

The Confessing Church in the Midst of Empire

The latest round of work by the Lutheran World Federation's "Theology in the Life of the Church" series focuses on the theme of "Confessing and Living Our Faith in the Triune God: Being the Church in the Midst of Empire." I was privileged to be invited as one of the 20 global theologians to present a paper and discuss this topic at the gathering June 27-30, 2007, hosted at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. There were representatives from South Africa, Tanzania, Argentina, India, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, Canada, England, and the United States. I only knew a handful of the participants when I arrived. By the end of our time together, however, I was privileged to find many new friends in this global community.

The "empire" in question is largely the United States of America and all its constituents under the larger pyramid (G-8, Corporations, etc.). Coming to an understanding about what all we mean by empire was more descriptive ("signs of the time") than strictly definitive. Most notably were the evidences of unlimited quests for power and profit and the avoidance of accountability. Some of the helpful pre-reading on unpacking establishing the idea of imperial elements for the conference included the essays by Ninian Koshy ("The global empire: an overview") and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches' "An Ecumenical Stance Against Global Empire for a Liberated Earth Community" (both published, along with other essays, in *Reformed World*, Vol. 56 [4], December 2006). If you need further reinforcement of this theme, just browse through many of Ed Schroeder's numerous commentaries on the theology of empire and the GBA [God Bless America] Folk Religion in past Thursday Theologies.

Dr. Karen Bloomquist, head of the LWF Department for Theology and Studies and convenor of this seminar, provided the keynote address of the topic as we gathered on Wednesday night (June 27). "A common assumption in other parts of the world is that very little is happening theologically from with the US to challenge what is going on. Church folks seem mostly silent, complicit with the assumptions and policies of Empire, reinforced by expressions of religiosity that are the handmaiden to Empire... What in the world is being done theologically to counter the assumptions and practices of Empire?" Thursday and Friday (June 28 & 29) were filled with presentations and responses. For me the day started at 4:30 am with my wake-up call from my host, Gary Simpson, and speed-reading through the papers (usually over a few cups of coffee) until the first set of presentations at 8:30 am. These presentations continued throughout the day until 5:30 pm before we would break for dinner and evening conversations (sometimes going until 11:30 or midnight). Saturday (June 30) was the formal planning for the project of preparing all these papers for distribution in a forthcoming volume on the topic of being the Church in the midst of Empire.

In response to Karen's query, "what in the world is being done theologically to counter the assumptions and practices of Empire?" here is a brief snapshot of the five foci with which the conference concluded:

1. A critical history of empire. How will we examine what empire has been and has become? There is a general consensus from this group of theologians that empire is not an endearing reality-nor is it enduring. But it is being supported by "a particular brand of evangelical theology" (Charles Amjad-Ali, Luther Seminary, USA), and it does tend to promote "fundamentalism and totalitarianism" (Willy Hanson, ISEDET, Buenos Aires,

Argentina) as well a sexist patriarchy (Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, Bangalore, India). How does a “theology of the cross” help to uplift not only the deadly cruelty of empire, as well as the solution to an enlivening future?

2. Narratives in the midst of empire. Empire has its own narrative, one which the group feels is damaging to the human and environmental spirit of our world. What new narrative comes from the Holy Spirit? (Cheryl Peterson, Trinity Seminary, USA, at least asks) There are our own personal narratives of experience of seeking to live the Christian life faithfully. One of these was shared by Pr. William Strehlow, Geneva, Switzerland. What is the narrative of the church-the narrative of faith? Mary Joe Philip, Indian doctoral student at LSTC, highlights how the narrative of the church calls us to the edges of life that the empire has long since discarded.
3. Confessing in the midst of empire. Are we living in “a time of confessing” (Formula of Concord, Article X)? I was especially invited to this conference to discuss these criteria of times of confessing, when the gospel of our Lord Jesus the Christ is at stake. Such times, to be sure, are times of oppression-of people (and probably we would include environment), but also, and significantly, of the gospel itself. That usually means that the church authorities themselves are violating the substance of what it means for us to be “one” in the gospel. Is that the case in the midst of empire today? There are some signs that maybe so, but not all were takers on the idea of our being in statu confessionis-at least not yet. Nonetheless, the criteria laid out by Robert W. Bertram on such times of confessing give us food for thought: a) there are witnesses who are on trial for their faith, oppressed by authority, usually the church’s own; but it is not only

