

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD, OR AN ENEMY IN DARKNESS?

Excerpts from an address by Rev. Dr. Eileen W Lindner
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USA, to the Religion and World Order Symposium.

I will be expanding on Robert Traer's comments by touching on three topics: context, capacities, and process, as they relate to the role of religion in global community.

To set the context, I would make three observations. First, many of our religious traditions in communities are much more venerable than most present forms of governance, especially in the modern nation states. They are models of sustainability. Second, I want to suggest that religious communities might be conceived of as the interstitial membranes within the body politic, tissues of elasticity and permeability between the governmental organs. And last: Taking Robert Traer seriously, I am no longer comfortable with looking upon religion as a resource for global governance. Yet, I am not satisfied to look upon religion as a source, inasmuch as human history is littered with disastrous examples of such attempts. Therefore I am viewing religion as a catalyst to and for global governance, that which exists between peoples rather than nations.

To expand upon capacities, I would mention three. First, the educative capacity, as opposed to educational institutions, with their service to the elite. I am including the practices of spiritual or faith formation, informal educative enterprises that take place on a congregational basis, as well as the kind associated with, for instance, "barefoot doctors," midwives, community organizers and so on. Second, both explicit and implicit infrastructures. In many religious communities, including my own, the infrastructure is very highly developed, with institutions of healing, teaching, services, and the capacity to interact with the highest levels of national governance, including small communities where there is little governmental infrastructure. Last, the greatest asset of any religious community: moral authority, the faith, confidence, and goodwill of its membership, enabling our communities and nations to rise above self-interest.

On the subject of process, and to offer a word of encouragement as we consider the vast nature of the task before us, we may begin by invoking, as we have several times in our meetings, the name of Gandhi. We can then mention the Dalai Lama. In the last half-century we have seen some wonderful object lessons about the combined moral authority, infrastructure, and educative capacity of the church has provided for real and enduring changes in governance. Pope John Paul II, for instance, planned to visit Poland shortly after his elevation. To its everlasting regret, the Communist government of Poland chose not to invite him, so the job fell to the Catholic Clubs of Poland. The network that was created for his visit grew into the Solidarity movement, which played a key role in bringing down that government.

I think, too, of the Christian organizations in the USSR and the USA that maintained difficult but important relationships through the Cold War. It can now be told that their efforts led to the names of Jewish and Pentecostal dissidents being spirited out of the Soviet realm and into the West. Several other such efforts contributed to the revision of governance in Central and Eastern Europe.

We recall the work of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the dismantling of Apartheid in South Africa, engaging worldwide faith communities in cooperation. Or, in my own homeland, the indispensable Rev.

Dr. Martin Luther King and others who were motivated by Christian teaching, such as Fannie Lou Hamer and Rosa Parks, and their roles in the fight for civil rights. We remember, as well, Dom Elder Camara and Archbishop Oscar Romero.

But the words of moral authority must be matched by the brave deeds of moral witness. As a cautionary note I want to call to our minds the most striking failure of the 20th Century from the perspective of the Christian community: the Barman Declaration and the Confessing Church of Germany's Third Reich. Yet, even our own failures instruct.

Those to whom we look as exemplars knew how to utilize the context, the capacity, and the process of the religious community's role in service to social justice, even in the face of powers and principalities that were much more powerful.

I am reminded of a story that, for this occasion, I will pry loose of its Christian moorings. It seems a man has done an exceptionally good deed, and the god of the universe has sent him an angel to grant him any request. The angel reports that the god's heart is troubled by an enmity the man has harbored against another, and so he tells the man that whatever gift he chooses will be given two-fold to his enemy. The angel departs, and the man is left to think. "A bag of gold? No, my enemy will receive two." He thinks again. "A large farm with crops and livestock? No, then my enemy will have a farm twice as large." He turns down one option after another. Finally the angel reappears and asks for a decision. The man weighs grace versus enmity, enmity versus grace, and makes his sad decision. "Make me blind in one eye."

In many ways, the world community faces such a dilemma. Will we give up our own enmity in order to accept the grace that is ours for the asking? It remains an open question. I personally believe that the religious communities of the world, acting in concert, have much to contribute to the possibility that the world community will finally choose grace.