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This is the fourteenth 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

HOPE AMID ABSURDITY?

Many of us have been watching and lamenting the tragic events unfolding in the Middle East. There is hardly a conflict that surpasses this one in terms of complexity, which makes well reasoned and carefully calibrated comments on the situation so difficult and risky.

RELEVANT LWF INVOLVEMENT

The LWF has been in dialogue with the Jewish people for quite some time.¹ One of the highlights of this history was the LWF Seventh Assembly in Budapest, Hungary, in 1984, which marked the significant progress that had been made in Jewish-Lutheran dialogue. In September 2001, the Department for Theology and Studies organized an international consultation on antisemitism and anti-Judaism in Dobogókő, Hungary, at which stock was taken of the member churches' dialogue work since 1984.² A number of LWF member churches, notably in Germany and the USA, had by then explicitly distanced themselves from the egregious anti-Jewish statements Martin Luther made in the last years of his life.

Is there enmity against Jews and their faith in your country? How has your church responded?

The LWF has, for many years, been involved in Christian-Muslim dialogue through the office for the Church and People of other Faiths. A study exploring possibilities for Christians and Muslims to contribute to peace and reconciliation under conditions of conflict and violence, has recently been concluded.

Are there tensions between Christians and Muslims in your country? How does your church deal with them?

The LWF has consistently supported the “Palestinian cause,” especially through its field program and its office for International Affairs and Human Rights. This can be seen as part of LWF's overall commitment to justice and peace, a wider ecumenical concern. The LWF has furthermore accompanied and supported the witness and mission of its member church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL).

All these activities constitute links between the LWF and this region rent by rampant violence and war.

ONGOING THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL CHALLENGES

The LWF general secretary recently joined calls for an immediate cessation of hostilities. All acts of violence, terror and war need to come to an end as soon as possible in order to prevent the loss of innocent lives. The LWF has stated time and again that peace is much more than the silence of weapons, but must be based on justice accommodating the legitimate concerns of all those embroiled and affected. This is a task of the utmost complexity requiring, from all sides, considerable amounts of goodwill, patience, wisdom, a willingness to repent and transform, as well as negotiating skills.

I also see some specifically spiritual and theological challenges. As Christians in general, and Lutherans in particular, we are called to recognize our indissoluble relationship with the Jewish people as God's first-chosen people together with whom we as a Christian church constitute God's people.³ This deep bond implies the unequivocal insistence that the state of Israel has the right to exist in security for two main reasons. First, the land of Israel plays a significant role in Jewish faith and hope, with variations within the different traditions of Judaism. This entails some political and institutional framework such as a state. Second, the state of Israel carries a particular meaning for the Jewish people insofar as it was to serve as a safe haven after centuries of discrimination, persecution and genocide. That the state of Israel was founded after the Holocaust, in which a third of world Jewry was systematically exterminated, mostly at the hands of Christians, many of them Lutherans, is certainly no coincidence.

To recall this tragic history, so deeply ingrained in Jewish consciousness, is currently all the more pertinent as movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah advocate the destruction of the "Jewish state." Recently the Iranian President publicly denied the Holocaust calling it a "myth," and said that Israel should be wiped off the map and Jews relocated to "where they came from." Christians must openly take a stand against such egregious claims, as did the LWF president in December 2005.

It is, nevertheless, also important to insist that Israel, a member of the United Nations, comply with international law. Notwithstanding its unique background, it is not exempt from moral and legal requirements. Nonetheless, even if questions rightly may arise as to the extent to which Israel does comply (e.g., in relation to the proportionality of the means employed in self-defense), its right to exist within secure borders (whatever this may mean) is undisputed.

Furthermore, irrespective of the ambiguities and complexities involved, Lutherans should do everything they can in order to encourage and promote interfaith dialogue and encounter. Mindful of fundamentalist tendencies in all faith communities — Muslim, Jewish and Christian — including some LWF member churches, we need to distinguish between Islam and the yearning which comes with it, on the one hand, and its fundamentalist distortions and political misuse on the other. We must be cautious of the ways in which fundamentalist expressions of Christianity can be used in order uncritically to support whatever Israel does. Wherever possible we need to continue dialogue, encounter and practical cooperation. Prejudices need to be unmasked, foe images corrected (e.g., in school text books), and vulnerable trust nurtured.

How can we as Christians maintain our deep bonds with the Jewish people including our (critical) commitment to the integrity of the state of Israel while upholding our support for the Palestinian people, most of whom are Muslim, in their quest for justice and peace?

