

# **Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire**

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**REPORT TO THE 39TH  
GENERAL COUNCIL 2006**



Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire  
Report to the 39th General Council 2006



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# Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire

## Summary

The 37th General Council 2000 of The United Church of Canada approved the report *To Seek Justice and Resist Evil: Towards a Global Economy for All God's People*. The report described, analyzed, and denounced “the global reality of systemic economic injustice” (neo-liberal economic globalization) and called the church “to seek justice and resist evil so that together in mission we can build a global economy for all God's people.” It was both critical of the global economic status quo and its exclusionary tendencies, and filled with hope for the fulfillment of God's promise of justice for all people and creation.

Tragically, in this world of extraordinary abundance and potential, the pain and misery experienced by the vast majority of God's people is worsening. Year after year reports by major global institutions, like UNICEF<sup>1</sup> and the United Nations Development Programme,<sup>2</sup> tell dreadful statistical tales of growing poverty, rising rates of mortality, and escalating environmental destruction. One of the most alarming barometers of this deepening crisis is UNICEF's annual report on the state of the world's children. In announcing the 2005 report<sup>3</sup> David Agnew, president and CEO of UNICEF Canada, made these sobering comments:

More than half of all children in the world are suffering extreme deprivations from poverty, armed conflict and AIDS....For every child enjoying what we [in the developed world] consider to be a normal childhood, there is a child going to bed hungry, watching a parent die from AIDS, or living in a refugee camp after being forced to flee from home by war and violence...we are continuing to deny one billion girls and boys the opportunity to grow up healthy and safe.<sup>4</sup>

United Church partners in Africa, Asia, Canada, Latin America, and the Middle East confirm this appalling situation and put a vivid human face on the numerical data with stories of intensifying suffering among their peoples and increasing environmental ruin.

*To Seek Justice and Resist Evil* described how neo-liberal economic globalization and unlimited market capitalism lie at the root of this crisis. Increasingly, however, we are realizing how complex the injustice of systemic economic globalization really is. More and more the term “empire” is being coined to characterize this complexity. It is a system that is causing creation to groan, in bondage, waiting for its liberation (Romans 8:22).

At its General Assembly in 2004, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) said that neo-liberal economic globalization is no longer an adequate term to describe the appalling plight befalling God's creation (Accra Statement). “As we look at the negative consequences of globalization for the most vulnerable and for the earth community as a whole,” WARC said, “we have begun to rediscover the evangelical significance of the Biblical teaching about Empire.”<sup>5</sup>

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1 “UNICEF” is the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund.

2 For example, see the United Nations Human Development Report 2005, “International cooperation at a crossroads: Aid, trade and security in an unequal world,” <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2005/>

3 The State of the World's Children 2005: Childhood Under Threat, UNICEF, December 2004.

4 “UNICEF releases The State of the World's Children 2005,” media release, UNICEF Canada, Dec 09, 2004.

5 “Mission Section Plenary Report,” 24th General Assembly of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), Accra, Ghana, October 2004.

Similar concerns were expressed by the Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth (AGAPE) project, a process initiated by the World Council of Churches in 1998. AGAPE asks the question, “How do we live our faith in the context of globalization” and in a time of “empire”? Like WARC, AGAPE calls empire “...a system of global domination directed by powerful nations and organizations”<sup>6</sup> that are the Caesars of our time. AGAPE calls the worldwide church to commit itself “to reflect on the question of power and empire from a biblical and theological perspective, and take a firm faith stance against hegemonic powers because all power is accountable to God.”<sup>7</sup>

The Executive of the General Council affirmed the Accra Statement and its concern about empire at its autumn 2004 meeting. It also urged the Permanent Committee, Programs for Mission and Ministry, “to develop a process to engage the United Church, including the courts of the church, in study and action.”<sup>8</sup> Also, the draft Statement of Faith, placed before the 39th General Council 2006 by the Theology and Faith Committee, acknowledges empire as a complex system to which all God’s people are captive. The statement makes reference to “the domination of economic, political, and military empires; rampant consumerism and unchecked accumulation of wealth; limitless growth and damage to creation.”

In response to these concerns, the Empire Task Group was formed to begin to reflect upon “empire” and to make a preliminary report to the 39th General Council 2006. This report offers glimpses of the experiences named as “empire” and foresees a follow-up report on the subject for the Executive of the General Council by March 2009, following a three-year period of engagement and consultation with United Church members. Members of the task group include The Very Rev. Dr. Robert Smith, the Rev. Dr. Martin Rumscheidt, the Rev. Nanette McKay, Geegee Mills, the Rev. Brian Perkins-McIntosh, and Melissa Creasy.<sup>9</sup>

*Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire* follows a liturgical movement of Witness, Confession, Call, and Commitment.

“Witness: Empire in Jesus’ Time and Ours” is divided into three sub-sections:

- “Understanding Empire” defines the complex idea of “empire” as a system of global domination. “Empire” is directed by powerful nations, global economic institutions, and transnational corporations. We participate, knowingly and unknowingly, in “empire” primarily through our role as consumers in the global capitalist market system.
- “Stories of Empire as a Threat to Life and Creation” consists of testimonies from United Church global and Canadian partners. The stories help put a human face on the experiences of empire. The powerful observations and insights they contain leave no doubt as to empire’s devastating impact on God’s wondrous creation.
- “Theological Reflection on Empire” is a summary based on three theological reflections written especially for the report by the Rev. Dr. Douglas John Hall, Professor Emeritus, McGill University; the Rev. Dr. Ofelia Ortega, Principal, Evangelical Theological Seminary, Matanzas, Cuba; and the Rev. Dr. Néstor O. Míguez, Professor of New Testament Studies, Instituto Universitario ISEDET,

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6 “AGAPE, A Background Document,” World Council of Churches. Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth, or AGAPE, is a process initiated at the 8th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches. The process examines “the project of economic globalization that is led by the ideology of unfettered market forces and serves the dominant political and economic interests.”

7 Assembly Documents, 9th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2006.

8 Minutes, Executive of the General Council, October 29–November 1, 2004, Toronto.

9 Staff members who provided support for the Empire Task Group were Omega Bula, Bern Jagunos, Gary Kenny, Jim Marshall, Christie Neufeldt, and Choice Okoro.

Buenos Aires, Argentina. It analyzes the context of empire in Jesus' day and its impact on his ministry and the early church. It discusses how the life-threatening and oppressive dynamics of empire in the first and 21st centuries are essentially the same. The expanding threat to life that contemporary empire represents means we are at a critical time, a *kairos*<sup>10</sup> time, for the discernment of the gospel.

“Confession: Church and World in the Midst of Empire” acknowledges and analyzes the church’s complicity in empire. “Complicity” refers to our participation as individuals, institutions, and nations in empire’s systems of domination and control. We are only able to begin to name our complicity and to begin to turn around (to repent) through honest and faithful confession.

“Call: Living God’s Reign in the Midst of Empire” encourages all United Church members to take up the challenge of our collective confession by seeking to be a responsive and transformed people of faith, hope, and love at every level of our being and of the church. This section calls the church to recognize signs of hope and transformation, and gives some examples.

“Commitment: Actions and Recommendations” calls the church and its members to support specific actions for the next three years, including learning more about empire and our complicity in it through engagement and consultation. It envisions the development of an “empire lens,” an animation, education, and action tool to assist all courts of the church to discern more about empire and their place within it. It also calls the whole church to engage in acting with renewed vigour upon past resolutions that challenge imperial forms and forces, especially in the program areas of economic justice, human rights, peace, and the environment.

Drawing on the theme of the World Social Forum, “another world is possible,” this report lifts up sources of hope. The theme of the World Council of Churches (WCC) 2006 Assembly in Porto Alegre earlier this year is also key to this report: “God, in your grace, transform the world.”<sup>11</sup>

Transformation for the sake of abundant life for all peoples and the earth means making difficult choices. In the 21st century world of empire, Caesar commands, God calls. Whom will we serve?

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10 The New Testament offers several but similar perspectives on *kairos*, which translated from the Greek means “the right or opportune time.” For example: Luke 12:54–56—*Kairos* is extraordinary time, requiring interpretation. The capacity to read the signs of the times—the *kairos*—and respond is an issue of faith; Romans 13:11–13—*Kairos* time is here. It calls for action, conversion and transformation—a change of life; 11 Corinthians 6:1–2—*Kairos* is not just crisis but opportunity and favour. God assists us in discerning the *kairos*—a moment of grace. (Source: [www.kairoscanada.org/e/network/KairosBibleStudy.pdf](http://www.kairoscanada.org/e/network/KairosBibleStudy.pdf))

11 “God, in your grace, transform the world” was the theme of the World Council of Churches’ 9th Assembly held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January/February 2006.

