutb, the theologian of Islamic fundamentalism did not proclaim war on the west. Neither does Bin Laden. Instead Bin Laden writes that the reason he attacked the U.S. is because the U.S. attacked the Ummah (the people of Islam). According to Bin Laden we have attacked the people of Palestine which has been under occupation for 80 years with terrible loss of life to Palestinians.

He continues that the U.S. attacked the Ummah in Somalia, supported Russia in the attacks in Chechnya, supported the attacks of India against Pakistan, support Arab dictators for cheap oil, and starved 1.5 million children in Iraq because of sanctions. Bin Laden claims the Quran permits revenge when attacked.

In a more positive tone Bin Laden says, "we call upon you to be a people of manners, principles, honor, and purity; to reject the immoral acts of fornication, homosexuality, intoxicants, gambling, and trading with interest... It is saddening to tell you that you are the worst civilization witnessed by the history of mankind."

Again, "You are a nation that exploits women like consumer products...You are a nation that practices the trade of sex in all its forms, directly and indirectly. Giant corporations and establishments are built on this under the name of art, entertainment, tourism and freedom and other deceptive names you attribute to it."

And, "You have destroyed nature with your industrial wastes and gases more than any other nation in history. Despite this, you refuse to sign the Kyoto agreement so that you can secure the profit of your greedy companies and industries."

Whom Does Al Qaeda Represent?

If Al Qaeda is not simply a perverted Islam, nor the beginning of a civilizational war but the vanguard of a significant movement, whom does Al Qaeda represent? In reading around in the theology of Qutb or the letters of Bin Laden one might argue that Islamic fundamentalism represents only Islamic fundamentalism. If so, that represents a significant problem but one with which western civilization might cope.

However, it might also be argued that Al Qaeda is really the vanguard of the 5.5 billion people of the world who have been left behind or oppressed by corporate globalization. Many of those 5.5 billion people are very religious and find in their faith a profound connection with their humanity. Few of these people approve of the events of 9/11. Yet most would say they understand some of the reasons for it. In that sense they would be very similar to the many anti-abortion advocates who decry the killing of abortion doctors but understand why some might be moved to do it.

Across the globe the forgotten, the marginalized, the unrepresented are finding their voice and demanding changes to the international system. In the name of Jubilee, they want the

rich to drop the odious debt that keeps their nations locked in misery. They advocate fair trade, not just free trade. They bitterly resent U.S. and European subsidies to our farmers that undercut their farmers and force them off their farms into migration or urban chaos. They want protection for their workers and environmental safeguards for their communities.

Most interesting is the fact that they are increasingly using religious, rather than Marxist rhetoric. When one sees the followers of Sub-Commandante Marcos from Chiapas in Mexico, they parade behind the symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Furthermore, representatives of these Mayan Indians are likely to show up at the anti-globalization rallies from Seattle to Cancun.

A focus for the 5.5 billion has been the World's Social Forums (WSF). The first of these was held in Davos, Switzerland with 20,000 people to counter the World Economic Forum held at that place. Next was a WSF in Porto Alegre, Brazil. This year over 80,000 showed up in Mumbai, (Bombay) India to advance alternatives to the "neo-liberal" economic agenda and strengthen the networks to make those alternatives real. At the WSF they also helped to plan the global protest marches held around the world on March 20, to commemorate the beginning of the war in Iraq.

And what does this have to do with Lutheran Churches? It is when we identify with Latinos, and Africans, and the South-East Asians in our communities that we will find a significant response. At a DayStar conference in St. Louis we were thrilled when Yohannes Mengsteab recounted the growth of the African immigrant churches around us. That's just the beginning. Among the marginalized people of our world the word of the Lord is growing and growing fast. But why don't we see this fervor in many of our American churches?

What's Wrong with Capitalism?

Why was the World Trade Center destroyed by Al Qaeda considered a symbol of the great Satan? Why does Benjamin Barber identify the target of Jihad to be "McWorld?" Why do the 5.5 billion people of the world who aren't doing so well see this quite clearly and we do not?