In August 2005, Bishop Munib Younan, ELCJHL, stated, “It is my fervent prayer that my children and grandchildren will live one day side by side with their Israeli sisters and brothers in a just peace. We care about the security of Israel but believe that the security of Israel is dependent on freedom and justice for the Palestinians. And freedom and justice for Palestinians is dependent on the security of Israel. This symbiotic relationship is the key to a just peace in this Holy Land.”

This is no cheap compromise demarcating the smallest common denominator in order to please the constituencies involved without tackling what is really at stake. It requires a shift of perception on all sides, a self-transformation rather than calling upon the other side to conform to one’s own image. It requires the insight that peace and security are indivisible, that the boat, in which both sides sit at opposite ends, requires reconciliation if both “peoples” are to stay afloat. While voices such as this one exist on all sides, there is the fear that they are drowned out in the midst of propaganda and war. But, no one can afford to give up. The Bible calls us to maintain hope even when its tangible basis seems to have been eroded and destroyed (e.g., Isa 35; Rev 21f.).

STATES, VIOLENCE AND WAR: FAMILIAR PATTERNS CRUMBLE

Lutherans have insisted that God is determined to maintain creation as the space in which human beings, created in God’s image, can live and flourish, listen to God’s Word and respond to it in faith. But this space is constantly threatened by evil forces. God’s means for protecting creation against these forces is the state. This includes, whenever necessary, employing military means (see Rom 13:1-7; *Confessio Augustana XVI*). This has been an aspect of the Lutheran doctrine of God’s twofold rule (two-kingdoms doctrine). By way of this teaching Lutheranism has espoused the theory of “just war” which, under specific conditions, legitimizes the state’s use of military force.

To what extent is the concept of “just war” being supported by your church? How would you assess it?

In light of the existence of weapons of mass destruction, the LWF has reexamined this teaching, asking whether it continues to be sustainable.⁴ More recently this theoretical framework has come into question from yet another quarter: “war” is no longer a reality of two states squaring off against one another as has been the case in the past. Present realities have widely dissolved this neat perception. The current war in the Middle East is a case in point.

We are confronted by the following questions: How do we creatively deal with violent, radical, indeed terrorist groups and organizations operating within (even democratic) states, that are supported by totalitarian regimes and spring from and are fuelled by a host of complex conditions that reinforce each other? These include rampant economic exploitation, gross economic asymmetries, the breakdown of the social fabric, environmental degradation, ruthless competition over resources, geopolitical interests, cultural upheav-

als, ethnic reflexes in response to threatened identity and faith traditions being hijacked by rivaling economic and political forces. What role can the state play in this maze? In how far is the use of violence on the part of the state conducive to the goal of securing threatened life? How do human rights become casualties and “collateral damage” in the “war on terror”?

How have churches in your country or region dealt with conflicts such as these in spiritual and theological terms?

The sobering military insight that powerful, traditionally designed armies, geared to confronting a hostile state, prove unfit for coping with these new forms of conflict, violence and chaos, is perhaps indicative of this crisis.

How do you reflect theologically on this ethical dilemma? Please share your insights with us!

Reaffirming one’s own identity at the expense of others, while ignoring the flux of history, which inevitably affects how this very identity is defined and lived out, is a potent ingredient of fundamentalism which drags us just closer to the abyss. Conversely, all faith traditions are asked what they can contribute toward shared survival in dignity regardless of the distinctiveness of their own beliefs. Lutherans, too, are called to take stock of their own heritage and examine its potential for promoting life, which can only be life together with others.

REINHARD BÖTTCHER

¹ See Harold Ditmanson (ed.), *Stepping-Stones to Further Jewish-Lutheran Relationships* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), which includes a foreword by Rabbi Leon Klenicki and chronicles these efforts from the inception of LWF up to 1990.

² Cf. Wolfgang Greive and Peter N. Prove (eds), *A Shift in Jewish-Lutheran Relations? A Lutheran contribution to Christian-Jewish dialogue with a focus on antisemitism and anti-Judaism today. LWF Documentation 48/03* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2003). Also available in German.

³ The insight that the church has not replaced Israel as God’s people (the so-called substitution theory), that God has rather upheld his/her covenant with the Jewish people is one of the basic results of Christian-Jewish dialogue throughout the last decades.

⁴ See Goetz Planer-Friedrich (ed.), *Frieden und Gerechtigkeit. Auf dem Weg zu einer ökumenischen Friedensethik* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1989); Viggo Mortensen (ed.): *War, Confession and Conciliarity. What does “just war” in the Augsburg Confession mean today?* (Hanover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1993).

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