

The St. Louis Bonhoeffer Conference, July 19-21, 2006

Colleagues,

My first thought was to start this post with a different focus. As Hezbollah rockets continue to rain down on Haifa, and the Israelis continue to retaliate throughout Lebanon, I checked a topographical map of Israel and Lebanon to get some clarity. When I zeroed in on Haifa, I got more than I wanted.

Haifa is at that coastal point on Israel's western boundary that juts out into the Mediterranean from an otherwise smooth coastline. "Pushing" that point out into the sea is Haifa's backdrop, Mt. Carmel, the highpoint (1800 ft.) of a mountain range that slants back away from the sea to the southeast. At the other end of that range, 20 miles away from Haifa, is Har-Megiddo, "Mount Megiddo," in Hebrew. Drop the "H" and you have Armageddon. Gulp.

The word Armageddon appears only once in the Bible, Revelation 16:16. "And they [demonic spirits] assembled them [the kings of the whole world for battle] at the place that in Hebrew is called Harmagedon."

Add more rockets and bombs and you have it indeed. Armageddon Now. Apocalypse Now. Reflections on "Apocalypse Now" have been in these posts before. I just checked the internal Google search for our Crossings webpage <www.crossings.org> and got 36 hits. If interested, you can do likewise.

But something else also happened this past week, and that's the topic for ThTh 424. It was the Bonhoeffer Conference in St. Louis. It doesn't take much of a segue to get from

Israel/Hezbollah these days to Bonhoeffer/Berlin in the days of Hitler's Third Reich.

We had our own mini-apocalypse (if that's not an oxymoron) here in St. Louis during the conference. At almost the very moment that things were to begin on Wednesday evening (7:30 p.m.) a storm with never-before-recorded violence ("hurricane 2" strength, we were later told) struck St. Louis. As we're waiting in the auditorium for the kick-off event, the Bonhoeffer film, electricity fails and never comes back for the whole rest of the conference. And the daily temperatures are pushing 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

But it was a Bonhoeffer conference. So even though we couldn't see the film without electricity, we could talk and listen to one another. Compared to Bonhoeffer's life and times this was chicken-feed. Or as his own Finkenwalde ["forest of finches"] seminary students would have said: "Kleiner Käse!" (small cheese). So we improvised, gathered in a lecture hall that had a whole north wall of windows. We sweat and kept the water jugs close.

Five speakers anchored the conference. All of them major players in scholarship about Dietrich Bonhoeffer [Hereafter DB]. Charles Ford, local St. Louisian and one of those pros, organized the gathering focusing on the Lutheran roots of DB's theology. That's still one of the ongoing debates in the International Bonhoeffer Society [hereafter IBS]. Who was DB's own major mentor? Though he draws on Luther all the time—as do most German Protestant theologians, regardless of their personal theological predilections—it's not always clear. Not clear enough to settle the debate: Where is he really coming from?

The conference speakers thought he was coming from Luther, and

in several of the presentations that was made “perfectly clear.”

Presentation #1

Bonhoeffer and the Church Struggle – H. Gaylon Barker

[Barker is a Lutheran parish pastor in Connecticut, Adjunct Prof at Molloy College (Rockville Center NY), IBS board member, editor for the English language edition of DB’s works.]

Here’s Barker’s own abstract of his paper:

“During the 1930s German Church Struggle DB fought to protect the integrity of the church’s proclamation from the outside influences of Nazi ideology. Drawing on Luther’s theologia crucis, Bonhoeffer clearly distinguished between the true church of Jesus Christ—which takes its life from sola scriptura, solus Christus—and the heretical teachings of the German Christians, who had compromised the very church’s existence by wedding Nazi ideology to Christ.”

Barker at the end, but sotto voce, (too much so, I thought) signalled some parallels between the “German Christianity” of DB’s day and the “Folk Religion of God Bless America” [FROGBA] in our times. But he didn’t elaborate. A pity. Does FROGBA not equally “compromise the church’s existence by wedding AMERICAN ideology to Christ?” How different in theological substance are these “Amerikanische Christen” from the “Deutsche Christen” that triggered the time for confessing of DB, and gave the movement its name “The Confessing Church”? Why is there no “Confessing Church” in the USA today? He “almost” addressed those questions. ThTh readers will know that I wish he had not only done so, but then answered them using the data he’d already given us. Perhaps

I can get him to do just that for a future ThTh posting. I've already asked. He hasn't yet said no.

