

Shock and Awe in Time of War, Part II

Colleagues,

Yesterday was Bonhoeffer Commemoration Day on the church calendar, the anniversary of his death in 1945. His name still signals “shock and awe” from the days of World War II. In last week’s Thursday Theology Amy Thoren took the Shock and Awe of current American rhetoric and ran it through the sieve of law and gospel. The “shock and awe” of the US war in Iraq does not come out godly. It isn’t even “good” law. With victory just around the corner, it’s still bad law. Theologically bad—very bad. For us Americans. Why? Simple. A pre-emptive strike is murder. Forget the deceptive euphemism. That was Luther’s response 5 centuries ago when the Pope urged a pre-emptive strike against Suleiman, the Saddam Hussein of his day. And, Luther noted, God does not bless murderers. So forget God Bless America. God avenges, not blesses, murder. God’s axiom: “vengeance is mine; I will repay.” Even in America’s forthcoming “glorious victory,” our future is not promising. “Visiting the iniquities to the third and fourth generation of those who hate keeping the do-not-murder commandment,” God once said. So no matter how long and loud we intone “God bless America,” we’re self-deceivers. There is no record of God ever blessing murderers. Au contraire. If there ever was a time for repentance, this is it.

Speaking of which, one of you, a recent victim of murderous trauma yourself, sent me this quote from David McCullough’s book “John Adams” [Simon and Schuster, 2001. Page 160]. “One day as he [Adams] and Benjamin Rush sat together in Congress, Rush asked Adams in a whisper if he thought America would succeed in the struggle. ‘Yes,’ Adams replied, ‘if we fear God and repent

our sins.'" To which you, dear colleague, said: "What a contrast between the attitude of one who would become our second president and our present president!"

Enough from EHS. The substantive essay this week—still on this subject—comes from Maurice Schild, an Aussie. Maurice and I were colleagues in 1994 at Luther Seminary in Adelaide, Australia. More than colleagues, really, since we were co-conspirators in teaching Reformation History and Lutheran Confessional Theology at the seminary that whole year. Maurice recently retired, but he keeps on "doing Luther." And in what follows he "does" Bonhoeffer too.

In the 31 March 2003 issue of the magazine of the Lutheran Church of Australia, THE LUTHERAN, Maurice examines pre-emptive strikes and Luther's theology. The title tells it all. But don't just stop there. Read through to the end.

Even in these days—especially in these days—Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

NOT IN LUTHER'S NAME

By Maurice Schild

Though not on our soil, it seems that war is to be our destiny again. America holds out the bait just for a moment, and we-or our leaders-rise to it, we eager little Aussie battlers! As though we can swallow so much death.

The threat of a pre-emptive strike on Iraq is a radical new twist on the traditional idea of self-defence. The 'doctrine of

pre-emption' was summed up by Robert Bird last month in a speech on the American senate floor. He called it 'the idea that the United States or any other nation can legitimately attack a nation that is not imminently threatening, but may be threatening in the future ...' It is the view that good Western nations like ours, far from turning the other cheek, should get in first, strike first! And, if there is any response, then also strike last, of course.

A pre-emptive strike appears to be in contravention of international law and the UN Charter. And it is being tested at a time of worldwide terrorism, making many countries around the globe wonder if they will be on our-or some other nation's-hit list.

What is going on here? Since the end of the Second World War, we have relied on deterrence and containment. Now, having pointed fingers at an 'axis of evil' and so-called 'rogue states' (none anywhere near the size of the former Russian empire or China, surely), we think that deterrence is too weak, and 'pre-emption' has to be rolled in! With no other legal qualification or restraint than that we are assured that 'pre-emption' will be 'in the national interest' of powerful nations-our interest. But we live in a fragile and overcrowded global village, with chronically deprived and starving inhabitants. If 'pre-emption' is not good for them, it's not good.

Eisenhower insisted that 'the people of the world genuinely want peace. Some day the leaders of the world are going to have to give it to them.' The warning of Margot Kaessmann, bishop of the 3.3-million-member Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover, is timely also: 'The future belongs to the non-violent, or we have no future'.

