

“Thinking it over...” Issue #12

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This is the twelfth 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. Please send any responses regarding this issue to kbl@lutheranworld.org. To subscribe to this series, please contact Ursula Liesch at Liesch@lutheranworld.org

ANGER, DIALOGUE AND THE CHURCH:

WHO SETS THE TERMS?

The recent publishing of cartoons offensive to Muslims has sparked massive amounts of rage and debate. It has escalated into disturbing developments not only for Denmark, but also for Muslim-Christian relations in many places around the world.

On the one hand, for Christians living in countries or communities where other faiths have long been dominant, what this crisis brings to light is not new. There these faiths have influenced the formation of attitudes, policies and practices that at times may be experienced as discriminatory or oppressive by Christians, who know what it feels like to be minorities in contexts where the terms are set by more powerful majority cultural/religious influences.

On the other hand, in especially northern European countries, Lutheran churches historically have been pivotal shapers of culture, values, worldviews and ways of life – as “folk churches.” This is now typically expressed in secular terms such as toleration, free speech and social welfare policies; there is much justifiable pride associated with this complex cultural/religious legacy. It has been the envy of much of the rest of the world. Now, however, some are attacking, challenging, raging against certain aspects of this previously “sacrosanct” legacy, which *others* feel is a direct offense against what *they* hold sacrosanct.

The “cartoon crisis” has caught short and shocked those who until recently have been living in rather homogeneous cultural and religious contexts. Here those in the majority have been accustomed to setting the terms (based on their

cultural values) for encountering those of other faiths and cultures, many of whom are recent immigrants. This may include seeking to enter the life world of those who are “other” and to understand reality from their perspectives, but this can also result in overtly discriminatory policies against those considered “outsiders.” Often this remains at a polite level, where the norms and rules of the dominant culture are still “in charge” and thus not threatened. But now this has been upstaged in disturbing, even violent ways that have grabbed attention on the world stage. Close observers have sensed this tension escalating for some time, but with the publicity given to the cartoons, this crisis burst onto the world scene with a vengeance that took many by surprise.

Freedom of expression, including of the press, has become a part of the secular “faith” – one of the non-negotiables – in modern Western societies. Ironically, however, defending this in uncompromising terms, as many Danish spokespersons have done, has actually turned this into a battle of competing faiths, with the precipitating clash being between Islamic prohibitions and a secularly-expressed “faith,” as expressed, e.g., in freedom of the press. The realization has dawned that such secular values do not necessarily guarantee social peace, especially when they are reacted to with violent outbursts of rage.

Churches, including those of the LWF, have long been emphasizing the importance of dialogue with those of other faiths, and even more so in situations of tension. Through dialogue with others we are able better to understand others as well as ourselves. This means moving into the real depths of what motivates people, especially in terms of their spirituality. Space needs to be opened up that makes it possible for people of different faiths to articulate their real pain, critiques and concerns.

When US cities were burning in the 1960s because of the depth of Black rage at entrenched injustice and oppression, expressions of tolerance, good will and dialogue were important but not sufficient. What furthermore was needed was a deep societal self-examination and exposure of the sin of racism (meaning: prejudice plus power), led by the churches. This ongoing “conversion” process still continues today, especially through intentional anti-racism training in churches, schools and communities.

It may be that churches and societies in Europe, not to mention elsewhere, are confronted with an analogous turning point today. Rather than dismissing angry Muslims as extremists and tolerating others living in their countries only on the condition that they abide by values that implicitly reflect a Western Christian ethos, there must be deeper scrutiny of how these values are embedded in institutionalized power realities that prohibit those with “outsider” cultural or religious identities from ever becoming “insiders.” The terms are pow-

erfully stacked against them from the beginning. Is this not at least part of what the outbursts of anger are communicating? Taking expressions of anger seriously can be key in the quest for social justice that goes beyond benign tolerance.

What does it mean to be the church in the midst of provocative crises such as this? How might “our” ways of defining and controlling reality on “our” terms need to be challenged? What are we saying and doing in our local congregations and in our communities to counter the ethnocentrism and Islamophobia? What intentional educational and organizing efforts do churches and others need to make if that is to occur? Rather than smugly self-righteous responses (e.g., “we’re more tolerant than they are”) more humble self-critical approaches are required instead. We need to face what has been an ambiguous Christian history and legacy toward people of other faiths, and to resist any misuses of Christian symbols to justify cultural or political power today.

Ironically, even in secularized societies, what may be most needed is a distinctly *Christian* witness. This does *not* mean in ways that are triumphalist or that seek to make those of other faiths into Christians, but in ways inspired by how Jesus was continually challenging and transforming the distinctions humans make between “outsiders” and “insiders.” This is especially evident in Jesus’ interactions in Mark’s Gospel. He heals “outsiders,” making them clean, whole, restoring them to community, and in the process he himself becomes an outsider to established powers, most extremely, on the cross. In reality, this strange logic is at the heart of this Gospel, challenging all human claims to status or inclusion by either individuals or societies. Lutherans refer to this strange logic in terms of justification by faith through God’s grace.

The central gospel dynamic of “outsiders becoming insiders” points to a much needed transformational agenda within many societies, where fully incorporating immigrants, especially those of a minority religion or culture into the dominant societies has become such an acute challenge. That doesn’t necessarily mean converting them religiously into Christians or culturally into Danes, Germans or Americans. But following the lead of Jesus, it means challenging social attitudes and structures of power that discriminate against outsiders in favor of insiders. That’s inspired from out of the heart of the gospel. For us as Christians, it is Jesus himself who not only models this but also empowers those of us “inside” to change places continually with those who are “outside.” Not building up “Christian cultures” that become fortresses to keep others out or to keep them feeling like they don’t really belong, but living out the strange logic that we have learned from Jesus. This implies a radical new kind of hospitality based not on our terms but on God’s terms. Might that not be the more appropriate kind of *Christian* witness for today?

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