Presentation #2

Bonhoeffer: Politics and Christian Martyrdom – Craig Slane

[Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Simpson University, Redding California, author of the book BONHOEFFER AS MARTYR, 2004]

I have not read Slane's book. In his presentation, he told us, he was not repeating what he said there, but moving to a spinoff from that work to look at DB's martyrdom in terms of social ethics, its beneficial consequences for others. Most often martyrs are noted for standing firm, confessing the faith, not opting for apostasy in the face of death. Polycarp's martyrdom (155 A.D. Smyrna, Asia Minor) was that, but there was more. He was a paradigm for martyrdom that had social-ethical consequences, benefits even, for others. His death, so Slane, had "power to quell violence."

He then connected that theme to DB, tracing it through his theology and in the communal life at the underground seminary in Finkenwalde. Thomas a'Kempis' classic work from the Middle Ages, IMITATION OF CHRIST, was prominent in the theology studied and communal life lived at Finkenwalde. As DB continued to work with the martyr-theme, the NT term "image of Christ" began to replace "imitation of Christ." For one reason, the imitation motif always rested on the imitator striving to be like Christ. The NT term left the initiative to Christ imparting, impressing, his image on the disciples following in his train.

Martyrdom in a "world come of age" may not lead to death. It can

be a “white” martyrdom. Fundamental to either red or white martyrdom is this: as Christ shapes his disciples to conform to himself, the disciples in following Christ are at work to conform the world to Christ.

Presentation #3

Bonhoeffer and the German Resistance – Dr. Charles Ford

[Conference organizer, Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science at Saint Louis University, recognized Bonhoeffer scholar.]

Here is Ford’s own abstract of his presentation:

“Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized at the outset of the Church struggle, at the beginning of April 1933, the centrality of the Jewish question, and appealed to Luther in declaring that the Church is the place where Jew and German stand together under the Word of God. He spoke of the defenders of humane values who had left the Church and, in their struggle for justice, truth, humanity, and freedom, had become homeless. They learned once again to speak the name of Jesus Christ, even in hesitation and with genuine fear, and found in it a new purpose and power.”

Along the way Ford constructed—and documented—an amazing story of DB’s bridge-building to these “homeless humanists,” his by-and-large “unchurched” co-conspirators in the resistance.

Many of the leading figures in the German resistance were at best “casual” Christians. DB, as pastor and committed believer, was the exception. The resistance movement was not a “churchy” undertaking, if for no other reason than that the assassination

of Hitler was central to the program and killing God's appointed leaders has scant Biblical warrant. The resistance figures were among the brightest and best of German "Kulturprotestantismus" (cultural protestantism) in the early decades of the 20th century.

DB's own family was not particularly "churchy" either. Here too he was the exception, and elicited dismay when he opted to study theology instead of some obviously "significant" discipline. They too were mostly cultural Christians. Yes, the kids were all baptized, confirmed and married "in church." That was public decency. Once a year Christmas Eve church service with all those dear carols was a must. Bach was beloved. Propriety and morality were fundamental to their way of life. They were committed humanists.

Ford showed us that, as the resistance progressed and progressively failed in the many attempts to kill Hitler—was God really protecting him?—these "dear worldlings" showed themselves (much to their own surprise) to be "homesick humanists." Homesick for the Christian roots that had spawned the virtues, the high culture, the freedom, the decency, even the Wissenschaft (all of them God's left-hand good things) that the Christian Gospel aided and abetted. When the July 20, 1944 assassination attempt failed—Ford was telling us this on July 20, 2006—and the roof caved in, some of these homesick humanists found themselves "learning once again to speak the name of Jesus Christ, even in hesitation and with genuine fear, and found in it a new purpose and power."

DB's words and witness had built bridges for these homesick humanists—at least some of them—his dear "worldling" co-conspirators, now fellow prisoners and facing the gallows, bridges for them to come back home.

Presentation #4

Bonhoeffer, Luther and Monasticism – Dr. Jonathan Sorum

[Theology professor at Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia, widely recognized Bonhoeffer scholar.]

