Luther’s Call to Resistance: “Not with Violence, but the Word”

by Thomas W. Strieter

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Some remember Martin Luther as an inspiring resistance theologian. Others see him in a negative light due to his indefensible stance against the peasants in their revolt in the 1520s, which he entitled, “Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants,” and particularly due to the anti-Semitic rantings he published in his declining years. While not seeking to apologize for these unconscionable writings, I am nevertheless interested in discussing some of his insights that may resonate for progressive people of faith.

When I first read Luther’s anti-Semitic diatribes in my younger years, I initially wished that he had died before he wrote this stuff. A number of years ago, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America rightly asked Jews for forgiveness for Luther’s racist writings. Sometimes I wonder whether those uncharacteristic diatribes may have been related to the kidney stones that Luther suffered throughout all of his adult life. At one time, he could not urinate for a week, which caused uremic poisoning during the last decade of his life. In these declining years there were times when he produced excessive writings that were paranoid and weird. In his prime, Luther wrote a fine book in defense of Jews, entitled That Jesus Was Born a Jew. If that were all he had written on the subject, he could have been remembered as a heroic figure to Jews. I was inspired to write this piece on Luther after reading Ulrich Duchrow’s article in the Winter 2011 issue of Tikkun, which effectively addresses the imperative that people of faith must confront the destructive effects of global capitalism. Duchrow is one of the European leaders in ecumenical and interfaith action for peace, justice, and the sustaining of creation. He was my doctoral mentor, and I wrote my dissertation based on his research in Luther studies and his perspective of Martin Luther as a resistance theologian.

One of the main criticisms of Luther’s followers has been that they have been unwilling to address systemic injustices within society. During Luther’s time, because Germany had only a Catholic religious administrative hierarchy, Luther turned to Germany’s Lutheran princes to temporarily serve as administrators of Lutheran church affairs. Unfortunately, with Luther’s death, this “emergency” arrangement became the permanent order
of things, and the church became a department of the state in which church administration and clergy were beholden to the government for their financial support. The church, therefore, was expected not to make waves for secular rulers. Subsequently, Lutheran theologians adapted Luther’s thought and distorted his ideas to conform to this subservient situation.

Lutherans and others within the anti-Semitic Deutsche Christen movement worked to align German Protestantism with Nazi goals. Here, Nazis inaugurate Deutsche Christen leader Ludwig Müller as Reich Bishop in 1934 at the Berliner Dom. Credit: Wikimedia Commons/Deutsches Bundesarchiv.

Duchrow in his writings refers to this legacy of quietism and passivity as a “neo-Lutheran heresy” that culminated in German Protestants’ acceptance of Adolf Hitler. The Reformed Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, who played a major role within the so-called Confessing Church, attacked this “neo-Lutheran heresy,” saying it was the result of what he referred to as “Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms.” This heresy interpreted Luther as having had a dualistic notion that the theological realm, or “kingdom,” was a personalistic spiritual realm in which “Jesus is king of my heart.” Thus, religion had no prophetic role in society.

On the other hand, the secular realm was considered entirely autonomous. (The German word for this sounds even more extreme: Eigengezetzlichkeit, “a law unto itself.”) In this secular realm, according to this heresy, the Christian serves in unquestioning quietism and obedience. This dualistic understanding was convenient for both Lutheran liberals and conservatives. For liberals, it freed scientific investigation from the church’s outmoded worldviews of Biblical interpretation. At the same time, conservatives could justify the church’s subservience to the state, which was free to embark on colonialist expansionism (which liberals actually supported too) and to squelch the rebelliousness of the masses with brute force (something liberals did not appreciate). Thus, for instance, Adolf Eichmann, who was in charge of transporting Jews to Hitler’s concentration camps and gas chambers, could defend himself on trial by saying, “As a good soldier, I only did what I was told.”

Of course, Karl Barth would have been correct to blame Lutherans’ passive, and sadly often even active, acceptance of Hitler, on Luther himself, if this were what Luther had taught. Luther was, in fact, a brilliant and creative resistance theologian, whose ethics were echoed in Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian realism in the mid-twentieth century.

If Luther, in fact, did not promulgate a Christian quietism and passivity in a society that evidences demonic elements, what then is Luther’s “doctrine of the two kingdoms,” and how does it speak to resistance against political, social, and economic evil in society? Luther spoke of the two kingdoms as the cosmic struggle of the powers of good against the demonic forces of evil. This mythic vocabulary is expressed in apocalyptic literature in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, which describe the world in upheaval during particularly chaotic and trying times and which spoke to Luther’s world and to ours today.
God, Luther said, governs creation in this chaotic situation with two “hands,” or governances. The power or governance “on the left hand” is secular authority, whose function is to bring peace and order to society. Its instrument for preserving order is the force of law. Luther never, however, perceived this to be unanswerable to the law of God, which is expressed in principles of justice in society. Luther cautions princely rulers that their governance should be carried out with Kopfrecht (the justice or law of reason), not with Faustrecht (the justice or law of the fist or brutality). Nevertheless, for the sake of peace and order, this realm has the power of the sword.