# WITNESS: Empire in Jesus' Time and Ours

## Understanding Empire

The context of the Roman Empire defined much of the life and ministry of some of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, and the early church, as the theological reflections in this report and other sources show.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, contemporary empire frames much of the experience, struggle, and witness of many United Church global partners and the United Church's own life and ministry. In first-century Palestine (Galilee, Samaria, and Judea), the imperial power was clearly Rome and its local rulers and allies. At its territorial peak, the Roman Empire controlled nearly six million square kilometres of land in the greater Mediterranean region. It was the largest of all empires during classical antiquity. The context of Jesus' time was the brutal oppression of occupied Palestine under the Roman Empire.<sup>13</sup>

What makes up empire in the early 21st century? How does it shape our world and how we live our lives? Since the events of September 11, 2001, "empire" is increasingly being used to describe global systemic injustice. It is the subject of articles, books, and events, including major global ecumenical conferences. Emerging from these discussions has been a growing understanding of contemporary empire with striking similarities to the empire of Jesus' day.

While empire in Jesus' time consisted of distinct forms of oppression including military occupation, violence, unjust taxation, and slavery, in 2006 we have to look deeper and wider to put a recognizable face on empire. Some, especially after September 11 and the United States government's declaration of the War on Terror, point to the U.S., the most powerful economic and military power in the world, as the principal power of modern-day imperialism. The U.S. doctrine of preventive war,<sup>14</sup> aggressive unilateralism,<sup>15</sup> violations of international law, and maintenance of hundreds of military bases around the world have prompted comparisons to Imperial Rome. But while the U.S. may have much to answer for—and indeed, millions of Americans are holding their government accountable—empire has more than one location. As stated in *To Seek Justice and Resist Evil*, contemporary "empire is not dominated by any single state but by a network of powerful economic interests held together by the ideology of neoliberalism,"<sup>16</sup> and furthermore, is a system in which most of us play some role, wittingly or unwittingly.

*To Seek Justice and Resist Evil* defined neo-liberalism largely in economic terms. Neo-liberalism, it said, upholds and promotes the market as the judge of the common good. It is a market that enshrines competition as the supreme good. In the marketplace of neo-liberalism, everything is viewed as a commodity that can be bought or sold.<sup>17</sup>

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12 For a clear and powerful discussion of empire in Jesus' time see Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God in the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2002).

13 Christopher Ferguson, *The Reign of God and Empire: The covenant community in the midst of the kingdom of death* (London Colney, February 8–11, 2004).

14 A "preventive war" is the term given to a kind of war whose public justification is proclaimed as "self-defence." The concepts of preventive war and pre-emptive war differ only in the certainty of an attack—the latter concerns an imminent attack, while the former requires no military provocation. The rationale for preventive war is the claimed prevention of a possible future attack, which international law considers to be indistinguishable from a forbidden war of aggression.

15 "Unilateralism," in a foreign policy context, refers to the practice of a single country acting alone outside of the parameters of international law to which that country is obligated.

16 The United Church of Canada, *To Seek Justice and Resist Evil: Towards a Global Economy for All God's People* (2001), page 24.

17 For a more extensive discussion of neo-liberal ideology and economic globalization, see *To Seek Justice and Resist Evil: Towards a Global Economy for All God's People*, The United Church of Canada, 2001.



At its General Assembly in 2004, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) reflected with alarm on the signs of the times. “We live in a scandalous world that denies God’s call to life for all,” WARC said.<sup>18</sup> The annual income of the richest 1 percent is equal to that of the poorest 57 percent. Some 24,000 people die each day from poverty and malnutrition. The debt of poor countries continues to increase despite having repaid the principal on their loans several times over. Wars over resources such as oil and gold are on the rise and claim the lives of millions, while millions more die of preventable diseases. The HIV/AIDS pandemic afflicts life in all parts of the world but especially in the impoverished global South where anti-retroviral drugs are too expensive to buy. The majority of those living in poverty are women and children, and the number of people living in absolute poverty (less than US\$1/day) continues to increase.<sup>19</sup>

WARC also asserted that policies of unlimited growth among industrialized countries and the drive for profit among transnational corporations have plundered the earth and severely damaged the natural environment. In 1989, one species disappeared each day, and by 2000 it was one every hour. Climate change, the depletion of fish stocks, deforestation, soil erosion, and threats to fresh water are also among neo-liberal economic globalization’s devastating consequences. Communities are disrupted, livelihoods are lost, coastal regions and Pacific islands are threatened with inundation, and cataclysmic storms increase. Life forms and cultural knowledge, part of the global commons, are being patented for financial gain.<sup>20</sup>

Neo-liberal economic globalization, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) said, is no longer an adequate term to describe the scope and inherent characteristics of this appalling plight befalling God’s creation. A more accurate term is “empire.” Recognizing that there is no easy definition of empire, WARC offered the following:

[Empire is] the convergence of economic, political, cultural, geographic and military imperial interests, systems and networks that seek to dominate political power and economic wealth. It typically forces and facilitates the flow of wealth and power from vulnerable persons, communities and countries to the more powerful. Empire today crosses all boundaries, strips and reconstructs identities, subverts cultures, subordinates nation states and either marginalizes or co-opts religious communities.<sup>21</sup>

Using WARC’s definition as a point of reference, the Empire Task Group sought to understand early 21st century empire in a more contextual and identifiable manner. In addition to the WARC statement, the World Council of Churches’ AGAPE initiative,<sup>22</sup> theological scholars, United Church elected members and others have helped us in this process. The assistance of United Church global partners has been immeasurable. In early 2005 the Empire Task Group conducted a survey of partners asking for their views on empire. Significantly, 35 partners from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, as well as some ecumenical partners based in the North, responded. All spoke of the imperial nature of neo-liberal economic globalization, calling it a significant threat to life. For example, The Caribbean Council of Churches said:

As third world peoples, ours is the constant plight and recurring experience of standing helplessly in

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18 Covenanted for Justice in the Economy and the Earth, 24th General Assembly of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), Accra, Ghana, October 2004.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

22 “AGAPE, A Background Document,” World Council of Churches. Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth, or AGAPE, is a process initiated at the 8th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches. The process examines “the project of economic globalization that is led by the ideology of unfettered market forces and serves the dominant political and economic interests.”

various “Praetoria”<sup>23</sup> (John 18:28) of the powerful contemporary Pontius Pilates—be it the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, or otherwise—and being reminded who has “power to release” us and “power to condemn” us (John 19:10).<sup>24</sup>

The Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea, adopting a similar point of view, also affirmed the obligation of Christians to resist empire:

Empire has been sustained by the unbridled capitalist system backed by military force. Therefore the most effective way to resist it is to render the production base of Empire impotent. When we resist the consumptive lifestyle of Empire, the production base will gradually lose ground to a non-capitalist lifestyle (or economic system) based on the spirit of justice, sharing and cooperation which can be termed a “divine economy.”<sup>25</sup>

Partners in Canada, Aboriginal peoples in particular, have also provided compelling testimony on the subject of empire. For example George Erasmus, former Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, has described the naming by Europeans of landmarks, communities, and even people in terms foreign to their understanding. Aboriginal peoples became the acted upon, not the actors, named from the outside as “Indian,” “status or non-status Indian,” or “Métis.”<sup>26</sup>

It is through the eyes and experience of partners, global and Canadian, that we can best gain insight into the empire phenomenon and its destructive impact on God’s people and the earth.

Through the survey, partners helped the task group break down “empire” into seven forms or forces that are united in their will to control and dominate: political, economic, military, cultural, religious, environmental, and patriarchal. The stories from or about partners contained in this report exemplify these inter-connected forces. The following section is a commentary on the stories that demonstrates how these forces converge to create a dynamic that negates other forms of power and alternatives to empire. It is intended to assist readers to derive the most from the stories that follow.

## Commentary on the Stories from Global and Canadian Partners

The stories “Empire and the Privatization of Water Is ‘Killing My People’” and “Empire, Militarism, and Human Rights in the Philippines” demonstrate how governments in the global South, already weak from crushing external debts, are forced to acquiesce to Western political influence and development schemes shaped by neo-liberal economic policies. The results are often damaging social cost-cutting and the cynical exploitation of their natural resources, water in the case of Lesotho and minerals including gold in the Philippines. Creditors like the World Bank use the debts as leverage to force these countries to cede public ownership, operation, distribution, and management of their most valuable resources and social services and place them into private, often foreign, hands. Once privatized, water, health care, education, and other vital services are made unaffordable for millions of people.

