

“Lutheran Theology and Global Capitalism” [Or “Empire-building and Me”]

Colleagues,

Pastor Robin Morgan, occasional co-conspirator in these postings, links in this book review the grisly underside of today’s global capitalism with the results of her just-completed doctoral dissertation. In that dissertation she takes case studies of Lutheran ministry here in St. Louis and “crosses” them with Luther’s axiom of God’s ambidextrous work in the world. Although she doesn’t literally say so to make her case, she could have: “He’s got the whole world in his hands—BOTH of them.” As you may remember from her earlier postings, “care” and “redemption” are her labels for the work of God’s left and right hands, respectively. Applying that axiom to local Lutheran church history may seem reasonable enough. But how can she possibly connect that with the yucky global megalith that Perkins exposes in his “confessions?”
Read on. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

***John Perkins. Confessions of an Economic Hit Man.
(New York: Plume Books, 2006)
303 pp, paperback. Price: US\$15.00***

This book by John Perkins is a helpful, if painful, explanation of how our country, the USA, has gotten to this place in our

history. He answers the question on so many people's minds right after 9/11, "Why do they hate us?" He offers an insider's overview of U.S. foreign policy since World War II.

Perkins opens his book with his definition of economic hit men:

"Economic hit men (EHMs) are highly paid professionals who cheat countries around the globe out of trillions of dollars. They funnel money from the World Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and other foreign "aid" organizations into the coffers of huge corporations and the pockets of a few wealthy families who control the planet's natural resources. Their tools include fraudulent financial reports, rigged elections, payoffs, extortion, sex, and murder. They play a game as old as empire, but one that has taken on new and terrifying dimensions during this time of globalization. I should know; I was an EHM." (p.xi)

Perkins talks about his childhood and the factors that helped push him toward this life. Born in 1945, he grew up in a small New Hampshire town where his parents were teachers at a prestigious all-boys prep school. Perkins attended the prep school and absorbed the superior attitude of students and faculty, but he and his family were not part of the wealthy elite who made up most of the student population. His frustrations from that period of his life and his eligibility for the draft during the Vietnam War era made him an easy target for the National Security Agency when they offered him a job that included draft deferment. He says that "anger at my parents, an obsession with women, and my ambition to live the good life gave them a hook; I was seducible. My determination to excel in school and in sports, my ultimate rebellion against my father, my ability to get along with foreigners, and my willingness to lie to the police were exactly the types of

attributes they sought.” (p.8)After finishing his bachelor’s degree in Business Administration from Boston University, Perkins began his NSA training with a tour in the Peace Corps in Ecuador. He was told by NSA insiders that after the fall of Hanoi, the Amazon would become the next hot spot. Learning to live in contexts far outside the comfort zone of most North Americans and learning Spanish were important beginning steps in his training. His development was monitored by Einar Greve, an executive from MAIN, an international consulting firm, and a liaison for the NSA. Greve’s assessment of Perkins’ capabilities was favorable and he was offered a job as an economic forecaster with MAIN. In the process, he was also upgraded from learning to be a spy, to learning to be an EHM.

Perkins says there were two primary objectives of this work. “First, I was to justify huge international loans that would funnel money back to MAIN and other U.S. companies (such as Bechtel, Halliburton, Stone & Webster, and Brown & Root) through massive engineering and construction projects. Second, I would work to bankrupt the countries that received those loans (after they had paid MAIN and the other U.S. contractors, of course) so that they would be forever beholden to their creditors, and so they would present easy targets when we needed favors, including military bases, UN votes, or access to oil and other natural resources.”(pp.17-18)

Perkins’ book is full of examples of what he experienced as an EHM in Iran, Ecuador, Panama, Colombia, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. He tells how the EHM were the first offensive line in the economic global domination that continues unabated in the U.S. government, international corporations and a few wealthy families. If the EHM couldn’t get the job of enslaving less developed nations done, the jackals, professional assassins, were brought in to eliminate leaders in those nations who stood in the way of the “corporatocracy.” If the jackals failed, then

an overt military solution had to be implemented. However, all-out military empire building is considered too risky since World War II and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. More covert economic means have become the weapons of choice among today's empire builders.

In this short review, I will look at only one of Perkins' examples that, I believe, is most relevant to the Thursday Theology audience and can lead to some theological discussion of this most troubling topic. After his initial time in Ecuador and some time back in Boston for more in-depth training, Perkins was sent to Indonesia in 1971. Indonesia was considered the key to keeping Southeast Asia from falling into communist hands. To ensure America's dominance in Indonesia's future, MAIN had been commissioned to construct an electrification project for the whole of Java. Perkins was to make optimistic economic growth forecasts upon which the forecasts about electrical demands of the island and hence the construction of power plants, transmission and distribution lines would be based.