DB once said that Luther's departure from the monastery may well have been his most significant reformation act. He replaced world-denying monasticism with a "worldly" monasticism. Its rubrics: living 100% as Christ's disciple IN the world—just as Christ lived IN the world as a "man for [all] others."

Worldly monasticism could be called the cantus firmus of DB's classic book NACHFOLGE ("Discipleship" although its title in English translation has unhappily—so Sorum—been "Cost of Discipleship"). The term comes from Jesus' simple invitation to his hearers (in German) "Folge mir nach." "Follow me." When you make a noun out of that verb you get "Nachfolge," simply "following." In articulating worldly monasticism DB recovers the church distinct from the world, while at the same time in solidarity with that world. Clearly such a Nachfolge call from Christ reshapes Christian Gospel proclamation away from getting souls to heaven toward being "little Christs" for all others in the world.

Two or three times Sorum, if I heard him aright (and we didn't get printed copies of the addresses), said that Luther's and DB's proposal for worldly monasticism was their alternative to "orders of creation" theology. I don't think so, at least not for Luther. He often linked the two, contrasting the monastic "orders" with the "orders" (relational patterns) in which the Creator places us at the very beginning of our life as human

creatures. To wit, where God “ordains” for us to live out our life as his creature, in the context of the “givens” we have received. So, for Luther, joining a monastic order—and thereby deserting these “worldly” linkages and relationships and the RESPONSIBILITIES that come therewith— is thumbing one’s nose at God who put us there. It’s choosing something better than God chose for us. How on earth (sic!) can that be done faithfully?

If that is what Sorum said, maybe I can get him to respond to this comment.

Presentation #5 Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Medical Ethics – Dr. Christopher Hook

[C. Christopher Hook, professor of medicine (hematology/oncology) at the Mayo Medical School, medical ethicist]

That much we got in the printed program. When we asked what “medical ethicist” meant, he (humbly) told us: “In the field of medical ethics, I am actively involved in scholarship and research in the areas of end-of-life ethics, reproductive medicine ethics, genetic ethics, the ethics of biotechnology (including stem cell and cloning research), transplantation ethics, the ethics of new technologies (particularly cybernetics, nanotechnology and artificial intelligence), the philosophy of technology and science, and research involving teaching methods in ethics.

“I have expressed these interests internally to Mayo by founding the Mayo Clinical Ethics Council, the Ethics Consultation Service, the Ethics Education Committee, the Reproductive Medicine Advisory Board, the DNA Research Sub-committee of the

IRB, the Institutional Ethics & Bioterrorism Task Force, and assisting the formation of the Transplantation Ethics Advisory Board and the Psychogenomic Ethics.”

Some of those high-falutin terms I’d heard of before, but by the end of his presentation we knew what some of them meant—and had learned a few more. Such as “techno sapiens” and “transhumanism.”

Hook’s lecture, the last of the conference, was scary. [If Barker had expanded on the parallels between the syncretism of the “German Christians” and the syncretism of FROGBA, his could have gotten scary too.]

Scary were the parallels Hook drew between today’s super-duper medical technology already in place and Hitler’s programs of medical research, experimentation and engineering in DB’s days to produce a super Aryan race, where “valueless human beings” were identified and then discarded. Hook claimed that he was no “techno-luddite,” though he gets that epithet now and again in the work he does. It’s not the technology per se, the “nanotechnology” that can create and place atom-sized entities within the human body to fix formerly unfixable defects and even enhance the healthy that is Hitlerian. It is the accompanying ideology that regularly goes with it. If the nanotechnology elicited a “Gee whiz!” from us, the ideology elicited “Angst.” For it is way beyond Hitler’s mad dream of the Aryan “Uebermensch.”

That ideology keeps popping up in the cutting edge literature of Hook’s world. He quoted us texts about “techno-sapiens,” the cyborg [CYBernetic ORGanism] superman just over the horizon to replace homo sapiens. That we are biological creatures is simply our current status, transhumanists believe, but it is not necessary for defining who we are or who we should be. In his

book HEAVEN IN A CHIP (2002) Bart Kosko, USC scientist, puts it more bluntly: "Biology is not our destiny. It was never more than tendency. It was just nature's first quick and dirty way to compute with meat. Chips are destiny."

