Does this not also relate to the deepest meaning of freedom that we receive in Christ? Rather that 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?

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STUDY SECRETARY

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

**NOTES**

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.” 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 Raiffeisen. 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 walls 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.