The man who was making the electrical forecasts was Howard Parker, an engineer retired from New England Electric System. Parker was unwilling to inflate the numbers, even though he well knew what his superiors wanted to hear. In private, he tried to reason with Perkins to act responsibly, but Perkins was young and still looking to make a name for himself. Perkins knew that Parker had already sabotaged his earlier career with New England because he wouldn't play the game or abandon his integrity. As they argued, Perkins said, "You'll look pretty stupid if I come up with what everyone expects—a boom to rival the California gold rush—and you forecast electricity growth at a rate comparable to Boston in the 1960s." Parker's next words struck a raw nerve in Perkins, "Unconscionable! That's what it is. You—all of you—you've sold your souls to the devil. You're

in it for the money.” (p.37)

Parker’s words were only one of the wedges that worked their way into Perkins’ conscience during his time in Indonesia. Another wedge came in the form of the poverty that Perkins saw from his window at the Hotel InterContinental Indonesia, the country’s fanciest hotel. “I would look out my window, across the opulence of the hotel’s gardens and swimming pools, and see the hovels that fanned out for miles beyond. I would know that babies were dying out there for lack of food and potable water, and that infants and adults alike were suffering from horrible diseases and living in terrible conditions.” (p.31)

Perkins made the acquaintance of a young man named Rasmon, an economics student at a local university, and began to spend time with him outside the domain of the MAIN community. “Rasy” began to teach him Bahasa Indonesia, the easy-to-learn language that had been introduced by President Sukarno after independence from the Dutch to begin to bring together the 17,500 islands of Indonesia with their 350 languages and dialects. Rasy also took Perkins into parts of Jakarta that rarely, if ever, saw Americans or Europeans.

Perkins relates one particular night with Rasy and his friends that stands out as a turning point in his thinking about his job. They went to see a dalang – famous Indonesian puppet master. After a classical selection from ancient Indonesian texts, the dalang produced a puppet of Richard Nixon dressed like Uncle Sam. Next to him was another puppet carrying a bucket that was decorated with dollar signs. Behind the two puppets appeared a map of the Middle East and Far Eastern countries. Each country hung on a hook and Nixon would pick up the Islamic countries one by one, utter some kind of expletive (Muslim dogs, Mohammed’s monsters, Islamic devils) and throw them into the bucket. When Nixon picked up Indonesia, he said,

"Give this one to the World Bank. See what it can do to make us some money off Indonesia." (p.50) A third puppet was introduced at that point who represented a popular Indonesian politician. He stood between Nixon and the bucket man shouting, "Stop! Indonesia is sovereign." (p. 50) The crowd broke out in wild applause and the show was over.

Later over coffee, Perkins, Rasy and his friends discussed the show. Perkins was understandably shaken by the performance, but one young woman in the group challenged him. "'Doesn't your government look at Indonesia and other countries as though we are just a bunch of...'" She searched for the word. 'Grapes,' one of her friends coached. 'Exactly. A bunch of grapes. You can pick and choose. Keep England. Eat China. And throw away Indonesia.' 'After you've taken all our oil,' another woman added." (p.51)

Perkins asked them why they thought the dalang had singled out Muslim countries rather than the supposed "domino" countries of Southeast Asia. Again, the first young woman responded that the West, especially the U.S., wants to control the world. The Soviet Union has stood in the way, but its communist ideology is not strong enough to sustain it. Muslims have the faith to stand against such dominating forces, even more than Christians, she said. "We will take our time," one of the men chimed in, "and then like a snake we will strike." Perkins was horrified and asked, "What can we do to change this?"

The young woman looked him straight in the eyes. "'Stop being so greedy,' she said, 'and so selfish. Realize that there is more to the world than your big houses and fancy stores. People are starving and you worry about oil for your cars. Babies are dying of thirst and you search the fashion magazines for the latest styles. Nations like ours are drowning in poverty, but your people don't even hear our cries for help...You must open

your hearts to the poor and downtrodden, instead of driving them further into poverty and servitude. There's not much time left. If you don't change, you're doomed." (p.53)

On the last night Perkins was in Indonesia, shortly before dawn he awakened from a dream. He had seen the Christ standing in front of him. Not the fair-skinned, blond Jesus he had talked to as a child, but Christ with curly black hair and a dark complexion. This Jesus bent down and heaved something onto his shoulder. "I expected a cross. Instead, I saw the axle of a car with the attached wheel rim protruding above his head, forming a metallic halo. Grease dripped like blood down his forehead. He straightened, peered into my eyes, and said, 'If I were to come now, you would see me differently.' I asked him why. 'Because,' he answered, 'the world has changed.'" (p.58)

All of this happened in 1971.

It wasn't until 2003, after 9/11, after the birth of his daughter, after years of soul-searching that Perkins finally decided to go public with his story in this book. He'd started it many times before, but had always backed away for any number of reasons: pressure from his old colleagues, bribes to keep quiet, unwillingness to deal with the fall-out. He had quit MAIN in 1980, but continued to live in the same circles, gradually moving away from the centers of power, but still keeping their secrets. Throughout the book Perkins swings back and forth between the calls of his conscience and the allure of his James Bond-esque lifestyle.

