

## **Confronting the Powers of Empire and Shaping of the Church**

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Over 600 people had gathered in the school gymnasium that day to rally for a bond bill to rebuild one-third of Baltimore's crumbling school buildings. Elected officials characteristically were cold on the deal. The cost was "too high." Funds were not "available." The effort was "laudable but not realistic." At the same time, a tax break was being proposed for a new downtown redevelopment project. This latest tax break was added to the nearly dozen breaks given to a few downtown moguls who had amassed millions, perhaps billions of dollars from publicly supported development of their private properties.

In the gymnasium, our community organization, BUILD,<sup>1</sup> highlighted the details of the deals cut by politicians in their name. \$3.4 million dollars on the downtown Marriot hotel excused until 2022. \$4 million forgone on the Legg Mason building; \$1 million on the Laureate; \$1.1 million on Spinnaker Bay. Then the presentation turned ominous. "All of these tax breaks went to one neighborhood to fatten the pockets of one developer." An unflattering photo of the developer's face appeared on a screen along with his name. Gasps let out in the gymnasium. People shook their heads in disgust. Righteous anger was palpable.

This story is one way that today's faith communities engage "monstrous empires" on the ground. In responding to Safwat Marzouk's essay, I offer two points

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<sup>1</sup> Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD) is a local affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, the oldest community organizing network in the country.

of reflection from the perspective of the church resisting, confronting, and ultimately engaging empire on the ground.

First, communities that want to confront “monstrous empires” must personalize the monstrous empires they oppose. Daniel 7 names known historical figures as “monsters.” In so doing, the text rewrites the prevailing narratives of that time that attributed greatness to these historic leaders. Though our community organization in Baltimore did not name the offending developer as a “monster,” we came close. We *personalized injustice* in order to focus the power of the faith community in a specific direction for a just purpose. Such a move is not to dehumanize the powerful, but rather to hold human beings accountable for their agency in monstrous outcomes. This is especially necessary in twenty-first century societies where the rulers of empires are shrouded behind structures, laws, policies, and resources under their control. The impersonal nature of modern empires promotes the illusion that human beings are not the architects and beneficiaries of unjust systems.

The most powerful leaders in Baltimore, for example, are typically not elected officials or CEOs of corporations (who are deposed when the stock price doesn’t reach its target), but rather those who operate the levers of industry and government from behind the scenes.<sup>2</sup> By holding powerful individuals accountable for monstrous outcomes of deep inequality, racial injustice, and health disparities in

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<sup>2</sup> In community organizing politicians are often understood as mediators between organized money and the common citizenry. For this reason, community organizations must undertake a power analysis to name true sources of power and begin a process that leads to engagement. Often these relationships can only be initiated through public actions that demonstrate the community’s power of organized people.

our communities, we “call out” individuals who benefit from monstrosity without being held accountable for it. The apocalyptic move here is to unmask the monstrosity of empire that seeks to remain hidden.

Comfortable North American Christians characteristically resist this kind of personalization. Finding no malicious intent in the individuals who wield significant power, they reject the tension of such confrontation.<sup>3</sup> However, as Hannah Arendt points out, the individuals behind the Nazi genocide also demonstrated little in the way of monstrous qualities. Of observing Adolph Eichmann at his trial for engineering the system that led to the deaths of more than 4 million Jews, she wrote, “I was struck in the manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer. . .was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions. . .but thoughtlessness. . .”<sup>4</sup>

Second, this confrontation initiated by communities of faith who personalize human powers must always anticipate the healing of those acting in concert with destructive systems opposed to God’s kingdom. Marzouk rightly recognizes the “grievous temptation” of those who resist empires to become the evil they deplore.

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<sup>3</sup> Organizer Richard Harmon argues that middle class people are “mainlined with massive doses of politeness” that limits their initial willingness to confront powers. The experience of a powerful leader reacting as an “enemy” is often needed to force middle-class people to decide whether or not they want to fight injustice. Richard Harmon, *Making an Offer We Can’t Refuse* (Chicago: Industrial Areas Foundation), 1973, quoted in Aaron Schutz, “Power and Trust in the Public Realm: John Dewey, Saul Alinsky, and the Limits of Progressive Democratic Education,” *Educational Theory*, Vol. 61, No. 4, 2011, p. 497.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, (New York: Harcourt, Inc.), 1971, p. 4. See, also, Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006).

Pointing to history, he recognizes that the three Abrahamic faiths have characteristically identified themselves with the Holy Ones and their opponents with the monsters. A text written to ignite resistance to monstrous empires, he argues, is easily twisted as a tool to support those same empires.

The way to avoid this temptation, he asserts, is for followers of God to: a) identify their own social location (which informs whether the text supports their resistance to injustice or critiques their participation in it); b) rely solely on the agency of God as judge; and, c) find appropriate distance between the divine and the human, achieved by recognizing both the “sameness” of being human and the diversity of human communities.

Translated to the ground, this means 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.* Further, this organized resistance must maintain prayer at the center of all action and discernment. Finally, the community of this organized resistance must embody the tension between sameness and difference that is at the heart of the kingdom of God. My experience in an interracial, cross-class, interfaith community action organization is that these three ingredients are deeply unnerving to the powers that be. Unemployed people, for example, who act as though they are equal to a billionaire leader, who initiate prayer of their own volition at the beginning of any meeting with said billionaire,<sup>5</sup> and who come to the table with a

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<sup>5</sup> Self-described “progressives” are often averse to prayer in public spaces, but prayer is one of the most subversive tools given by God to those who battle the power and principalities. A fresh look at the practice of prayer in the public realm is needed.

team of people whose cross-racial, religious, and economic relationships are a mystery to said billionaire are threatening because they act outside of the experience of the powerful. In such a situation, the billionaire is forced to confront a new kind of power previously unknown to him. The resulting tension can lead one of three ways: a) a resolve by the billionaire to retaliate; b) an attempt to win over the new power with seductive offers of money, assistance or access; or, c) a change of heart. Such reactions are as old as the biblical witness itself. Those confronting a leader of empire must always pray for the final outcome, hoping that the leader, like the winged lion, might trade his dominion for a human heart. But the wise church will be prepared for all three outcomes ready to resist, confront, or engage the powers trusting the surety of the day when God's dominion will be established forever.

***Questions for Reflection:***

1. What does it mean to "personalize the monstrous?" Why is this such a vital activity for community organizing? What are the benefits and costs that come with doing this?
2. What resources/practices are necessary for maintaining resistance to the monstrous without becoming monstrous, ourselves? And how do we develop these resources and inculcate these practices?
3. Why should the church either be constituted by the oppressed or stand in solidarity with them rather than acting on their behalf? What are the implications of this for the church's self-understanding?