The “right hand of God” in the world is the spiritual realm, through which God maintains his church. He empowers the church with his “Word.” The Word is proclamation based on Scripture, but not simply in a biblical-literalist or legalistic way. The Word is a living thing that both accuses and liberates, and which ultimately manifests God’s grace and salvation in Jesus Christ, freeing the believing community to be whole and responsible as children of God.

Luther cautions that people of faith "live the Word ... by serving in a curative and charitable function," the author writes. Here, quilts donated by Lutheran World Relief are distributed to villagers in Niger through a local NGO supporting the disabled. Credit: Creative Commons/4Cheungs.

The function of the faith community in society, Luther cautions, is never to impose its sacred texts or religious convictions by force or coerce by the sword. In society, people of faith “live the Word,” both as individuals and as communities, by serving in a curative and charitable function — “to love one’s neighbor as oneself” and to work for healing and peace. This is its “priestly function.”

The community of faith, says Luther, also has a “prophetic function” in the world. It calls society to operate under the rule of law with justice, fairness, and the well-being of its people. In all this activity, the weapon of the community of faith is non vi, sed verbo, “not with violence, but the Word.” Proclaiming the Word is more than simply quoting Scripture. It is with the power of this Word that people of faith become truth-tellers, unveiling injustice and corruption in church and society, and speaking out against persons and systems that destroy human integrity through war and failure to sustain God’s good creation.

Luther often said that we “cannot leave the world to the serpent.” If people of faith do not act for the common good against corrupt and unjust forces, then who will? We serve God by serving our neighbor through our various vocations, or roles, in society. This may mean that for the good of society people of faith may have to fill public roles that may call us to perform tasks that we normally would not do as private citizens. In other words, in society we may not always be able to literally obey the Sermon on the Mount. In a number of his writings, Luther elaborated on how he perceived the role of the believer in society.

In Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed, Luther urged Christians to be good and obedient citizens, but when flagrant injustice and evil are perpetrated that compromise the gospel, then Christians must resist, but wherever possible, nonviolently. As followers of Jesus Christ, operating according to conscience, we
may experience pain and retribution as a result. Luther urged the ruling princes, on the other hand, to regularly read Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount in order to influence their use of power among his people.

In On Sending Children to School, Luther called upon citizens to see to it that their children receive a proper education so that they can play meaningful roles in society, especially in governmental administration, since princes were often drunken and profligate. It is important, therefore, that people of faith play a stabilizing and reforming role within the structures of society.

In Can Soldiers Too Be Saved?, Luther assured soldiers that if they are keeping the peace, even when minimal violence is necessary to thwart a greater violence, this can be a God-pleasing vocation. Luther, however, questioned “hiding behind the skirts” of princes who falsely claim that they are involved in a just war. When a soldier is called to violate his conscience by committing acts that are manifestly wrong or evil, then the soldier must disobey. Thus, Luther may very well be the father of selective conscientious objection. He warned, however, that to do so means that one may have to “bear the cross” of serious consequences, even imprisonment or death.

Finally, in Luther’s tract On Usury and Trade, he made it clear that early capitalistic abuses were very much operative in his day. Luther warned his readers against the “big boys” who were getting immensely rich by loaning money at usurious interest rates and by holding monopolies over various products, charging artificially high prices. Luther said that, for instance, for a widow to support herself, it might be appropriate for her to charge a low rate of interest on some object or commodity, but to enrich oneself through usurious methods was unbiblical and unjust. He called his readers to subsistence living, if necessary, to boycott these capitalistic big boys.

What does all of this have to do with us today? It means that in society we cooperate with the powers that be when they perform their functions with justice. We are called to play a reforming role when such powers deviate from their just functions. And we are called to roles of resistance when these powers develop demonic tendencies contrary to their just purposes.

It is not only appropriate to resist in such struggles between good and evil; it is imperative for our calling as people of faith. If we have no experience in struggle, then we must learn from those who have. We must learn from our own past failures and from those who have served a prophetic function in a broken society — from the biblical prophets and Jesus, from Gandhi and Mandela, from Tutu and King, from Luther and Duchrow, and from secular voices in society who call for peace, justice, and the sustaining of creation.
Theologians such as Duchrow have done careful analysis of how the world economic systems affect the vulnerable and nature itself. They offer an agenda for people of faith to work hand in hand with progressive humanists of every stripe. We must find common cause ecumenically, in interfaith cooperation and with all people of good will, to marshal our significant resources of power to transform unjust and demonic national and international structures that have devastating and deleterious effects on the well-being of our world.

Luther, as we have said, recognized that it may be necessary to do minimal violence to avoid greater violence, but this is not the tactic of the church and other institutions of faith. The worst strategy to strive for God’s will for the world would be for us to initiate violent action against the powerful. Ours is the “sword of the spirit,” which is the Word of God. Let us use this weapon wisely and well.

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