

Peace Among the Churches

Editorial by

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Published in

Perspectives

A Journal of Reformed Thought

October 1990, p. 3

As I write, the Middle East is at flash point. Saddam Hussein is calling the Muslim masses to a holy war, even though he himself has been one of the most secular of Arab leaders, allowing the fundamentalists no access to power in Iraq. Television news again brings us scenes reminiscent of the Iranian hostage crisis of some years ago. A Muslim cleric leads a huge congregation in prayers to Allah and then leads them in a rhythmic chant, "Death to America." Hussein calls up images of the great Babylonian empire of ancient times and would appear to see himself as the new Nebuchadnezzar, firing the passion and imagination of Arabic masses with visions of a return to the greatness and glory of ancient time.

It is not difficult to discredit Hussein, to puncture the logic of his rhetoric. One ought to be scandalized by his bald abuse of religion to incite people to hatred and to war. And it is difficult not to feel hostility for Muslim masses chanting "Death to America" and burning the American flag.

Still, before righteous indignation rises up within us and rage consumes us, we must remember the tortured history of the region and especially the history of the last decades. The tangled web of Middle East affairs knows no boundary between the just and the unjust, the selfless and the selfish.

So it has been throughout history. It was a holy war that Joshua waged against Canaan, the "Promised Land." I wonder what it felt like to be a citizen of Jericho when the walls came tumbling down.

But that is different, you say. God gave Israel the land. Canaan's bloodbath was God's judgment on their wickedness. Simple. Maybe. Maybe too simple.

World history is history's judgment, and certainly the biblical God is history's sovereign, staying with creation, engaged with history's unfolding drama. God's prophets saw conquering pagan rulers as instruments of God's judgment and grace. The poet of Lamentations who prayed God to curse conquering Babylon,

sounding strangely like “Death to America” (3:64-66), also recognized Judah’s sinful recalcitrance. Where such prophetic insight is present and where humble acknowledgment of involvement in history’s tragic web of evil is confessed, there is hope.

But such insight and confession have not always characterized religions, including the Christian church. A heart inflamed with hatred is not a hallmark of Islam; it is an ever-present potential of the human heart. And there is no more devastating instrument for inciting hatred than religion. Hans Küng’s claim made in the February 1990 issue of *Perspectives* is right: “There will be no peace among the nations... without peace among the religions. There will be no world peace without religious peace!” Muslim, Jew, and Christian have all had their turns at calling on the same God to curse the other. Is it not time rather to bless in the name of the one God?

If that be granted, then how urgent it is for us to recognize the ecumenical vocation of the Reformed Church in America suggested by Arie Brouwer in this issue.

In a piece appearing in the *Christian Century* recently, Brouwer cited Henry P. VanDusen, who spoke of “the denominational heresy.” Brouwer went on:

Theologically, denominations are best understood as reform movements within the one Church of Christ which are temporarily denominated, or named, according to the reforms they embody until such time as those reforms are received by, and themselves reformed within, the whole Church, at which time the denominations lose their reason for being and cease to exist as separate bodies. Thus understood, denominations are themselves instruments of the ecumenical movement. They are members of the body of Christ struggling to reform and reconnect the body so that it may be whole. (The *Christian Century*, June 27-July 4, 1990, p. 632)

Brouwer’s claim reminded me of the first time such an idea really registered with me. It occurred in an interview conducted by Paul Fries with Hendrikus Berkhof in the first issue of *Perspectives*. The RCA was trying to discover its identity. Fries asked whether a church can be both Reformed and relevant. Berkhof responded:

I am inclined to look at this question from the other side and ask if it can be relevant and thus Reformed?... to focus on these identity problems might be both a sign and fostering of spiritual decline. Witness to a Lord who humbled himself and who was ready to lose his life for the sake of his Father’s kingdom, and for humankind, means that a church should not bother too much about its own identity, but concentrate on the identity of its Lord and his cause.

Berkhof went on to explain that Reformed churches have less reason to be concerned with identity than other bodies: “The name implies catholicity and

carries the call to constant reform so that the church can become more Reformed.” Born at the crossroad “where traditional and modern in Europe intersect, the Reformed tradition is rooted in the Catholic tradition and open to the future sounding new calls and presenting new possibilities.”

Küng is right; there will be no world peace without peace among the religions. But there will be no peace among the religions without peace among the churches.