

Shaping a Kingdom, not an Empire: Reflections on Responses

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There is a valid cynicism towards the possibility for religious commitments to contribute to the harmony and tolerance of human communities. Many terrorist operations, various wars, and violent oppressions that have taken place throughout history were motivated or backed by religious ideologies. Ironically, there are also within faith traditions many devotees who act benevolently by showing love and compassion towards those who differ from them. This diversity within every faith tradition should make us wonder about the worldviews of adherents of the same faith who live by different ethics. What makes distinct strands within the same faith tradition differ in their posture towards those who hold beliefs other than their own?

Mrinalini Sebastian's response to my reflection on the monstrous empire and the kingdom of God in Daniel 7 pushes the conversation in two important and related directions. Sebastian calls on faith communities to be mindful and conscious of what and whom they worship. It follows that these communities should reflect on how their devotion and worship shapes their ethics towards the other. Worshipping power and the attempt to impose this power on others is not just a sign of insecurity but also consumes the wellbeing of the human and the non-human creation. The awareness that worship belongs only to God should orient human communities towards the wellbeing of the other. Sebastian writes, "For those of us who identify

ourselves with specific religious traditions, it is the mystery of faith, and our reliance on the beyond-the-human power that dictate our ethics toward the other. Ethical traditions and religious texts orient us, people of faith, to take our eyes away from things that 'pretty much eat us alive', and turn to the divine precisely because we are caught in a relational web, and hence, cannot simply exist by ourselves."

Living with and for the other is a difficult business. Humans tend to define themselves over against others. The dichotomy "us vs. them" is a handy framework for communities that claim a sense of superiority and security by keeping others out. Attempts to deal with the differences of others are handled either by assimilating others or by demonizing them and casting them into the wilderness. The difficulty of living with and for others is intensified by the way we relate to power. Denying power and privilege or longing for power and privilege are two different forms of worshipping power. A reflective worship of God calls on the powerful to repent and to stop abusing and oppressing the other; a reflective worship of God seeks to assure the powerless that God is in control and that God will bring judgment upon the oppressor and liberation for those who put their trust in the just God. The question remains, though: What should communities do towards those who abuse their power and oppress the marginalized? What does activism look like when evil is overwhelming?

Tim Hartman's response takes up the theological task of decolonizing the kingdom of God by way of exposing the hegemony of western theological discourse and

missional practices in Christian circles worldwide. Hartman's "hope is that, through the end of the Christian empire, the stark distinction between Western and non-Western Christian theologies will disappear. . . that deeply contextual theologies flourish around the globe and that thoughtful engagements arise across boundaries. These engagements will both allow for cross-fertilization of new ideas as well as self-critical re-assessment of one's own theological method and assumptions." While many are alarmed because western forms of Christianity are moving beyond Christendom, Hartman sees this as "an opportunity not a threat." The opportunity lies in the fact that this process will decentralize Western expressions of Christian theology and will reconfigure the roundtable of theological reflection to include expressions of Christian theologies from the global south.

The decolonization of the kingdom of God by way of revisiting the hegemonies of theological discourse requires self-assessment and demands openness on part of the western church to listen to the church of the global south. Hartman's response exhibits these two necessary steps towards dialogic global theologies. First, as a western theologian himself, he does not shy away from claiming the ways that western hegemonies have been harmful: "Alongside all the good works done in the name of the gospel is stacked the horrors of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, and other atrocities supported and endorsed by Christian theologians and the Church."

Furthermore, he confronts western theologians who dismiss non-western theologians because they are deemed conservative theologically and biblically, explaining that this is a continuation of western colonial interaction with the global south. Dialogic global theologies do not just depend on self-criticism, but they are deepened by way of listening to the other. Hartman's response includes two voices of African theologians who are calling for the decentralization of theological reflection and who claim their agency as theologians who are aware of their own context and whose theological reflection make contribution to the dialogic global theologies.