Though he never again relates an overtly theological moment such as the one above, Perkins does open a door for theological discussion when he distinguishes between the American republic and the global empire we have become:

"The republic offered hope to the world. Its foundation was

moral and philosophical rather than materialistic. It was based on concepts of equality and justice for all. But it also could be pragmatic, not merely a utopian dream but also a living, breathing, magnanimous entity. It could open its arms to shelter the downtrodden. It was an inspiration and at the same time a force to reckon with; if needed, it could swing into action, as it had during World War II, to defend the principles for which it stood. The very institutions-the big corporations, banks, and government bureaucracies-that threaten the republic could be used instead to institute fundamental changes in the world. Such institutions possess the communications networks and transportation systems necessary to end disease, starvation, and even wars-if only they could be convinced to take that course."The global empire, on the other hand, is the republic's nemesis. It is self-centered, self-serving, greedy, and materialistic, a system based on mercantilism. Like empires before, its arms open only to accumulate resources, to grab everything in sight and stuff its insatiable maw. It will use whatever means it deems necessary to help its rulers gain more power and riches." (p.150-151)

Whether or not you agree with his definitions here or his rosy portrayal of the American republic, Perkins' premise that the institutions themselves can be used for good or evil, is one very familiar to students of Luther. Throughout the Large Catechism Luther offers long laundry lists of institutions and circumstances through which God cares for the creation and of how human beings are to be about their God-given callings in the world. In the explanation of the first commandment Luther says that "we are to trust in God alone, to look to him alone, and to expect him to give us only good things; for it is he who gives us body, life, food, drink, nourishment, health, protection, peace, and all necessary temporal and eternal

blessings. In addition, God protects us from misfortune and rescues and delivers us when any evil befalls us... Although much that is good comes to us from human beings, nevertheless, anything received according to his command and ordinance in fact comes from God.” (Martin Luther, The Large Catechism, The Book of Concord, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000, 389)

In the explanation of the First Article of the Apostle’s Creed he says that

“I hold and believe that I am God’s creature, that is, that he has given me and constantly sustains my body, soul, and life, my members great and small, all my senses, my reason and understanding, and the like; my food and drink, clothing, nourishment, spouse and children, servants, house and farm, etc... Moreover, he gives all physical and temporal blessings – good government, peace, security. Thus, we learn from this article that none of us has life – or anything else that has been mentioned here or can be mentioned – from ourselves, nor can we by ourselves preserve any of them, however small and unimportant. All this is comprehended in the word ‘Creator’.” (Ibid., 433)

God as Creator has given human beings life and sustains us through the processes of the creation. Many, if not most, of the good things we receive and are nurtured by come through other human beings, but all of it has been ordained by the Creator. Both of these lists from Luther are describing human life from the womb. There is nothing in these descriptions that is overtly Christian. Though, of course, Luther was speaking to Christians in the Large Catechism, he was distinguishing the Creator’s care for His creatures from the work of redemption that was accomplished by Jesus Christ and is carried on by the

church. This distinction and its ramifications for ministry are theological threads that offer us a way to begin cooperating with God's work in the world instead of having God as an enemy. We are being judged for our greed, our willingness to look the other way and to defer making any changes in our lives that will begin to ease the burden we are putting on the rest of the world. But most of all we are being judged for our idolatry. We have turned from our Creator, the only One who can provide sustenance and nurture for His creatures. We believe that we have our own resources, that we can control, not only our own lives, but the life of the rest of the world.

It's Good Friday morning as I write this, so I suppose I'm immersed in the Passion story at the moment, but it is only the Passion of our Lord that can make any difference here. We have abandoned our callings as citizens and Christians, we have abandoned our Lord in our quest for power. Whether or not we have known about the things Perkins talks about, most of us reading these words have benefited and continue to benefit from the empire building that is happening in our name. We have been overcome by the evil inside of us and the evil which has overtaken the institutions in our country. Let us kneel at the cross, whether it be wood or bronze or shaped like a car axle, and confess our sin.

It is only His love for us, His willingness to sacrifice Himself on our behalf when we are still enmeshed in our evil that is our hope. So many of us feel stuck and don't know what to do even though we know something is terribly wrong. At the root, we can't do anything. We have been overcome by evil and only God's Messiah, Jesus Christ through His life, death and resurrection, can change the pathetic state we're in to new life. Fooling ourselves into thinking that if we just work harder or maneuver more effectively through the corridors of power we can essentially change what's going on will only feed

our mistaken belief that we are in control. At bottom, there is nothing we can do, but reach out to Him and trust that He will lead us where we need to go.

After this, go back and read Perkins' chapter, "What You Can Do." Then you'll have the freedom through Christ to make a difference, a real difference.

Lastly, to our sisters and brothers around the globe who read these Thursday Theologies I plead, Don't give up on us. There are Christians in the U.S. who want to get loose from this empire building, but we are overwhelmed. Unfortunately, most of the time we still bring our arrogance and sense of entitlement to the table, but we still need your help. We know we're in trouble. First, we need our Lord and secondly, we need you to stand with us as we challenge the horror that is our foreign policy. We have been blinded by our greed and we need your open-eyed honesty, speaking the truth in love.

Pastor Robin J. Morgan