The result of such stringent economic policies and political pressure to adopt them has created a host of life-threatening socio-economic and health-related problems. Governments in countries like Lesotho and the Philippines have become almost powerless to change a global trade system that

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23 “Praetoria” was the name given to the elite bodyguard of a Roman emperor, approximately the size of a legion, or to a member of this bodyguard. The term is sometimes applied to the inner circle of advisers to a major political figure.

24 A Partner Perspective on Empire: Synthesis Report of United Church of Canada Partners Survey, Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit, 2005.

25 *Ibid.*

26 George Erasmus in “We the Dene” in *Dene Nation: The Colony Within*, Toronto University Press 1977.

treats them unfairly, creates unrestrained rights for foreign capital investment within their borders, and increases and perpetuates their external debts. While elites in these countries stand to benefit, the majority of people, although promised prosperity, are left in deeper poverty.

“Empire, Militarism, and Human Rights in the Philippines” illustrates how militarization, employed as a strategy to advance a political and economic agenda, can impair a nation’s ability to exercise its sovereignty in a manner that has not only life-threatening, but mortal, consequences for its citizens. In the last four years more than 500 civilians, including church workers, lawyers, and human rights advocates, have been summarily executed by military death squads in the Philippines. Their “crime” has been speaking out against systemic injustice including unfair wages, inequitable access to land, and the adverse impacts of economic globalization. As the story explains, the victims “[were] killed because their activities threaten the economic and political interests of the elite.”

But who are the elite? The presence on Filipino soil of foreign mining interests and U.S. military bases underscores the reality that those who commit or are complicit in such crimes are not only Filipino. They also originate among transnational corporations and other powerful nation states.

The Philippines has become a regional staging point in the War on Terror, and U.S. military aid to the Philippines has increased ten-fold since September 11. The War on Terror and U.S. military support, the story asserts, has given the Filipino military licence to target social justice advocates as “terrorists” and “enemies of the state.” It has exacerbated the culture of violence in the country. As the story states, economic globalization, global geo-politics and empire “ensures that political, economic and military power...penetrates the internal political, cultural and social structures of a particular country...” as it has in the Philippines.

Empire also carries with it beliefs and value systems, usually Western in origin, which countries weakened by external political, economic, and military policies are forced to accept or do so willingly. These include materialism, consumerism, and individualism. Often the main vehicle for transmission of these beliefs and values is Western technology and popular culture.

“*Baywatch* and Cell Phone Cameras: Middle Eastern Youth and the Culture of Empire” is a story that demonstrates the impact Western culture can have especially on youth. Frustrated by poverty, unemployment, and other adverse social conditions caused or exacerbated by economic globalization, youth, in both the global South and North, sometimes resort to anti-social and violent forms of behaviour to bring into their lives a false sense of meaning and purpose. But as the story attests, governments wary of the potential of youth to rise up and challenge their authority and power “want people’s minds driven away from the horrific hazards of politics and economics.” Western TV, movies, music, and other forms of entertainment, and their pervasive promotion of materialism and consumerism, provide just the right balm. They can “anaesthetize an increasingly restless and angry generation of youth” and, for a time anyway, remove the threat of civil disobedience or worse.

Canada is complicit in empire in various ways. For example, our support of neo-liberal economic globalization, through participation in free trade agreements and global financial institutions like the World Bank, links us with contemporary empire, at least in the minds of many United Church global partners. The story “Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: Looking into the Eyes of Empire” provides another glimpse of how Canada has engaged in imperial behaviour in the past, but on the home front. As one writer quoted in the story says, while Canadian imperial treatment of Aboriginal peoples may have “lacked the pomp and ceremony of the British Raj, or the status-enhancing experience of a handful of officials ruling over millions in tropical Africa, Ceylon, or the Dutch East Indies,” it was nonetheless connected to the global phenomenon of empire at that time.

First Nations peoples in Canada today continue to struggle with the effects of this imperial legacy, fighting in the courts to regain land that was unjustly taken, demanding compensation for what some call “cultural genocide,” and battling alcohol and substance abuse in their communities, a tragic consequence of loss of identity and the impoverished conditions in which many Aboriginal communities live. The United Church is confronting its own complicity in the imperial subjugation of First Nations peoples by addressing its role in the former residential schools system.

As the story “Empire and Environmental Destruction in Haiti” shows, in some countries in the global South, 19th-century colonialism has evolved into a form of unchecked global capitalism that exploits, and in the case of Haiti, decimates, what was once a paradise of natural riches. To supply the industrialized North with raw materials to meet the ever-growing demands of large commodity markets, crops are monocultured and mineral resources mined with little regard for the impact these activities have on the natural environment. As the story narrates, monoculture of sisal and rubber, bankrolled by foreign companies with the collusion of Haitian elites, has rendered much of Haiti’s soil infertile. Mining activities undertaken in similar circumstances have created veritable deserts through large-scale excavation and failure to replant vast tracts of deforested land. These predatory practices have caused massive erosion and loss of soil, leaving much of the country a wasteland.

In the process of “development,” indigenous farmers were displaced and forced into poorly paid jobs for foreign companies, and a sustainable, communal way of life that thrived for generations was reduced to ruin. Today, in a tragic twist, impoverished farmers are forced to participate in the ruination of their own local natural environments through the over-cutting of trees to make charcoal for income and energy purposes. Relegated to living on barren land, they and their families are often the first victims of flash floods and landslides. They are blamed for Haiti’s environmental degradation when the real cause is “a historical process that flows from the venality of Western powers in concert with local dominant classes.”

Massive human displacement and migration, within and beyond borders, especially from rural to urban areas, is a major and tragic consequence of economic globalization and empire. “Empire and Environmental Destruction in Haiti,” “Empire and Privatization of Water Is ‘Killing My People,’” “Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: Looking into the Eyes of Empire,” and “Empire and Patriarchy: Violence against Women in Guatemala” are all stories that involve displacement or migration as a result of national or international policies that are imperial in nature. Aboriginal peoples in Canada were uprooted from their traditional lands by Europeans who placed their own rapacious desire for land above the rights of the people who had settled it first. Mining and deforestation have ruined land traditionally cultivated by Haitian farmers, forcing them to migrate to cities where they can’t find jobs. Mega-dams in Lesotho have flooded the traditional lands of thousands of people who, displaced to urban areas, have seen few of the dividends promised from the sale of their water to South Africa. Families in Guatemala have been forced to relocate to urban areas in search of work because international trade rules have rendered their traditional farming practices, around which their lives and culture were built, redundant. In each of these cases, and so many more like them, human beings have been effectively re-conceptualized as commodities—objects considered superfluous or valued only for their potential to help the world’s imperial principalities and powers to turn a profit.

Some partners surveyed on the subject of empire said empire and patriarchy are mutually reinforcing. As the story “Empire and Patriarchy: Violence against Women in Guatemala” attests, patterns of imperial, patriarchal power and violence, a partial consequence of decades of civil war and poverty that has left men in particular frustrated and angry, undergird the brutal violence against women that is endemic in Guatemala today. Over the past five years some 2,000 women have been murdered,

most of the cases involving firearms, torture, and rape. Women of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry are particularly targeted, suggesting that ethnic discrimination and racism are coinciding motives. That bodies are often mutilated suggests virulent misogynous resentment. This “femicide,” as it is called in the story, “is carried out largely because of the simple fact of the victim being a woman and as a demonstration of power and domination.”

Economic globalization and the negative impact of free trade agreements have aggravated the crisis, the story asserts. Families have been forced to migrate to urban areas in search of work because free trade has made farm-based production no longer viable. Families that are displaced into social conditions that create insecurity and even deeper poverty face growing tensions, eventual domestic conflict, and finally, family disintegration. A society already stoked and smouldering with “machismo” culture bursts into flames of misogynous violence when fanned with the systemic economic exploitation of empire.

“Empire, For or Against: Make Every Dollar Count” reminds us what empire seeks to eradicate: the creation of alternative ways of living that are rooted in enduring hope and assert gospel values of community, interdependence, love, generosity, and stewardship of the earth. The “story within the story” of farmer Stuart Dermott’s unhurried day of cultivation is in poignant contrast to our fast-paced consumer culture that is fixated on the bottom line: “It’s a great day,” Stuart replied to a passing neighbour curious about his slow-moving tractor. “I enjoy cultivating, and I just want to make it last.” For Stuart, and many United Church people, “life is about stewardship, in every sense of the word, something to be enjoyed and treasured, not a competition for individual gain.”