Because we are seeking dialogic global theologies and because the success of this process depends on the ability of the parties involved in the conversation to treat each other as subjects and not objects, I would like to put forth further points in addition to those that Hartman has highlighted. As we think about the global context, it is also important to think about how these dialogic theologies relate to the local contexts. In a world where migration is a prominent phenomenon, the global has become local. We need to assess how these theological conversations are happening in communities in North America. Along those lines, it is important to reflect on what we mean by "Western Christianity."

It is necessary to remember that although Christianity reached many places of the global south by way of European colonialism, Christianity has its origins and roots in the so-called Middle East. Christianity in the Levant and North Africa and its

theological discourse in the Middle East should be seen as African and Asian expressions of Christianity that precede European colonialism. Furthermore, does the term “Western Christianity” include theologies that have been formulated by the context(s) of theologians who come from non-European origins and who live in the west?

Moreover, as a theologian from the global south (Egypt), I believe that self-criticism on the part of theologies that come from the global south is an expression of a healthy level of subjectivity. As theologies that come from the global south seek liberation from the hegemony of western discourse, we should be mindful of the ways in which our own theological discourse and biblical hermeneutics have marginalized women, people with special needs and HIV-AIDS, and the LGBTQ community. Many conservative churches in the “west” try to use partnerships with churches in the global south as an excuse for not showing openness and affirmation to women and the LGBTQ community. This is a continuation of the colonial way of dealing with the church of the global south as an object of the care of the western church.

Treating the global south as a subject should hold the global south accountable for its own context without imposing this context on the church of the global north. When the church of the south and the north relate to each others as subjects, their theological reflection will happen in a dialogue that “would allow for the exchange of ideas in order to better interpret Biblical texts and encourage the development of

local, indigenous theologies that are not isolated, but offer conversation with other contextual theologies around the world.”

Although the text of Daniel 7 deals with monstrous empires and the kingdom of God as collective entities, Foster Connors’ response seeks to connect this text to the interpersonal as well as the systemic forms of oppression that manifest the empire on the local level of the neighborhood. Connors suggests two specific ways through which the church could engage the biblical discourse on empire in light of the contemporary realities of a city like Baltimore.

First, although it is important to speak about the larger picture of the atrocities of the empire, opposing empire will be effective by way of unmasking “the monstrosity of empire that seeks to remain hidden.” This happens by exposing the individuals who abuse the system in order to maintain a status quo that benefits them and harms the marginalized. Connors writes, “We personalized injustice in order to focus the power of the faith community in a specific direction for a just purpose.”

Second, Connors asserts that “any attempt to oppose empire must be led by those who experience most directly the oppression they oppose. The church must either *be the body of oppressed peoples* or be *in solidarity* with them. *It cannot act on their behalf.*” In doing this, the church will be surprised with the powerful agency that the oppressed possesses; through prayer and expressions of hospitality and generosity, the oppressed baffle and unsettle those who wrongly perceive themselves to be

powerful. In this way, opposing empire begins by rejecting the way empire defines power and agency.

Connors' remarks remind the church of the concreteness of imperial hegemonies; the empire is not out there; it is here and now, affecting our neighborhoods and communities. This process of personalizing empire is helpful because it identifies specific facets of oppression to dismantle and sets specific goals towards this end. In doing so, opponents of empire should not lose sight of the systems in which individuals operate. Personalizing the empire will lead to a better understanding of the systems in which individuals get entangled; such a process will yield a prophetic message mixed with compassion even as it opposes oppression.

I agree with Connors' points that the oppressed should be the agents of change and that the church should conform itself with the gospel's understanding of power. But at the same time, those who are privileged are still responsible; for allies to be helpful, they should ask the oppressed how they could be helpful and they should also ask themselves how their own lifestyles should change in order to decrease the impact of empire. Finally, as the church celebrates the subversive ways of dismantling imperial power, one prays and hopes for concrete ways in which oppression, poverty, and marginalization are dismantled, and the poor and the oppressed find tangible changes in the systems that inflict them.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude for Mrinalini Sebastian, Tim Hartman, and Andrew Foster Connors for their careful reading of my reflections on the empire and the kingdom of God in Daniel 7. Their responses enrich and deepen the conversation through profound theological reflections and inspiring practices.