Sentiments like these are not new to the church. In fact, the case for the churches working together to outlaw war goes back some distance along Lutheran rails to Fanø, Denmark. There, in 1934, Lutheran theologian (and later, martyr) Dietrich Bonhoeffer stunned his hearers when he said that 'Christians can't direct weapons against one another because they know that in doing so they are directing them at Christ himself!'

Bonhoeffer marks a turning point. In his writings Protestant politics changes from a 'matter of order and obedience to a responsible task'. He claimed that, while the individual church can witness and suffer, 'only the one great Ecumenical Council of the holy church of Christ over all the world can speak out, so that the world, though it gnash its teeth, will have to hear, so that the peoples will rejoice because the church of Christ in the name of Christ has taken the weapons from the hands of their sons, forbidden war, proclaimed the peace of Christ against the raging world'. Having wandered away-some would say 'having sleepwalked through history'-are we now being driven back to this position?

The current crisis should be leading Lutherans to look to their roots. For, as Lutheran theologian Prof Peter Brunner says, Luther was the first to uphold insistently the principle which, only much later, became a constituent part of the law of nations via the UN Charter, namely, that only self-defence against an actual attack constitutes legitimate use of violence in the form of war. 'The attack, on the other hand, is in every case, a fundamental violation of international law', claimed Brunner. Lutherans, of all people, should be taking the UN Charter seriously. In 1961 Brunner wrote that the direction for humanity's dealing with the war problem is clearly indicated by the UN Charter, especially so for any student of Luther.

Blatant, dangerous talk about 'pre-emption' must be brought

into this light by Christians, especially by Lutherans. According to the Augsburg Confession 16, we may 'engage in just wars', but certainly not in just any wars, which means, I would say, not in most wars. Brunner reads Luther as follows: 'The assurance of political and military leaders that the war is just is in no way sufficient. Whoever does military service must investigate this question himself (sic)'. Are Lutheran people aware of this?

It is a real concern that these Lutheran-compatible positions, so obviously relevant to our world and to survival, are not widely known or preached, taught or discussed. Perhaps some are well informed, and many church leaders have indeed spoken out clearly in the current crisis (also the National Council of Churches, under good Lutheran influence). But Ashcroft, Rumsfeld, Rice, Howard [= Australia's Prime Minister] and Bush, and many mainline Methodist, Lutheran and other people in the Western world give the impression that Christianity has no problem with war as such.

To many in the Muslim world, Bin Laden is a man fighting for justice. For many Muslims, the impression that Christians have no problem with war simply reinforces their memory of the suffering inflicted by the medieval Crusades. Thus the name of Christ is defamed. The gates of mission narrow. I dare say, too, that relations with the world's largest Islamic and so fragile nation at our front door, Indonesia, are undermined by talk of a pre-emptive strike. Perhaps the huge anti-war rallies of the past weeks save face for us somewhat.

But why should we be content to leave the protests to the hippies and the students? Should not the church be taking the lead? During all the years of peace the church's teaching and living never really addresses-consistently, audibly and intentionally-the horrible issue of war. Bishops should veto

the sending of our young to fight on foreign shores; this nation is not under attack. This is especially so, given that we have a propensity to fight every war some powerful friend asks us to. And then we make a cult of the dead on Anzac Day [the day of Australia's most bloody defeat in World War I], meanwhile caring most meagrely for the injured and the wives and families left to bear their losses.

War is a last resort; otherwise, it is unthinkably obscene. What, then, holds us back-we who are grateful for every day of peace and the amazing 'luck' of the draw, being born in this 'lucky country'? What restrains us from being more vocal and up-front, fomenting not revolt but utter abhorrence of war? Indeed, are we not biased deeper down, bound to be partisan followers of the Non-Violent Crucified from Nazareth?

The old century saw an average of a hundred human beings die in warfare every hour. A shocking statistic, yet unable to measure the agony. In this new century, all assumptions are up for grabs. It is our young people who are always most directly concerned with the crisis of war. With our fine schools the challenge of teaching a different ethos and political culture is surely manageable. Let it be based foursquare in the Christian ethic. This would add a reality-and-religion-related dimension to the curriculum-critical, exciting and hopeful. It may, pray God, just save us from breaking last century's deadly records.