Partners surveyed on the topic of empire identified religion as playing a sometimes central role. The linkage between religion and empire in the early church, in the form of Christendom, is well known and discussed elsewhere in this report. What about contemporary empire? Some partners associate religion with cultural hegemony, saying religion is used to promote neo-liberal economic ideology and to inculcate, especially among impoverished and vulnerable people in the global South, a so-called “gospel of prosperity.” By adopting the culture of consumerism, these religions teach, you can be “saved.” So-called fundamentalist Christian churches based in Northern countries and increasingly in countries in the global South preach this “gospel.”

Religion can also play a positive role in challenging the power of empire as illustrated in all the stories from or about partners contained in this report. The Middle East Council of Churches, Christian Council of Lesotho, United Church of Christ in the Philippines, and others are resisting empire in a variety of thoughtful and courageous ways and offering alternatives that accord, not with Caesar’s, but with God’s reign in the world. The story of the Dermotts is a shining testament to how unadulterated gospel values can be rooted deeper in the soil of our selves, families, communities, institutions, and nations.

As theologian Néstor O. Míguez says, empire reduces the rich diversity of the world to a question of economic management. All peoples, expectations, cultures, and nations are required by empire to submit to this logic.<sup>27</sup> Others have followed another path, as the stories will show.

The definition of empire offered by WARC, and the testimony of partners, highlight the notion that empire is a particular arrangement of power characterized by the joining together of economic forces, government structures, some political organizations, and some classes of society. In an empire, writes Míguez, these forces join to meet a single objective: the elimination of other forms of power and

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27 “Jesus and Empire: Then and Now” by the Rev. Dr. Néstor O. Míguez, 2006. See Appendix C.

social and economic alternatives, such as those we might obtain from the life and teachings of Jesus. Says Míguez, “We are now witnessing a time of imperial consolidation... The whole world is under pressure to mould itself [into] a single economic system and way of conceiving politics and managing power...”<sup>28</sup> and it will only bring death. But there is hope, which lies in the creation of life-giving alternatives.

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28 *Ibid.*

## Stories of Empire as a Threat to Life and Creation

Following is a series of stories written by or about United Church global partners on their experience of empire, and stories that comment on empire and resistance to empire in the Canadian context.

They witness both to the impact of empire, in its various but inter-connected manifestations, but also to what resisting empire or living more fully into God's reign might look like.

### Empire and the Privatization of Water Is “Killing My People”

Christian Council of Lesotho, Maseru, Lesotho/JGER Empire Task Group

“How can anyone own the earth's water?” Mamosa Nts'aba asks, adding, “Water belongs to God.” But in Nts'aba's country of Lesotho, water appears God's no longer. Increasingly it is being privatized and turned into a commodity for sale and profit. “My people used to collect clean water for free at communal water sources,” Nts'aba says. “Now they must pay for it.”

Lesotho is known as the “rooftop of Africa” and is a small, mountainous, landlocked country completely surrounded by South Africa. Of its 1.8 million people, 90 percent are subsistence farmers and livestock herders who dwell and toil in the country's fertile mountain valleys. Most Basotho<sup>29</sup> are poor and live on less than US\$2/day.

Water is Lesotho's greatest natural resource. Runoff from two mountain ranges, the Maluti and Thaba Putsoa, feeds many rivers, streams, and aquifers. But Nts'aba, who works on gender and women's programming at the Christian Council of Lesotho, says, “Water and its sale for profit is killing my people.”

Over the past 20 years, Basotho have seen their country's rich heritage in water increasingly sold off to private interests and to South Africa, a regional economic colossus. The shift from public ownership and management of water and water services to private ownership is increasing throughout Sub-Saharan Africa and the global South. The key actors are the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. They are able to impose these changes on indebted countries like Lesotho by using their leverage as creditors. These international financial institutions, sometimes called modern-day brokers of empire, argue that private management of natural resources will be more cost-effective and efficient, and will reduce poverty and conserve the environment. They view water not as a communal resource for sharing, Nts'aba says, but as “a commodity and an economic good to generate profit.” She adds, “This is what the World Bank calls ‘people-centred’ development.”

In 1986, the government of South Africa made a deal with Lesotho government officials for a multi-billion-dollar water diversion project. The World Bank initiated and financed the scheme to provide water to apartheid-era industries while avoiding international sanctions. The agreement allows South Africa to redirect more than 2 million cubic metres of water from Lesotho's Orange River system annually. When complete, the Lesotho Highlands Water Project will consist of five major dams, 200 kilometres of mountain tunnels, and a 72-megawatt hydroelectric power plant. It is Sub-Saharan Africa's biggest ever infrastructure initiative. In return for water, the Lesotho government receives royalties and hydroelectric power.

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29 “Basotho,” in Lesotho's Sesotho language, means “people of Lesotho.”

Ordinary Basotho, however, get mostly broken promises and misery. Some 27,000 Basotho were displaced when the new Mohale Dam and Reservoir flooded 22,000 acres of their traditional lands. Their houses, fields, graveyards, grazing lands, and other private and communal resources disappeared under water. Gone forever is a modest but dignified and sustainable way of life that had flourished for generations. The uprooted were relocated to urban areas and were promised clean water, new housing, job training, and financial compensation. But standards for applying for compensation are impossibly high, resulting in long bureaucratic delays and inadequate payment. Most of the schools, clinics, and clean water sources that were pledged are yet to materialize. The “trickle-down” of wealth from the highlands water project to grassroots Basotho, promised by the World Bank and the Lesotho government, hasn’t significantly happened.

Safe, adequate, and sustainable access to water for all peoples is one of the main social goals named at the global level in recent years. Privatization of water has the opposite effect. Many Basotho are unable to pay for water and are forced to rely on unsafe sources such as unprotected wells and open streams. Water-borne diseases such as cholera have increased as a result. With no access to affordable health care, more and more poor people, especially children, are dying needlessly. Maternal mortality has increased from 282 per 100,000 live births in the 1990s to 550 in 2003.<sup>30</sup> Reasons include poverty and poor nutrition, but also lack of access to clean water. Women are perilously affected by water privatization. Traditionally the gatherers of water, many women in rural areas have to walk vast distances, 10 kilometres or more, and often in the dark, to a spring or stream to collect free water. Along the way they are vulnerable to theft and rape.

Lesotho’s water woes are exacerbated by HIV/AIDS. The rate of prevalence among adults in Lesotho is 29 percent, making it one of the countries most affected by the AIDS pandemic.<sup>31</sup> Some 320,000 Basotho are HIV positive.<sup>32</sup> Inadequate water and sanitation service exacerbate the condition of people suffering from immune deficiencies such as HIV/AIDS and severely limits Lesotho’s capacity to fight the disease.

People-centred? Not so, Nts’aba says of privatization. Farmland has disappeared, people are poorer, children more easily succumb to preventable diseases, and the fabric of family life is fraying under increasing social and economic pressures. The water that God has given Basotho is being sold from under them, Nts’aba tells us. “How in God’s name is that ‘people-centred’ development?” she asks.

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30 World Health Organization.

31 UNAIDS 2004 Report on the global AIDS pandemic.

32 “Summary Country Profile for HIV/AIDS Treatment Scale-Up,” World Health Organization, June 2005.



## Empire, Militarism, and Human Rights in the Philippines

From the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, Manila, Philippines

In the spring of 2005 in Central Luzon (north of Manila), hardly a week passed without the sight of mourners in a funeral procession to bury someone. On March 13, 2005, that someone was Fr. William Tadena, a priest of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (Philippine Independent Church). Two days later, it was 67-year-old Victor Concepcion. Ten days earlier, it was Aberlardo Ladera, a member of the city council of Tarlac. All three were brutally murdered. All three had supported the strike of the farm workers at Hacienda Luisita where security forces violently broke up their rally and massacred seven striking farm workers on November 16, 2004.

Across the country, a similar pattern and practice of killings have been taking place. In the islands of Eastern Visayas, the Rev. Edison Lapuz was brutally killed on May 11, 2005. He was the Conference Minister of Northeastern Leyte Conference of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), a United Church partner. As chair of a regional human rights group called Karapatan and an active member of the ecumenical advocacy group Promotion of Church People's Response, he spearheaded a campaign for the prosecution of those responsible for the murder of Attorney Felidido Dacut, a human rights lawyer, on March 10, 2005.

In Northern Luzon, Jose Manegdeg was shot dead on November 28, 2005. He was a lay member of the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines and past coordinator of the Regional Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Cordilleras, also a United Church partner, which led the Save the Abra River Movement, a campaign to save the river from destruction caused by corporate mining and large-scale commercial activities. A week before, in the province of Leyte, seven farmers, two of them women, were massacred. They were preparing to return to their farms on disputed land granted them by the Department of Agrarian Reform, when military troops attacked them with guns and grenade bombs.

