

Islamization and the Christian Gospel.

Colleagues,

Jochen Teuffel, Lutheran pastor in Bavaria, Germany, has appeared before in ThTh postings. Most recent was earlier this year in ThTh 658 <https://crossings.org/thursday/2011/thur012011.shtml>

Today's ThTh post picks up a sticky wicket in German church life today. But also elsewhere in the "Christian" world. It appeared April 18 in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. [FAZ is the NYT of Germany.] Here he addresses the Angst in his homeland (ours too?) about the relentless growth of Muslim populations in European societies. Such growth is all the more "disturbing," even to European secularists, because Europe still lives on ostensibly "Christian" values and "Christian" traditions that are not at home in the social fabric of Islam. But the Christian Gospel, says Teuffel, is not threatened by such increasing "islamization." Nor are those who trust that Gospel. And to make his point Teuffel proclaims the Gospel to his readers—also those un-churchy readers of FAZ—to allay that Angst and to "listen once more to the Savior" and his "Fear not, only believe." I.e., "just trust my Gospel."

[Besides sending me his German text as it appeared in FAZ, Jochen alerted me to an English translation already online at a website for dialogue with the Islamic world sponsored by the German federal government. Marie and I have taken this translation and reworked it into American English. Or so we think.]

Peace and Joy!

“Listen Once More to the Savior”

- Christian churches in Germany would discredit themselves by forming any alliance with today’s critics of Islam in our society.
- Christians must face up to the fact that they are a minority.
- Christian tolerance of others is cruciform, shaped by the cross.

A commentary from Lutheran Pastor Jochen Teuffel.

Christianity in Europe is facing an existential problem. It is not the increasing secularization of society, nor its alleged Islamification. What threatens Christianity’s existence among us lies instead in the fact that people do not really believe in the One who gave Christianity its name, nor trust his message or his work. Unlike unbelieving Thomas, people are unwilling to put their finger to Jesus’ wounds and thereby come to trust the crucified and risen Christ.

The scandal of the Christian faith lies in Jesus’ last word on the cross: “Tetelestai!” – it is finished. There is nothing we mortals can add to Christ’s offering his life for our sake. What is left for Christians to do is celebrate Jesus’ pascal mystery in worship, give witness to his name in mission, and serve the neighbor, no matter how “strange” he or she may be.

Overarching everything is tolerance, which means nothing else than simply bearing the burden of what opposes and offends us, because we can neither avert nor ignore it, nor, least of all, find it acceptable.

THE CHRISTIAN PATH, A MINORITY'S PATH

Christ's crucifixion is a palpable manifestation of this commitment to tolerance – quite literally. Jesus impressed upon his disciples their calling to follow him to martyrdom with the words: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8:34f).

The Bible envisions that Christians will be traveling a minority pathway on which they will have to endure slander, persecution, and even violence to their persons because of their linkage to Christ: “Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2 Timothy 3:12).

With good reason, Martin Luther in his treatise *On Councils and the Church* (1539) refers to persecution as one of the seven marks of Christianity: “The seventh external mark for recognizing God's holy Christian people is the sanctifying work of the holy cross. They must suffer every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh, in order to become like their head, Christ.”

Even in their own society, according to Luther, Christians must suffer a hatred more bitter than that which afflicts the Jews, heathens and Turks. They must “be called the worst people in the world, to the point where they are ‘doing God service’ who hang them, drown them, slay them, torture them, hunt them down, plague them to death; not because they are adulterers, murders, thieves or scoundrels, but because they will to have Christ alone and no other God.”

GOD RULES IN WORLDLY WEAKNESS

Indeed, the “Word of the cross” (1 Corinthians 1:18) projects unreasonable expectations on Christians. It gives them no special status in their own society. Such status is precisely what Jesus rejected for himself and his disciples when interrogated by Pontius Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight” (John 18:36). The symbol of Emmanuel – “God with us” (see Matthew 1:22f) – has no place on military belt buckles. From the cruciform dialectic of God ruling in worldly weakness no policies of state can be deduced. Absolutely none. It is precisely because this is true that Christians see secularized state as legitimate..

Participants in the debate about German society’s recognition of Islam frequently make reference to an “over-arching Christian culture” in European history. In cases where this is intended to bring into play a Western, Christian requirement for Muslims, this is the surest way to discredit the Gospel and the cross of Christ in society. In such instances cruciform tolerance is replaced by a human claim to religious power over people, applied with political pressure, far removed from personal faith.

Socially conservative Christians attracted to such an option may achieve a short-term alliance with church-disinterested–or even atheist–critics of Islam. In the long term, however, promoting such a “Christian” heritage supposedly still alive in the West, is nothing more than a “post-secular” attempt to re-establish a particular bond with church traditions by means of social-political policy.

When “Christian values” are again made the basis for inclusion or exclusion in society, it inevitably awakens the collective memory of Europe’s overarching “Christian society, Christian culture” preceding the Enlightenment . The pathos of bourgeois

freedom and self-determination is summoned up as a *cri de guerre* against the imagined restoration of religiously motivated social discipline. In the long run, the critique of religion now applied to Islam in Germany will eventually affect the Churches too. Thus, the current debate on Islam can only encourage a development towards a “religion-less” state, which would be tantamount to edging the churches completely out of the public sphere.

CONTRA CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS CONSERVATISM

Furthermore, a Western “Christian” cultural prerequisite for people to live in our society makes Christian missionary work among Muslims in Europe practically impossible. Those who demand some basic religious convictions – and not loyalty to the law, for instance – as a prerequisite for inclusion in society, cannot simultaneously proclaim Christ’s surrender of his life on the cross as an act of redemption. Coming from the minority position we Christians have in society our Christian witness remains credible only then, when nothing more than personal faith, personal commitment, gives it validity apart from any societal pressures for anyone to accept it. Thus, the state’s religious neutrality and freedom of religion in fact guarantee that we can bring Christ’s message into play as relevant for life in our society, and do so without coercion.

Institutional Christianity still has difficulties coming to terms with its minority position in society. Religious pluralization and increasing numbers of people leaving the Church do, after all, cause a lot of trouble for its own allegedly hereditary status in society. It would seem logical in this situation to defend claims about the importance of religion on cultural grounds. Nevertheless a religious conservatism that relies on maintaining some sort of “Christian” culture is a lost cause. The only thing that gives hope and confidence for the

future is for Christians to look once more to the cross. Jesus' message from the cross, "It is finished!" places our current society under an eschatological qualifier (modifier?). There may be increasing religious pluralization, the churchly milieu of society may further dissolve, fewer and fewer people believe in God; and yet all this does not affect in the slightest the incarnate act of redemption on the cross.

Christians have nothing to lose that we have not long since won in Christ. According to biblical testimony, what was finished on the cross – the victory over sin and death – will be validated throughout the cosmos at the end of world history in Christ's second coming. For those who trust this promise, their own tolerance of opposition is not dejected acceptance of a pluralist society, dealt them by fate. Through their faith in Christ's "It is finished!", Christians in fact escape the bourgeois identity trap in which fear of life or of death comes in prophecies of society's collapse. Instead, Saint Paul's testimony has the last word: "For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38f).