Transnational corporations are gigantic in the scale of the world's nations. General Motors has a greater economy and revenues than Indonesia, or Thailand, or Finland, or Pakistan. It is followed by Daimler-Chrysler, Ford, and Wal-Mart who have more revenues than Egypt, or Algeria, or Iran, and any of the countries of Africa.

Corporations and the communications industry they control are responsible for the twenty-plus ads we see for a half hour of national news. They pay for the violence and sex that make television the vast noisy wasteland it has become. They control the purse strings of both Republican and Democratic politicians. They push for free trade so that capital can move freely across international borders while workers lose their jobs in America and elsewhere. They are responsible for the growing gap between rich and poor in both the U.S. and across the world.

Because of the values they advertise, that happiness can be purchased, those who imbibe those values are far more likely to have abortions, to neglect their children, to pay more attention to the youth culture (young people will buy more) than the elderly (they don't spend as much). As an idol, corporate capitalism looks far more like Baal worship than does Judaism or Islam.

For every sermon actually heard by church members, there are hundreds, if not thousands of advertising minutes and images

selling us another vision of happiness and blessedness. Why do others see this and we do not? Corporations have literally "bought us out." Churches as institutions need money. Much of that money comes from people who are well off or from corporate foundations like Schwan. Money from the wealthy also buys air time for Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and a host of conservative talk shows.

The alliance between corporate America and evangelicals has secured a corporate lock on Congress and the White House. It has also silenced the church's prophetic voice. We are left at the edges debating gay marriage and images of the Passion while 8 million Haitians struggle to live and millions more in Africa and Latin America live at the very edge. Yet, at the same time, those millions are turning to Christ as never before, and the faith of our people, weakened by the false gods in our midst, gets shallower day by day. Can Christians in America and other rich nations get in touch with the world-wide movement of Christians and other religious folk around the world?

An Internationalist Perspective

One of the most interesting aspects of Al Qaeda is that it is an internationalist movement, not dependent on any single nation, recruiting followers from many different countries including the United States. Furthermore, its goal is not to take over the United States but to accomplish its work through networks of committed followers.

While liberation theology had as its goal to take over governments (a la Castro or the Sandinistas) currently people working for social change often do not want anything to do with government. A humanitarian organization goes to Kenya, does its good work and hopes to get out before the government even knows it has been there.

This morning I spoke with a gentleman working with Iridium phones, which are directly linked to satellites permitting voice and internet connections from nearly any isolated area around the world to any other area. For the most part these communications are undetected unless one would have the resources of the CIA or some other sophisticated tracking devices. He believed these phones to be very useful for missionary and relief organizations working in isolated areas.

We all know how the internet has permitted moderate Missouri Synod folks to communicate and organize to challenge the conservative steamroller that has dominated the synod for the past 30 years. Now communications may enable a two-way dialogue between Christians in the U.S. and others around the world. In a very short period of time they may also enable religious and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to form networks challenging transnational corporations for a fairer, more just world society.

Corporate globalization and corporate influence on denominational affairs will not go away. They are here to stay. However, the 5.5 billion people in the world who are not doing so well are finding their voice and their networks to check the power of the corporations and limit the damage they cause. The question this raises for us is a significant one: Is our goal to be a successful denomination, with generous funding from corporations, sending out pith-helmeted missionaries? Is it not rather to be networking with global Christians, receiving their insights and gifts even as we share with them our love and resources?

If the latter, we are going to have to learn how to do church work on far more limited means and with the direct involvement of the people in our congregations. This means finding alternate ways of training church leaders and doing dialogical

mission work between congregations here and those abroad. For many of us our personal identity has been wrapped up in the institutions we have attended and those to which we belong. After 9/11 identities may depend far more on what we are doing than to what we belong. That might just be what the Kingdom of God is all about.

Bob Schmidt