The dead are not victims of ordinary crimes. They are killed for demanding fair wages or a small piece of land to farm, for protesting human rights violations, for speaking about the negative impacts of economic globalization policies, for supporting community resistance to mining companies, or for opposing the continuing war games between government and U.S. forces that have displaced hundreds of thousands of Filipinos. They are killed because their activities threaten the economic and political interests of the elite. The victims include church people, human rights advocates, lawyers, leaders and members of social movements, and organizers and members of grassroots political parties.

A document of the Philippine Armed Forces, "Knowing the Enemy: Are We Missing the Point?" released in April 2005 named several progressive organizations, including the UCCP and the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, as "terrorists" that should be neutralized. In military terms, "neutralize" means to silence or, if this does not work, to physically eliminate them. Under President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, more than 500 civilians have been executed in four years by suspected state security forces and paramilitary elements. Over 150 people were murdered in 2005.

Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo launched the "war on terror" immediately after the Bush administration declared the Philippines as the second front in the U.S.-led "war on terror." The U.S. sent 1,200 troops to Basilan in the island of Mindanao to eradicate a small group of terrorists, Abu Sayyaf. In exchange for Macapagal-Arroyo's support of the U.S. "war on terror," the Bush administration has increased military aid to the Philippine government ten-fold. It has committed at least US\$356 million in military aid to the Philippines, up from pre-9/11 annual military assistance of US\$30-\$40 million.

The “War on Terror” opened the opportunity for the U.S. to re-assert its military presence and intervention in the Philippines. The U.S. had to withdraw its troops in 1992 after the Philippine senate decided to end the Military Bases Agreement. However, since 9/11, American special operation forces have been allowed entry to provide special warfare training to the armed forces of the Philippines. The U.S. and the Philippines conduct annually at least 18 joint war exercises involving a rotating presence of around 2,000 troops. The military trainings have now focused on counter-insurgency.

The people of Mindanao, where the Moro people (Muslim Filipinos) have waged the oldest and longest self-determination struggle in Asia, have borne the heaviest cost of this war. President Macapagal-Arroyo abandoned the ongoing peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Indiscriminate bombings and strafing operations in civilian areas have resulted in massive forced evacuations, brutal killings, arbitrary arrests and detention, and destruction of property and religious sites. Since 2002, there have been 33 bombing incidents in Mindanao that killed 85 people and injured more than 450 others.

It is no coincidence that the targeted killing of activists that has been going on since 2001 started in Mindoro where local officials, non-governmental organizations, workers, farmers, professionals, church people, and ordinary citizens joined together in broad and strong opposition to a mining project of a Canadian company. In the Moro province of Sulu, weeks after the government declared that the war against the MNLF was “over,” a subsidiary of U.S.-based energy company UNOCAL led a consortium to conduct an oil and gas exploration project in nearby Sulu Sea. Mindanao provides strategic access and control over the South China Sea, a critical trade route for oil. Eastern Visayas has abundant marine resources, which are controlled by foreign and local fishing companies, and mineral deposits that are a major interest and attraction to foreign mining corporations.

The church leaders who visited Eastern Visayas in July as a part of the Pastoral Ecumenical Delegation of the World Council of Churches and the Christian Conference of Asia made this observation in their report: “The military protects ‘economic investments’ and not the people of the land. It is critical for our analysis to name the ideology behind this market-focused economic development as rooted in the neo-liberal economic thinking, which claims to be without alternative, demanding an endless flow of sacrifices from the poor and from creation. We see here...the impact of economic globalization and its global geo-politics backed by the dominant ideology of globalization. This ideology also referred to as Empire ensures that political, economic and military is power vested in one center and that this power penetrates the internal political, cultural and social structures of a particular country such as the Philippines. Today’s dominant leaders will not hesitate to use whatever power and force to suppress the people and the world when their objectives of economic exploitation are threatened and hindered.”

## Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: Looking into the Eyes of Empire

JGER Empire Task Group

The Mi'Kmaq First Nations peoples of Canada's Maritime region have fished in Miramichi Bay, in what is now New Brunswick, for centuries and long before the arrival of European colonizers and immigrants. Despite the constraints of colonization, the Mi'Kmaq were allowed to continue their traditions of hunting and fishing, an important source of livelihood. These rights were enshrined in a Treaty signed in 1760 by the King of England and the Mi'Kmaq bands in present-day Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. In the early 1950s, however, the Treaty was violated by British colonial authorities when they introduced a new law prohibiting fishing outside regulated seasons.

In 1999 Donald Marshall Jr., an activist Mi'Kmaq, disagreed with the new law and decided to honour the old Treaty (thereby breaking the new law) by fishing out of season. He was arrested for his efforts. Marshall filed a legal claim with the Supreme Court of Canada arguing that the 1760 Treaty was still in force. The Court ruled in Marshall's favour. It interpreted the Treaty in practical, contemporary terms and ruled that Aboriginal bands who are party to the Treaty have a right to hunt and fish out of season but only for consumption and not for profit.

In view of the ruling, the First Nations of Esquopeetitj (Burnt Church) resumed their traditional lobster fishing activities in Miramichi Bay. But regional non-Aboriginal fishers disagreed with the Supreme Court ruling, saying out-of-season lobster trapping by Aboriginals was a direct threat to their own livelihoods. Violence erupted and attacks were launched on Aboriginals when they tried to resume lobster fishing. In an effort to address the concerns of both communities, the Supreme Court has since adjusted the Marshall ruling. The hunting and fishing activities of the Mi'Kmaq will now be regulated by the provincial government.

The Cross Lake First Nation in Northern Manitoba is also currently struggling with the legacy of "empire." Located about 600 kilometres north of Winnipeg, it has grappled with the effects of flooding caused by a hydroelectric generation mega-project in the early 1970s. Only after 10 years of long and arduous negotiations was compensation provided to the affected First Nations.

The experiences of the Mi'Kmaq and Cross Lake First Nations illustrate the realities of Aboriginal communities that are currently negotiating their autonomy, rights to self-determination, and access to land and natural resources. There are hundreds of First Nations groups like these struggling to find practical solutions to the problems associated with the imperial colonization of the past.

Many Aboriginal activists, writers, and researchers who contributed to the 1995 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples used the word "colonial" frequently in reference to the historical and present-day treatment of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Alan C. Cairns, in *Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State*, observes that the usage of this term is in contrast to the majority of non-Aboriginal Canadians who did not in the past and do not now regard Canada as ruling imperially over the Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Until very recently, Cairns explains, Aboriginal peoples, in a typical colonial fashion, were the subjects of policy. "Status Indians, the only Aboriginal people to have a separate branch of government to their affairs, were an administered people. They were in a colonial situation. Indeed, the very language used to describe them for the first century after Confederation could equally have

been used in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). They were described as wards, likened to children, and assumed to be unready for full citizenship.”<sup>33</sup>

When Canadians speak about their experience of “empire,” some are referring to the perceived threat of living next door to the “American Empire.” For other Canadians, “empire” was and is something associated with Canada’s British heritage. But in linking empire at home (Canada) and abroad, Cairns explains that while Canadian imperial treatment of Aboriginal peoples may have “lacked the pomp and ceremony of the British Raj, or the status-enhancing experience of a handful of officials ruling over millions in tropical Africa, Ceylon, or the Dutch East Indies,” it was nonetheless connected to the global phenomenon of empire at that time.<sup>34</sup>

Canada, Cairns writes:

...sent missionaries to Christianize, anthropologists to analyze, and Indian agents—our version of district officers—to administer. Indian children were taught wounding versions of history; sacred practices and revered customs were forbidden or mocked; the use of Aboriginal languages was discouraged; customary forms of governance were bypassed; traditional healing arts were displaced; and treaties were accorded lesser significance by governments than by the descendants of the Indian leaders who had signed them. In general, Aboriginal ways of life, and thus their bearers, were stigmatized.<sup>35</sup>

The ideology that supported the spread of the British Empire was and is the same that drives empire in Canada today. The difference is that in Canada, the majority non-Aboriginal population cannot “go home” or simply give up their colonial power like Britain, France, Portugal, and other colonial powers did in Africa, Asia, and other regions of the world. As Cairns explains, “This crucial fact that the Aboriginal nations will be in the minority in Canada even after the maximum degree of self-government has been realized, differentiates the Canadian—and the New Zealand, Australian, and American—and the situations of many Latin American countries—from the decolonization process in most of Africa and Asia. In no case does the relationship between the formerly imperialist and the formerly colonized completely end with independence.”<sup>36</sup>

Many Aboriginal communities in Canada know this. The process and strategy for negotiating the rights and self-determination of First Nations in Canada is proving to be a long and onerous task.

