

“Thinking it over...” Issue #11

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This is the eleventh 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 official positions of the Lutheran World Federation. You are encouraged to duplicate, translate and use this in local settings. To subscribe to this series, please contact Ursula Liesch at Liesch@lutheranworld.org

LUTHERAN ETHICS AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF GOD’S ONE WORLD

In light of blatant, urgent crises today, such as when people are starving, being killed, tortured, or having their basic human dignity violated in other ways, there is little moral ambiguity. As Christians we cannot remain silent in the face of such atrocities, but must speak out and act. But even on these, as well as on other ethical matters, the picture becomes more complicated when different cultural, ethnic, gender, historical and religious factors are involved or clashing in disturbing ways. Such factors need to be taken seriously, but they cannot be the last word. How can these differences be transformed in light of our faith? This sets the stage for the new book by the Department for Theology and Studies, "Lutheran Ethics at the Intersections of God's One World." The following is adapted from the concluding chapter.

Various cultural influences are inevitably and increasingly interacting, especially under the forces of globalization, and as they do so, encountering ethical differences if not clashes. What happens when these cultural, historical, political, religious and other dynamics intersect or clash is the focus of attention here.

These intersections are occasions for further reflection, where we need to stop and ask, What is going on here? What formative values, worldviews, histories, religious sensitivities, social patterns and taboos are at stake? What happens when these encounter other cultural perspectives and influences? What power dynamics are at play? How do deep-rooted cultural sensitivities respond to what is experienced as an overpowering intrusion of external influences? Or, from another viewpoint, how can such influences challenge or transform what is harmful and destructive of life in these cultural realities? What happens at the intersections, and how we relate to one another there, is of theological as well as ethical importance.

God’s Spirit holds us together as a communion of churches, rather than our agreement on ethical matters. Sometimes, however, we doubt that this power is sufficient to hold us together in the midst of our real differences, based as they are on economic disparities, political ideologies, gender, ethnicity and various other cultural factors. Fearing conflict over ethical questions, we

too often avoid such questions. Not only is this so within a highly diverse global communion of churches, but also within individual churches.

We have been formed by the Christian tradition, which has developed through dynamics of crossing, blending and transforming cultures throughout its history. The faith conviction that the world, with all its diversity is **God's**, reminds us that despite all the diversity we encounter, it nevertheless is God's **one** world. What holds us together in the midst of all our differences, and empowers us to deliberate together, is a resilient conviction of faith in a God who creates, re-deems, and promises to transform us and our world.

This is the basis for Christian ethics as a way of life, not with enforceable “traffic rules”—which some simplistically equate with “ethics”—but living according to a kind of “grammar” for making sense of how God is acting and calling us to act in the midst of the intersections in our world today. What is distinctive about these interactions is a theological-ethical lens or grammar that reflects a Lutheran interpretation of the wider Christian tradition. It influences how we negotiate with one another at the intersections, and provides form and direction for the content or substance that emerges through our interactions.

A Lutheran approach to ethics—in common with many other traditions—asks what will help or harm the neighbor. But in our pluralistic world, the neighbor increasingly embodies significant cultural differences, making it difficult to generalize as to what is right, good or fitting. Questions immediately arise, Right according to whose criteria? Good for whom, in which culture? Many ethical positions, previously assumed to be universal, have increasingly been challenged, especially because of the cultural imperialism with which they are associated. In addition, in areas where Christianity is growing the fastest, including in many Lutheran churches, Enlightenment premises simply cannot be assumed. Instead, the compatibility between pre-modern biblical views and people's own views and practices today is assumed, so that the Bible becomes an unquestioned rule book for the moral life—no other discussion needed.

The point is not to come up with uniform global Lutheran answers to ethical dilemmas. Abstract, universal perspectives are appropriately viewed with suspicion. Nor is the point to leave matters in a postmodern sea of values freely chosen according to one's preference or situation. Both poles are inconsistent with a Lutheran grammar.

Can there be ethical discernment within a confessional family that takes contextual differences seriously, but without foreclosing the possibility of arriving at clear ethical judgments? Are we as a communion of churches maturing to the stage when critical engagement across cultural terrains can be ventured, because of the theological grounds on which we stand as a communion?¹

These grounds include a deep-rooted confidence in the God who promises, forgives and can be depended on, no matter how morally confused we might be. It is not our own moral clarity that ultimately matters. Instead, we live by a grammar that is permeated with hope, comfort and confidence, based on who God is and what God promises. We thus are empowered through God's Spirit, as the body of Christ in God's one world, as we seek to discern what we are to do and to challenge others to do likewise.

Theological ethics involves reflective critique of much that is associated with culture, of the ethos or morality that is taken for granted. “Culture” cannot be the last word. Cultural assumptions and practices need to be critiqued when they go against basic theological convictions, such as

when the God-given dignity or equality of anyone is violated. But such ethical critique cannot assume to be neutral or without its own cultural baggage.

In this sense, it is crucial that ethics be approached inter-culturally, preferably between more than two cultures. Through our culture alone we may be unable to see, much less critique what is unjust or otherwise inconsistent with basic theological-ethical convictions. Deliberation with those from different cultures enables us to identify and sift out important areas of overlapping consensus from factors that are more peripheral, no matter how important they may seem to be in a given society.

It is through such deliberation that we and how we view ethical challenges can be transformed, through the power of God's Spirit at work among us. This involves not only a "renewal of our minds," but of our perceptions, feelings, will and actions.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2).

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To order a copy of the LWF Studies book, "Lutheran Ethics at the Intersections of God's One World," (publication date: December 2005); 12 Euro or 15 USD, please contact, liesch@lutheranworld.org.

TOPICS ADDRESSED IN THIS BOOK INCLUDE:

"The Grammar of a Lutheran Ethic" (Hans G. Ulrich)

"A Lutheran Ethic of Embodied Care" (Wanda Deifelt)

"An African Perspective on Sex and Marriage" (Phillip Moeahabo Moila)

"Embodiment Contextualizes Sexual Ethics" (Karen L. Bloomquist)

"Conflicting Religious-Cultural Discourses of Human Rights in the World Today" (Elisabeth Gerle)

"East Meets West: Rites and Rights" (Wai Man Yuen)

"Transition to Democracy in a Post-Communist Society: Can Fear Be Overcome?" (András Csepregi)

"Education, Gender and Empowerment in Brazil" (Wanda Deifelt)

“Agriculture, Food and Responsible Biotechnology” (Per Anderson)

“Privatizing Property that Belongs to All” (Puleng Lenka Bula)

“Renewing Our Minds’ through Moral Deliberation” (Per Anderson)

“Ethical Discernment in a Global Communion” (Karen L. Bloomquist)

NOTES

¹This is a challenge to be addressed in the “church unity amid moral diversity” track of the LWF/DTS study program, “Theology in the Life of Lutheran Churches.” To participate, please contact kbl@lutheranworld.org.

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