

SEPTEMBER 2009

This is the twenty-second 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

INTERFAITH PERSPECTIVES FOR ECONOMIC LIFE

The global economic recession has been a pervasive concern over the past year. Governments around the world have frantically attempted to mitigate or reverse what is occurring through huge bailouts, stimuli packages, new regulations, easing credit flows, providing aid to large financial institutions, banks and corporations—all with the hope that economies and markets around the world will rebound. Many have pointed to scandalous greed, quests for ever-higher profit and unethical practices as key factors contributing to this crisis, which the Bible and other sacred Scriptures strongly and repeatedly denounce.

And yet, as investors and businesses seek to recover their losses of the past year, their attention is turned again on what will bring the highest profit and growth. Assumptions and practices that got us into this mess may have been questioned at the height of the crisis, but less so now. Instead, there is a universal call for consumers to spend more for the sake of economic growth and the flourishing of markets. Investors are being drawn to where they can put their money now for the sake of fast growth.

The prescription for “healing” this crisis has concentrated mostly on the large corporations and other major players in the global market, in ways that overlook the many ways in which common people long have been coping and surviving, carrying out local activities for the sake of the *oeconomia* that can sustain their lives and that of their families. What other kinds of wisdom do we find in Luther and in other faith traditions that suggest a different orientation for economic life?

In affirming God's grace and continuing reign in earthly and not only spiritual matters, Luther saw *oeconomia* as an estate or mandate of "Christian love, in which one serves . . . those in need through all kinds of benevolent deeds."¹ Luther went further and called for establishing social policies so that the common people could sustain their households. The community should work together for the well-being of the neighbor and the common good.

One clear challenge to *oeconomia* is usury. The way in which Luther spoke out against such practices would have been familiar to the Muslims of the day. Through their "worldly and spiritual office," Muslims try to protect their community from usury, and expect that through this practice their *oeconomia* can be sustained, even enjoy growth.

The root of the Islamic economy lies in its constant critique of usury (*riba*) which, like Luther, is opposed because of how it tends to exploit the poor. Distress driven credit violates Islamic faith in what is just. Sharing our gifts (*zakat*) with the weaker members of society becomes a means by which economic sovereignty is protected.

In the modern context, Islamic banking is a way to mediate this anti-usury principle by promoting a profit-sharing system. The bank is a joint project where business partnership is pursued through an agreement on a fair interest to be gained on investments. This is how investment is controlled, and one way of dealing with the selfish *homo oeconomicus* and promoting realistic mutual gain.

Referring to the growing Islamic banking system in England, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, publically stated last year, "I would like very much to see a dialogue developing with Islam about question of what a just, reasonable rate of interest might look like in the light of a religious ethic" Luther might have said something similar.

Another way in which this is occurring is through alternative economic institutions. In Borneo and the Batak "Lutheran" area of Sumatra (Indonesia), this is taking place through a not-for-profit cooperative institution founded in 1849 in the Rhineland, Germany, by a devout Lutheran—Friedrich Raifeisen. This Credit Union (CU) in Indonesia, "Pancur Kasih," was started by the Catholic Church in West Borneo, and has over 76,000 Christian and Muslim members, most of who work as farmers or merchants. The CU seeks to encourage thrift among its members so that their savings can become a fund from which they can borrow. This is important for small businesses seeking to become self-sufficient, and who want to be free of the illegal "loan sharks" who charge exorbitant interest rates. As the director of "Pancur Kasih" once stated, this is a way of living out the subsidiary principle. The CU seeks to promote economic and social goals of its members, rather than profit for itself.

This is consistent with the 2009 Vatican document, *Caritas in Veritate*, which advocates solidarity as key in today's economic crisis. It emphasizes the dignity of labor as well as the

need to discern and transform the glaring inequalities in economic life. Further, Pope Benedict XVII added that we are called mutually to deal with this crisis, across religious boundaries. The CU is a clear example of this call for inter-communal solidarity and growth, for the sake of an *oeconomia* that serves the needs of all.

According to Luther, in the realm of *oeconomia*, God calls all of us to faithful obedience. This means that faith communities should enable a livelihood for all, so that people will see and taste God's gift. God gives what is needed for economic life, as we pray in "Give us today our daily bread." The different faith traditions provide orientations that are consistent with lives of faithful obedience. Life, profit and growth are shared, unethical practices avoided, and the self-sufficiency of communities enhanced, so that the lives of the common and faithful people will not be crushed in times of global economic crisis.

Such faith orientations can be joined with inner personal practices, for the sake of an *oeconomia* of caring and sharing. Buddhism, for example, may illuminate the joy and freedom of how we as Christians, who receive God's gift through grace and not works, can then live out this freedom in our daily practices.

At an international Buddhist conference on the global economic crisis (May 2009, Bangkok), the "Middle Path" was discussed: the joy of life is gained by way of moderation, prudence and resilience. In economic terms, this path can be realized through a self-reliant production of food.

One of the participants, Mr Priastana, pointed out that the economic crisis reflects human beings' craving (*tanha*) for material ownership. Here desire is the driving force. Humans want to justify and assert who they are by becoming more prosperous. This is an illusion. Humans are derailed from what is real, following the path of maya (illusion), instead of what will fulfill the deep human cry for security.

Mr Priastana's community lives near Borobudur temple in central Java, Indonesia, where they walk on a path leading from maya to "non-attachment" by following the reliefs carved on the wall of that temple. The reliefs are carved along four rectangular terraces, along which a person walks in order to reach the top circular dome (*stupa*). The reliefs near the bottom are the *Kamadhatu*, the path of desire. Next is *Rupadhatu*, a figurative scene, depicting the middle path taken by the Prince Siddharta to find his enlightenment. Here Siddharta has his palm open, showing the availability of blessing to all creation. At the top is *Arupadhatu*, the final reality, formless, yet open. Here the fullness of life is to let go of everything, and to receive reality as it is. Here, compassion for the neighbor becomes like the open and caring palm of Siddharta.

Does this not also relate to the deepest meaning of freedom that we receive in Christ? Rather than curving in upon ourselves (Luther claimed this *incurvatus in se* to be the real sin), we no longer need to worry or allow ourselves to be dragged into feeling guilty for not doing enough to prove ourselves by the rewards we earn, or the economic growth or profit we make.

What really justifies us? Can we walk along this kind of path in our communities, and not be led toward the *étalage* of consumptive culture? Freed from the bondage that blinds us to the gift of life, we can join in enhancing the lives of our neighbors.

As we realize the need to live differently in the midst of economic downturns, how can we listen to insights from our own Lutheran tradition, as well as learning from and entering into deeper dialogue with assumptions, understandings and practices of those of other faiths?

As we prepare for a focus on this in 2010, especially in a dialogue between Christian and Buddhist perspectives on economic life, we are eager to hear from you. How are interfaith perspectives enriching how you deal with the effects of these economic times?

MARTIN LUKITO SINAGA
STUDY SECRETARY

***You are encouraged to share your perspectives on this topic with
Rev. Dr Martin Lukito Sinaga at mls@lutheranworld.org***

NOTES

Martin Luther, "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper, 1528," in Helmut T. Lehman (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 37 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 365.

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 94 Fax +41/22-791 66 30

E-mail: mls@lutheranworld.org Web site: www.lutheranworld.org