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33 These excerpts are reprinted with permission of the Publisher from *Citizen Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State* by Alan Cairns © University of British Columbia Press, 2000. All rights reserved by the Publisher.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*

## Empire and Environmental Destruction in Haiti

By Marc-Arthur Fils-Aimé, Karl Lévêque Cultural Institute, Haiti

Haiti means “High Ground” or “Mountainous Land” in the language of the two aboriginal nations that lived here prior to the arrival of the European invaders in 1492. At that time, Haiti was covered with forests. The two indigenous groups lived together peaceably—contrary to all the allegations of cannibalism promoted by Western racists—and in their cosmological vision believed that the zone of Abricot (apricot) in Grand-Anse (part of Haiti’s south-west peninsula) sheltered their paradise. Christopher Columbus and his crew were so enchanted by this green island that they called it Hispaniola, or little Spain.

Today, only 2 percent of the national soil is still covered by vegetation that could be called a forest. The country is so deforested that in regions such as the North-West, the people scratch the earth to remove what remains of the roots of trees to satisfy their energy needs. How is it that Haiti, once called “the Pearl of the Antilles,” has come to be like this?

Generally, small farmers are accused of being the origin of this destruction. This accusation ignores the demands of globalization, which are effectively responsible for their behaviour. The great majority of these producers possess less than a hectare of land, often unsuitable for agriculture, or no land at all. For their domestic needs, they gather twigs and branches. The unjust land tenure system forces them to practices such as the cutting of trees, for survival. First of all, such cutting allows them to survive by making wood charcoal and, though less frequently now, quicklime. In turn, this charcoal is used by people selling goods in small markets and by the working masses in the urban areas who use the charcoal for energy. The small farmers end up having to cut down fruit trees that might have brought some income with each harvest, in order to survive in the immediate future. Can they really be held responsible for their own destruction?

Environmental destruction in Haiti began with colonization. The colonists destroyed vast green surfaces for the sake of profits from cane sugar, indigo, cotton, and other products. By 1770, they were attacking the mountainous zones to make coffee plantations, since the value of the coffee bean was increasing in the international market. After our first Independence in 1804, the new leaders did not divorce themselves from the colonial modes of production, and continued to strip the soil. In 1887, log wood (campeachy) was Haiti’s most valuable export, ahead even of coffee exports. Log wood, wood for carpentry (mahogany), and wood for construction (pine) became increasingly large parts of export production. But to whom did these ships belong? They did not belong to the small farmers. Who was exporting these varieties to Europe and the United States? Not the small farmers.

During the American occupation that began in 1915, U.S. capitalists took thousands of hectares, expelling small farmers in collaboration with some Haitian leaders. By 1929, 266,600 acres were in the hands of American capitalists. In the North-East and elsewhere, these new investors introduced the growth of sisal and rubber plants in large areas. These two plants suck the moisture from the earth and render it infertile. By the 1980s, the Haitian subsidiary of the U.S.-based Reynolds mining company that extracted bauxite in the Miragoâne region, and a Canada–U.S. company called SEDREN that extracted copper outside Gonaïves, withdrew from Haiti and left behind deserts. With the complicity of different Haitian governments, these companies (like many others) did not respect clauses in their contracts that required reforestation of damaged surfaces.

Government policies go against the welfare of small farmers. Economic globalization has also demanded policies that go against the welfare of small farmers. Small growers are often forced to

grow “cash crops” of cereal, in order to survive. Growing cereal crops means uprooting coffee trees—trees that had prevented erosion of hills and bluffs.

In spite of the fragility of this situation, the rich continue to build their castles in areas around the capital city, while the peasants have been forced to migrate to the cities. But the peasants do not find a better life. They live in subhuman conditions. They build their homes on the hillsides and even within the ravines and thus they are the first victims of the floods and slides that happen regularly after a few millimetres of rain. A good part of national and international public opinion blames them for environmental degradation instead of seeking the causes in the anti-social distribution of goods that is an element of capitalism and empire.

In Port-au-Prince, Haiti’s capital, the rich draw extraordinary volumes of water that is sold throughout the capital. This region once contained some of Haiti’s largest underground water reserves. It is now threatened with contamination by seawater.

Water contamination, drought, and flood all threaten the poorest citizens of Haiti. Once fertile, Haiti has become a mostly arid country with a few oases. Those who have the least security feel the effects of environmental destruction the most. The threat to small farmers and to the environment is a result of a long historical process, begun with colonization, and continuing today with economic globalization and imperialism.

## **Empire, For or Against: Make Every Dollar Count**

JGER Empire Task Group

Stuart and Luella Dermott had a farm outside Alliston, Ontario. It was a mixed farm of cattle, pigs, and chickens. They grew various grains. Children of the Depression, they knew what poverty and lack of economic security meant, but their farm prospered through the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s, partially because they remembered the Dirty Thirties, and knew how to make every dollar count. Faithful members of Burns United Church, they knew that community was more important than individual gain. They also knew that farming was about interdependence, not the domination of creation, and that the very security of our children and the planet are at stake in how we use every dollar.

Of course Stuart and Luella never actually said much about these things, though their actions spoke volumes. They never spent lavishly or bought into a consumer lifestyle. Neighbours recount stories of the Dermotts putting community and love of the land first. Once a neighbour pulled over to inquire if Stuart’s slow-moving pace on a tractor meant there was some type of problem in the field. “No,” he replied, “It’s a great day, I enjoy cultivating, and I just want to make it last.” No race to the financial bottom line for the Dermotts. Life was about stewardship, in every sense of the word, something to be enjoyed and treasured, not a competition for individual gain. Unfortunately others have embraced industrial agriculture, contributing to larger farms and rural depopulation. When Stuart and Luella died childless in the late 1990s they left almost one million dollars to their local United Church congregation in part to keep rural communities strong.

Here and there many United Church congregations have seen an increase in the number of financial gifts being left to them in bequests and wills of longstanding members born before the Second World War. David Foote, University of Toronto demographer and author of the best-selling book *Boom*,

*Bust and Echo*, describes those born in the first half of the 20th century as builders, and the postwar babies have come to be known as boomers. Foote notes that we are now in the midst of the biggest transfer of intergenerational personal wealth between builders and boomers that Canada has ever known or is likely to see for some time. Many United Church congregations receive these financial gifts. The question of how to use these gifts is a question of how we live out our faith. Do we see building projects or investment in mission as our first priority? How do we use the money to benefit the wider community, and communities around the world? The faithful congregation that inherited the Dermott's gift has established a community foundation. The congregation resisted the neo-liberal cultural command to invest without thought as to who benefits or who is harmed. Rather, the congregation chose to take social and environmental well-being seriously. Today the Dermott's love of the land and community has found new expression and new life in United Church camps, the local hospital, and education initiatives in Africa and Canada.

Whether as individuals or institutions, managing our daily finances, RRSP contributions, or a new gift, the financial choices we make have social consequences. Church organizations in Canada have been among the leaders of the socially responsible or "ethical" investment movement that promotes the integration of social criteria in financial decision-making. As noted in the 2002 book *Mission and Investing: A Guide for The United Church of Canada Congregations and Organizations*, many of the characteristics of the socially responsible investment movement can be seen in the activities of people working to alleviate poverty, in the field of international development assistance, and in the co-operative movement, all of which also have strong ties to Canadian churches. Now, more than ever, as we experience a global intersection of neo-liberal economic interests and military might for the benefit of a few, we are called to seek out alternative economic choices, ones that will uphold the common good.

## Empire and Patriarchy: Violence against Women in Guatemala<sup>37</sup>

By Nora Coloma, Ecumenical Network of Women, Guatemala

Violence against women and children, together with the increase of youth gangs linked to organized crime, are the results of family disintegration and youth alienation in civil society in past and present decades. These in turn cause a crisis of frustration and social and domestic violence where the moral values and ethical norms of our common lives as human beings are being lost. Inevitably, these phenomena have an impact on religious culture.

The problem of violence affects all of Guatemala. In this context, murders of women have grown substantially. This reality calls into question the capability of the government institutions to guarantee the right to security for all people, and especially those who are most vulnerable, including women. This concern is expressed even from within official agencies, including a pamphlet published by the office of the government's prosecutor for human rights entitled "Violent Deaths of Women during 2004."

Violent deaths of women in Guatemala are another form of social discrimination and intimidation. Generalized violence has a negative effect on participation in social movements, and aids in the development of a culture of fear.

Over the past five years, about 2,000 women have been brutally murdered in Guatemala. Year-to-year, this represents between 12 and 18 percent of all the murders in Guatemala. The numbers are not entirely precise, as government authorities do not provide exact statistics.

Forms of murder vary and include use of firearms, torture, and rape. Many women are found having been tied hand and foot, or placed in canvas or plastic bags; they are often mutilated and appear to have been thrown from automobiles. The victims usually range in age from 14 to 35 years of age. Among the most dangerous places are the capital city and surrounding municipalities, as well as the cities along the southern coast.

An important element to note is that in these statistics, it is very difficult to discern the ethnicity of the women. Most of the murdered women are described as *mestiza* (mixed Indigenous and European ancestry); few are described as Indigenous. But it is necessary to point out that because of racism, many Indigenous women have abandoned the use of traditional clothing.

Various groups of women and social movements call these murders "femicide"—the misogynist murder of women. The Mexican activist Ester Chávez (of Casa Amiga in Ciudad Juárez in northern Mexico) speaks of the extermination of women. Femicide, together with rape, torture, and other violence, is carried out largely because the victim is a woman; violence is a demonstration of power and domination. The results of various studies indicate patterns in the ways and locations that bodies are placed. The authorities allege that the women were involved in the street gangs known as "*maras*." These allegations fail to respect what the murdered women have suffered. In this way, the authorities seem to justify the ways that the women have been murdered. The allegations also hide the inability of the authorities to fully investigate the murders.

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37 Sources: Adrian Reyes, "Brutal Killings of Women Recall Counter-insurgency Techniques," IPS News Service, June 22, 2005: <http://www.ipsnews.org/news.asp?idnews=29187>  
"Report on Violent Deaths of Women during 2004," Procuraduría de los Derechos Humanos.  
"Some Reflections on Femicide in Guatemala," Centro de Acción Legal de los Derechos Humanos (CALDH), October 2005.



In lively debates and analysis among women's organizations and movements, many ideas about the causes of and responses to violence against women and patriarchal systems and structures are discussed. One hypothesis that is debated, with many reservations, is the idea that the economic empowerment of women has placed men at an economic disadvantage, because women have proven that they can generate their own incomes and no longer need to depend on men.

## **Baywatch and Cell Phone Cameras: Middle Eastern Youth and the Culture of Empire**

Middle East Council of Churches, Beirut, Lebanon/ JGER Empire Task Group

It's not the sort of thing that the Western media would lead us to believe possible, yet in March 2005, twenty-five Muslim and Christian youth gathered in Teheran, Iran, for a three-day seminar, one of a series sponsored by the Middle East Council of Churches, with the theme "Christian and Muslim Youth: Toward Developing Their Common Future." One of the key issues to emerge from the series of seminars concerned the impact of modern media, and the Western-dominated global culture of empire on the lives of young people, Christian and Muslim, in the Middle East.

Young people under 30 make up about 60 percent of the population of the Arab world, with youth unemployment running at 30 percent. Such symbols of modern life as satellite TV, Internet, cell phones, consumer electronics, and music videos are connecting them to a world their parents never knew. In many parts of the region, they are the first generation to live through the era of oil-generated wealth and rapid social change. Rather than accepting and absorbing the cultural identity of their community, they are being influenced by Western media to define their own *individual* identity.

"Tens of millions of young men and women, constrained by lack of employment opportunities, are constantly and increasingly exposed to the lavish lifestyles portrayed by music video clips—huge houses, beautiful gardens, posh cars, cool clothes, and seductive semi-naked girls jumping about everywhere," says one Christian participant. This is viewed as "a product of the Christian West," she continues. "We Arab Christians want to say, no, it is not Christian. We are Christian and we are appalled by this onslaught just like you!"

Other participants were open about the ambivalence within Arab society toward the mass culture of empire. One young Egyptian man recalls breaking the fast with Muslim friends during Ramadan recently. "After the meal the television came on, with a popular music program. The singer appeared singing on top of an open bus, wearing leather trousers and a skin-tight tube shirt. Her movements, her song, and her interview following her set all proclaimed sex. I learned she was Lebanese. I was embarrassed, and yet my friend's sisters were eagerly singing along, while dressed very conservatively, their heads veiled." The pressure of the culture of empire on changing gender roles in the region was a source of much animated conversation over meals.

One of the presenters at the seminar quotes the South African liberation leader Steve Biko to sustained applause: "The most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed." Yes, several participants energetically agree. "We even begin to absorb the negative stereotypes in Western media about Arabs, Iranians, Middle Easterners, and Muslims, and we forget the rich diversity of Arab cultures." As a representative of the Middle East Council of Churches remarks, "We have been seduced into letting the West tell our story, shape our identity."

A Muslim Lebanese university student notes that in many countries in the region, power is wielded in authoritarian ways, without accountability. People are restricted from expressing their social, ethnic, and political identities, and wealth is frequently distributed in grossly unjust ways. “The resulting tensions that build up are released, or postponed, through consumerism and materialism—enjoying *Baywatch*, or a Batman movie on TV, while denouncing American and British imperialism. This lasts for a while, but one day the human spirit snaps. *Baywatch* and Batman and cell phones with cameras and MP3 music players no longer compensate for the deep frustrations, disappointments, and fears that haunt young people in our societies.”

At the same time, some participants wonder if governments in countries throughout the Middle East are not quietly grateful for the “superficial, empty, distractions of the culture of empire.” A young Armenian Christian participant from Iran suggests, “governments want people’s minds driven away from the horrific hazards of politics and economics.” As a result, young people—both Christian and Muslim—are forced to find ways of claiming their identity in the face not only of the culture of empire, but with the complicity of governments “wanting to anaesthetize an increasingly restless and angry generation of youth.”

Is there a good side to the culture of empire, its commodification<sup>38</sup> of youth and beauty and its consumer technology, for the tens of millions of educated, unemployed young urban men and women across the Middle East? Yes, says a 24-year-old Lebanese woman. “After the murder of Lebanon’s Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, we mobilized mass protests in Beirut through cell phones and text messaging, and sent digital pictures and video out around the world to swing global opinion over this outrage—and it worked!” Another participant observes ironically that of all the issues facing young Christians and Muslims in the Middle East, the toxic encroachment of the culture and media of empire have proved to be the most effective at building common cause across faith communities toward building a common future.

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38 “Commodification” is a process that renders something, for example a material good or an idea, into an object for sale and profit.

## Theological Reflection

(When references to Douglas John Hall, Ofelia Ortega, and Néstor Míguez are made in this reflection, see Appendix A, B, and C respectively.)

Our study of empire, in particular through how empire is experienced by our global ecumenical partners, has led to the conclusion that empire—what theologian Ofelia Ortega and others have called a “civilization of inequality”—threatens and destroys the faith we confess and profess as followers of Jesus. The destruction of, and continuing threat to, all life means that we are at a critical time for the discernment of the gospel. At issue is the liberating good news the church professes. Empire has lured and co-opted the church into theologies contrary to the gospel alternative, which is centred on freedom *for* God, *for* the world, *for* the neighbour (see Mark 12:28–34). Yet through the gift of the Spirit we may again be made free to be the church, to risk living a life for and with the other and for this world God created and recreates (see John 8:31–36; Galatians 5:13–14; etc.).

To explore how empire has captured our loyalty, we survey scripture, concentrating on the New Testament and its imperial context. The imperium, and imperial theology, historically belongs to Rome and its political organization at the time of the Caesars—though the Jews had suffered under Egyptian and Babylonian domination throughout their history. Emperors were considered divine beings and given the titles of Lord, Saviour, and Son of God. They were honoured and celebrated as bringers of a salvation that had peace and security, the *Pax Romana*, as its cornerstone. This so-called peace, namely the security of protection from enemies, was grounded in war and victory with the sword, and since there was no distinction between politics and religion, victorious rulers were considered to have divine approval and status. For faithful Jews this meant worship of a false god (Exodus 20:3–5a).

It is in the context of the Roman Empire of the first century C.E. that Jesus was born, lived, taught, healed, and was crucified. The brutal oppression of occupied Palestine under Roman rule was his and his people’s daily experience. Scholar Richard Horsley puts the importance of understanding Jesus’ historical context in perspective: “Trying to understand Jesus’ speech and action without knowing how Roman imperialism determined the conditions of life in Galilee and Jerusalem would be like trying to understand Martin Luther King without knowing how slavery, reconstruction, and segregation determined the lives of African Americans in the United States.”<sup>39</sup> Theologian Néstor Míguez also speaks of empire as “the historical backdrop for Jesus’ ministry.”