Or this in Katherine Hayles' HOW WE BECAME POSTHUMAN. "In the posthuman, there are no essential differences, or absolute demarcations, between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot technology and human goals. . . . Humans can either go gently into that good night, joining the dinosaurs as a species that once ruled the earth but is now obsolete, or hang on for a while longer by becoming machines themselves. In either case . . . the age of the human is drawing to a close."

This is not sci-fi, Hook assured us. The US Congress is convinced and is funding it. Already in 2003 President Bush signed into law the "21st Century Nanotechnology Research and Development Act." The bill gives nanotech "a permanent home in the federal government" and assigns nearly \$3.7 billion over four years to get us there.

In his analysis Hook highlighted transhumanism as a "new incarnation of gnosticism, which sees the body as simply the first prosthesis we all learn to manipulate." Gnostics from of old have found the human body defective and finally dispensable. Au contraire Christian theology where "embodiment is fundamental to our identity, designed by God, and sanctified by the incarnation of Christ and his bodily resurrection. Unlike classical gnostics, transhumanists reject the notion of eternal soul and substitute for it the idea of an information pattern."

Bonhoeffer's protest against the IN-human Uebermensch "gospel" of the Nazis, with German scientists doing their best to make it come true, calls us to do likewise vis-a-vis the even more

frightening Uebermensch ideology and “scientific research” to create techno sapiens. The Bible’s “image of God” and “image of Christ” for humankind—created and then redeemed—is what the Christians proclaim as a Gospel both Good and New in the face of that long history of Pelagian proposals for human salvation, including cyber-chip super-duper wonders of our day. The conflict is finally THEOlogical. IDEOlogy is but another kind of THEOlogy. It is about the doctrine of humankind (what are human beings?), the doctrine of sin (what really needs fixing in the human race?) and salvation (what’s needed to heal that malady—and is such healing available anywhere?).

Hook’s conclusion: “Christians must not become techno-luddites, suspicious of all new technologies. While technology is not our salvation, neither is it intrinsically evil. Technology has enhanced our ability to show compassion and to spread the Gospel. Christians need to be techno-realists, recognizing the potential goods of innovation, but realistically anticipating and restricting its potential harms. This requires a correct understanding of human nature and of God’s ultimate plans for our species that only the gospel can provide. Christians must boldly engage in the discussion of these issues, both among themselves and in the public square.”

I think Hook might have been even bolder himself. I remember from Seminex days students asking Bob Bertram whether Transactional Analysis (the current rage at the time) was kosher or not. He responded with a two-page article [now archived on the Crossings website]. Here’s his last paragraph: “For the most constructive use of TA by Christians I would propose two alternatives. We should either demythologize TA’s soteriological pretensions and then employ it for a very limited level of secular, interpersonal behavioral change, or we should

radicalize it with the anti-Gnostic Secret of the Christian Gospel and then use it for the Kingdom unabashedly and outright. Of these two alternatives, my preference is the second.”

Might TA in that paragraph be replaced with TS, techno sapiens? Can TS be kept out of the salvation business? That’s the DB/Luther issue for conversation with transhumanism.

A round-table conversation among the five speakers brought the conference to an end in near total darkness with a flashlight illuminating the face so we could see who was speaking. Three days and still no electricity.

Perhaps that’s a signal. Perhaps an act of God will stonewall transhumanism and its salvation project. Suppose ALL the lights went out. Despite Christian witness for an “image-of-God, image of Christ” humanity in the face of this false Gospel, the course of human history suggests: If it can be done, it will be done. The drive to “Ueberschensch” is endemic to the offspring of Adam and Eve. It’s not the scientific labs that are dangerous. It’s “God-wannabe” lab workers. Even more, “wannabe” saviors of the race.

Yet Hitler’s Ueberschensch project crumbled when Germany crumbled. Could it happen here? Our impending Apocalypse Now may be right in our own back yard, thousands of miles away from Har-Megiddo. Wherever it is, whenever it comes, Christ’s words still pertain: “Repent and believe the Good News.” Which being interpreted is: “Even if the techno sapiens masters won’t, then you, my remnant, make a U-turn away from cyborg salvation and trust my Gospel. And so long as you have voice, tell others what you’re doing, and invite them to Nachfolge.”

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder