

“Thinking it over...” Issue #1

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This is the first in an occasional pamphlet series of theological reflections on timely challenges facing churches of the Lutheran communion. It is produced by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies, but does not represent the official position of the Lutheran World Federation. You are encouraged to duplicate, translate and use this in local settings. Your responses are welcome: kbl@lutheranworld.org

POWER POLITICS IN LIGHT OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

What we as faith communities confess about human beings in relation to God provides a framework that can enable us to understand what is occurring in our history, in particular contexts and globally. Although as a US citizen, it is imperative for me to focus here on the most obvious example of the exercise of political power today—that of the US-led war against Iraq a similar theological critique could also be applied to the use of political power in other settings. As Christians, we need to reflect on questions such as

- How is today's dominating political power defining, shaping and threatening the world? What are the assumptions and dynamics driving these policies? How are these related to economic globalization?
- Theologically, what does this reveal about human beings and the use of political power on the international scene? How can and should we respond to developments such as these, as a Lutheran communion, in relation to other faith communities and to civil society?

THE DOMINATING POWER TODAY

Many today view the USA as having become the reigning global imperial power, able to exercise this power in unilateral, bullying and preemptive ways that are unaccountable to the global community. Although a heightened fear of terrorism and a frantic quest for security for its own people are the reasons given for its aggressive policies at home and abroad, these have been disproportionate to the size and clarity of the threat, for which no clear-cut, persuasive case was made to the rest of the world.

Where else do you see political power being used in similar ways today?

Although the rule of Saddam Hussein was indeed tyrannical, the direct threat his regime posed to the USA was never convincingly established. Instead, popular US support for these policies was sought through carefully orchestrated media, public relations and military campaigns, often inspired by religiously-based, dualistic (good vs. evil), apocalyptic imagery. Such imagery fuels the historically-rooted sense of America having a “righteous” mission to defeat the forces of evil. Furthermore, the US has the military power and technological know-how to do so. Now that Iraq has been defeated and left in a vulnerable state of confusion regarding how it will be governed, the conquering power has made clear its intention to control how this will occur. Dramatic, high tech military strategies for targeted killings received far more attention than how to provide a “cup of water” for those who survived the attacks. Meanwhile, speculation mounts as to when and where the empire will strike next.

The globalization of advanced technology and finance has opened up new possibilities for terrorism and war. The frustrations and anger that result in terrorism and lead to war against terrorism must be viewed in the wider context of economic globalization.¹ Neo-liberal mandates of economic globalization—a kind of economic fundamentalism—have contributed to the crisis in which modern states now find themselves: their sovereign power over the economic well-being of their people often is threatened by one unrestricted world market.

A perpetual war against terrorism can be viewed as one attempt to resolve the crisis provoked by economic globalization. Economic motives were key in the recent war. Now, the resulting destruction of infrastructures needed for life to function normally has opened up new avenues for corporate investment and business, especially by corporations with the appropriate US political connections. (The first award of \$34.5 M to one such corporation is projected to surpass \$680 M in eight months.) In times of global economic slowdown, war and its consequences are seen as important economic stimuli for those in a position to benefit. The globalization of politics, even through war, helps to further economic globalization.

How do you view the connections between economic globalization, terrorism and war?

FROM A THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

This scenario must be challenged theologically and morally at a number of points. Although the amassing of power is not by itself to be scorned or declared as sinful, how that power is used must be scrutinized very carefully. The greater the power, the greater the temptation to use it in morally objectionable ways. When it is used to strike out against vague threats, in ways that compromise basic human rights, it can become a license for totalitarianism. When used for goals that are questionable to the human community, or in ways that take advantage of those who are weaker or more vulnerable, it must be called into account. Using power to protect reasonable self-interests in the face of real and formidable threats may be appropriate, but pursuing inordinate self-interest at the expense of the wider global community of nations is morally objectionable. Most alarming are preemptive acts of war against those who pose no great, substantive threat to others. This fails to meet even the most minimal conditions for a “just war.” Intervention for the sake of stopping horrendous practices against a populace must also be rigorously scrutinized as to whether this is ever morally justifiable.²

Which of these ethical principles would you question? What would you add?

What the above example especially brings to mind are basic theological tenets about human nature. The pervasiveness of human sin and fallenness, as exemplified in actions taken by powerful governments or other corporate bodies, is a critical theological perspective that needs to be brought to bear in the face of political arrogance, corporate greed and self-righteous ambition. Interests are never pure, deception is rampant. This necessitates humility in personal and political affairs, as well as in the pronouncements of churches. Sin clouds human judgments about what is in a person's or a country's self-interest, not to mention global common interest.

On this basis, unilateralism as a policy that goes unchecked, that does not confer and act collaboratively with others, must be called into question. Isolationism from the rest of the human community, or a "turned-in upon self" tendency (Luther: *incurvatus in se*) that is oblivious to others, is another pivotal expression of sin. The expansionist tendencies that continue to seek *more* are epitomized in the sin of greed—the insatiable desire to control more lands and more wealth. In the struggle for power, those with power seek to globalize it—by determining and directing the destiny of the world. It is this presumptiveness that must be challenged: claiming to reign over rather than being responsible stewards of a destiny that ultimately is in God's hands.

In political situations you are familiar with, how are these tendencies manifest?

This leads to the tendency to construe a political situation in fundamentally dualistic terms of good vs evil and overlooks the inevitable ambiguities and complexities of a situation; good and evil are complexly interwoven in human intentions and actions. To assume self-righteously that human beings can defeat the forces of sin and evil in clear-cut terms in this world is a pretension contrary to basic Pauline and Lutheran premises about the human condition. In naming a person or country "evil," people arrogate to themselves the good, the side of God, and thus set up their position as beyond critique.

Furthermore, soberness about the human condition reminds us that we become like those we hate. Those who strike out against their enemies often become like their enemies. Those who fight against evil can themselves also become embodiments of evil. Revenge and violence beget more revenge and violence. These cycles are part of our human bondage, ultimately redeemable by God rather than through human efforts. In contrast, Jesus reverses this whole logic with his words, "love your enemies," provoking the search for alternative responses to evil. Yes, evil is real and must be restrained, but not with strategies that only escalate violence and retribution. Realism regarding the human condition necessitates fuller deliberation from different perspectives within the whole human community as to what should be done in particular situations, rather than a one-sided imposition of *the* "righteous" solution.

This can lead to a dismal fatalism regarding possibilities for human decisions and actions to make a difference. But it can also lead toward more realistic assessments and proximate responses that are neither naïve about the human propensity for evil nor the human propensity for good.

Political policies must be developed and pursued that are cognizant of the reality of this human fallenness, in order to hold in check the dangerous effects this can have, especially on

those who are vulnerable. Vulnerability is intrinsic in what it means to be human. Conflict arises when people feel vulnerable, as well as when they assume that they are invulnerable. Recognizing this leads to the recognition that the security of others is our joint, cooperative responsibility. Rather than being linked primarily to the sovereignty of nation states, security today must be linked to how the vulnerability of persons and communities can be protected.³ Such a perspective, consistent with a theology of the cross, runs directly counter to how political power is normally understood and operates. In actuality, it may be more realistic.

This also is why more multilateral, cooperative, deliberative politics that seek to listen to and work with others in order to arrive at what is in the common good are more consistent with theological convictions about the human condition. Rather than apocalyptic, “end-times” thinking, we are reminded of God’s faithfulness to creation amid the terrors of what may seem like end-times. Instead of human beings being “raptured into heaven,” God descends to earth and dwells with the creation.⁴ A new globalization is called for—to renounce dominating power and, instead, enact compassionate solidarity with the wounded and suffering of the earth.

This poses a clear challenge to governments who act in unilateral ways that presume they have “God on their side.” It also challenges how churches speak and act. The eschatological promise of what God will ultimately bring to fulfillment is what inspires and motivates the church to speak truth to unjust, corrupt, and/or totalitarian political power. The church cannot remain silent, especially in the face of imperial power. Yet mindful of the ambiguities permeating history and all human policies, the church must avoid the very tendencies it decries in the political realm — to presume to save the world by imposing its “solutions” on the rest of the world. Instead, on the basis of its faith convictions, it can boldly enter the public arena where pluralistic interests assert themselves, and in coalition with others to engage in vigorous debate for the sake of forging together policies that truly will serve the common good of all.

How has your church been speaking out and acting with others? How might you do so?

REV. DR KAREN L. BLOOMQUIST

¹ See, e.g., *A Call to Engage in Transforming Economic Globalization* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2002).

² See, *Armed Intervention to Defend Human Rights* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2000).

³ Insights from *Vulnerability and Security* (Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations, 2000), which also appear in the 2003 Assembly Study Book, *For the Healing of the World* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2002), p. 212.

⁴ See the Bible Study on Revelation 21:1–6 in *ibid.*, p. 123.

The Lutheran World Federation

Department for Theology and Studies
150 route de Ferney, (P.O. Box 2100),
CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
Tel. +41/22-791 61 11 Fax +41/22-791 66 30
E-mail: klb@lutheranworld.org Web site: www.lutheranworld.org

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