they who are persecuted, but the gospel itself; b) these witnesses point to the authority of the Gospel as authority enough for the church's life and unity; c) their witness is profoundly ecumenical, shared by the whole faithful church; d) these witnesses, by their faithful testimony, reprioritize the evangelical authority of the church so that is not confused with the temporal authority of the law, and vice versa, the temporal authority of the law is not confused with the gospel; e) these witnesses appeal for and to the oppressed who are afflicted in this time of oppression (which is also a time for confessing); and f) no one is more aware of their ambiguous certitude in making this confession than the confessors themselves-but they are nonetheless right in making their confession. In relation to such times of discernment, how does the Holy Spirit help see us through our moral blindness? That was the question of Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Seattle University, USA. And how does the church become a community of belonging that embraces the "otherness" in a world where such "otherness" is not sanctioned by empire? That was the concern of Johannes Swart, South African doctoral student at Luther Seminary.

4. Citizenship and Social Location in the midst of empire. Gary Simpson (Luther Seminary, USA) focused on the theme of civil repentance. Building on Martin Luther's treatise "On War Against the Turk," Simpson contends that national repentance is a continual calling for Christians. "Without repentance a nation can lose its soul." Lincoln's 1863 address on a "Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day" is cited as an illustration of such efforts toward "patriotic repentance" in America. While Reinhold Niebuhr (Structure of Nations and Empires) recognized the place of "power" and "prestige" as pillars in nations, Simpson contends that a third element is needed: publicity, or

public (critical) accountability (which approximates national repentance). "Without 'publicity,' the power of strong nations remains unfettered and prone toward empire.... When publicity becomes the coin of international order, powerful nations become civic internationalists, and this opens the way for just peacebuilding practices." Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, who teaches at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul USA and is also currently running for a seat in the US Senate, wants to lift up the anti-imperial and non-violent streams that he sees in the Scriptures, though he is cognizant that there are other streams of thought in the biblical literature that speak of judgment (I'm not too sure he's got the two-kingdoms down well, but it was entertaining). How does our Lord Jesus the Christ call us into solidarity with the disenfranchised as his chosen, and what are the implications of that in our relationships in society? That was the question of Peter Lodberg (Aarhus, Denmark). And how much have the powers of empire co-opted the structures and cultures of our world? That was the query of Deenabandhu Manchala (WCC, Indian scholar living in Geneva, Switzerland).

5. Hope in the midst of empire. This group was a collection of the marvelous plethora of the other papers, all helpful reflections. John Hoffmeyer (LTS, Philadelphia, USA) commented on the discerning differences between need and desire in a consumerist society. Allen Jorgenson (Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Canada) described how our faith in the triune God leads us become the unceasing quantification that is a mania for empire. Deanna Thompson (Hamline University, St. Paul, USA) would have us embrace the sense of what it means to be "friends" in the Johannine/NT sense of the term in a world where this is diminished. Faith Lugaza (Tanzanian doctoral student at Luther Seminary)

calls us to challenge the Prosperity Theology of empire with a compassionate care for the poor. Margaret Obaga (African doctoral student at Luther Seminary) examines how African women living in the United States have been subjected to violence and abuse, and how remedies can be found in attending (community solidarity), mediating, and advocating. Elieshi Mungure (Tanzanian doctoral student at Luther Seminary), on a similar vein, calls for the transformation of these violent and abusive imperialist signs through embracing justice and equality on the one hand, and forgiveness and healing on the other.

Well, these are my re-presentations of what various folks at the conference were saying, and if there are any misrepresentations, I'll take the hit on that. It should be noted that there is still a lot of work to be done in refinishing this work in the coming months. If readers of ThTh have some thoughts that would help, let me know by writing back to Crossings (and I hope the editors of the website can help convey that info).

In faith and hope in the promises of Christ, we press on, even in the midst of empire!

Peace and Joy!

Mike

The Reverend Dr. Michael Hoy
Pastor, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, St. Louis, Missouri
Former Dean, Lutheran School of Theology, St. Louis