In story and parable, in healing and exorcism, in meal and miracle, Jesus provided an alternative to the reality of empire in his time, an alternative grounded in the covenantal and prophetic traditions of Israel. Jesus reminded those who bore the oppression of Rome and who were his primary audience that God sought their liberation by calling them to covenant for the communal living of the justice and righteousness portrayed in the Torah (see, for example, Matthew 5–7; Luke 6:17–49). To be bound to God through the Torah was for Jews a matter of ultimate allegiance that ruled out loyalty to the Emperor as a divinity, that is, a false god (see Matthew 22:15–22; Luke 20:20–26). Jesus the Jew and a child of Judaism drew upon the prophetic and apocalyptic tradition (see Isaiah 14:4–20; Micah 4:1–4; Daniel 3; Revelation 18; etc.) and its criticism of the kind of injustice and exploitation that marked imperial Rome and also announced God’s promised future of inclusive freedom (see Luke 7:36–50; Mark 5:1–20; etc.) and an “economy of grace” (see Mark 8:1–10). He also drew upon the Jubilee and Sabbath traditions, calling those once enslaved to create a society where liberation from slavery (see Luke 4:16–21; etc.), debt (see Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 11:1–4), and other inequities was the divine order of the day.

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39 Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, p. 13.

Jesus drew on the metaphor of the “realm of God,” taken from the Hebrew prophets. He proclaimed God’s covenantal reign of peace, compassion, justice, healing, reconciliation, and non-violence as being opposite to empire. According to Jesus, God’s reign was freely and graciously given to all, especially to the poor, marginalized, and diseased (see Luke 14:12–14; Matthew 11:2–5; etc.), to women and children (see Mark 1:29–31; Mark 5:21–43; Matthew 18:1–5; etc.). Such proclamation led to his crucifixion, which was imperial Rome’s way of dealing with those whom it regarded as a threat to its absolute rule. The cross, the central symbol of our faith, is full of historically tragic and terrible irony, as his Jewish brothers and sisters have, over the intervening centuries of imperial Christendom, suffered pain, pogroms, and holocaust from those who called themselves Christians, wearing crosses and wielding swords and guns in their hands to crucify his fellow Jews.

After his experience of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, the Apostle Paul spent his days visiting, establishing, sustaining, and teaching communities where the alternative that Jesus proclaimed was lived out as much as possible. Paul too knew the oppression of empire. In his letter to the church in Rome (7:24) he cries out: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” “Body of death” means living under the coercion of this world’s imperial principalities and powers, and not being able to fulfill the Torah, to do God’s will. The slavery he speaks of is such that even when we will to do God’s commandments, we cannot. But when in the next verse he cries out, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” he rejoices in the Christ-given gift of freedom for God, for the neighbour and for the world, the freedom to fulfill the Torah. When those early church communities called Jesus “Lord” they made it plain that Caesar was not to be worshiped and that ultimate loyalty belonged to God and to God alone.

Using provocative and political language, such as that of slavery and freedom (see Romans 7:24; Galatians 5:1; etc.) and clearly building on the gospel of Jesus, Paul laid the foundations of the church as local communities, initially house churches where social, spiritual, and economic mutuality was to reign. It was this agenda of congregational development that was a key factor in the spread and growth of the early Christian movement, since equality (women were leaders—see Galatians 3:26–28; Acts 16:14–15; etc.), inclusivity (Gentiles and Jews together—see Galatians 3:26–28; Acts 17:26; etc.), sustenance (goods, resources, Eucharist were shared—see Acts 2:42–47; Acts 4:32–35; etc.), and healing (liberation—see Acts 16:16–34; etc.) were hope-filled and life-altering. Conversion and baptism then meant incorporation into this body’s healthy and holistic way of living, which was contrary to empire. A Jew like Jesus, but also a Roman citizen, Paul too was executed by Rome as a politically dangerous figure.

The church was persecuted by imperial powers and martyrdom was widespread in its early life. But over time a theological drift from the core teachings of Jesus and Paul, particularly on the question of economic equality and the rejection of violence, paved the way for the greatest upheaval in Christian history—the conversion of Emperor Constantine! United Church theologian Douglas John Hall states that the emperor “invited the Christians to become...chaplain to his imperium,” as Constantine (and emperors since!) saw the potential for religion to lend unifying force, triumphalist power, personalizing morality, and authoritative deference to his imperial regime. This meant that the church that became triumphant and dominant alongside the state had in fact become empire itself in the form of Christendom. The militant globalizing mission of the church followed, including the devastation of the crusades, the dramatic expansion of wealth and property ownership of the church, the conflicting realignment of church and various states in the Reformation period, and the horror of the Holocaust in Germany and elsewhere during World War II.

Without going further into the history, we see a series of short steps to move from the dominance and power of the Roman Empire to the dominance and power of Christendom to the contemporary dominance and power of the neo-liberal capitalist empire. While it is true, as Douglas Hall states, that “western Christendom is in its final stages of decay”—thus providing us with a providential opportunity to recapture the original modesty of the gospel through the use of such metaphors for the church as salt, light, seed, yeast (see Matthew 5:13–16; Matthew 13:31–33; etc.)—empire itself continues in full force. Over the centuries, empire has co-opted religion and divorced itself from its explicit religious roots. Néstor Míguez identifies global imperial consolidation as a very real likelihood. Empire will be grounded in an economic axis in which “Mammon is God” and “everything must be adapted to the framework of capitalist commerce and consumerist society,” with a drive toward privatization in which “individual satisfaction dissolves...solidarity...(and) generate(s) an imperialized subjectivity.” Ofelia Ortega has named nine characteristics, while we have named seven factors in our understanding of contemporary empire—political, economic, military, cultural, religious, environmental, patriarchal—which join in such interconnected ways that they form a unified system of oppression, destruction, and threat of death to marginalized people and the planet’s ecosystems as a whole.

We are thus called anew to a prophetic faith that is oriented to real truth, holds ultimate hope and trust in God, and yet remains close to the negations of history, and is aware of the people and places where contemporary suffering is most acutely known (Douglas Hall). It is this prophetic faith that has led South African Christians, after the devastation of decades of apartheid, to build goodwill for the future—through the inspiring process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission led by Desmond Tutu and others—upon an understanding of “ubuntu” theology, which asserts that “I am human when you also are human.”

It is also this prophetic faith that leads Ofelia Ortega to write: “We are called to be nonconformist and transformative communities, because life is not possible unless we do transformation that addresses the roots of injustice. We are called to be transformed by the renewing of our minds from the dominating and egoistic imperial mindset, thus doing the will of God which is fulfilled in love, solidarity, and grace.... We as churches are called to create spaces for, and become agents of, transformation, even as we are entangled in and complicit with the very system we are called to change.” In offering a prophetic affirmation of “the creative power of God,” that another world and another resurrected church is possible, Néstor Míguez states: “To locate ourselves in spaces of hope is to begin working beyond Empire. It is to create life-giving alternatives for everyone.... But for this faith to become reality we cannot wait for time to pass and for the governing powers to fall by themselves. It is necessary to begin to demonstrate in our perceptions, relationships, and communities that another world is possible; that other ways of living bring dignity and plenitude... through the extension of alternate symbols and lifeways, of which we are heirs.”

It seems clear that God calls us to a bold confession and renewed profession and practice of our faith—God’s gospel alternative to empire—in word and deed with our various ecumenical and interfaith partners. Ofelia Ortega says, “the conflict with...empire is the theological place that makes us know who our God is.” With her and others, it is our conviction that nothing less than the contemporary theological integrity of the church is at stake. We therefore remind the church of God’s call to be the church of Jesus Christ, to be set free by grace, at all levels and in all ways, to reclaim our loyalty to the gospel rather than to be enslaved by the continuing imperial theology of our day.

## **CONFESSION: Church and World in the Midst of Empire**

The understanding of empire expressed in this report is primarily based upon the witness of our ecumenical, interfaith, and societal partners, both overseas and in Canada. It is also deeply informed by the witness of scripture, in both Old and New Testaments, and by the reflections of theologians and members of the Empire Task Group. The imperial threats to life in various dimensions in our current global context lead us to acknowledge the divided loyalties and deep involvement, or complicity, of The United Church of Canada and the larger worldwide Christian church with the forces and forms of empire in both church and world. Our acknowledgment of such complicity leads us to new and bold confession.

Acts of confession are absolutely critical to the integrity of our faith. Confessing our complicity with empire is a crucial first step, in order to turn in another direction (to repent). Our unique and oft-quoted Affirmation of Faith (“A New Creed”)—that we are not alone, that we live in God’s world, and that we are called to be the church—is deeply compromised if we fail to take into account the breadth and depth of our complicity in imperial violence. All subjects of empire are indoctrinated by falsehoods, lies, distortions, and misrepresentations that give rise to both overt and covert forms of violent power over ourselves, others, and God’s creation. Empire challenges faith communities such as ours to examine the very truth of their confession. Remaining silent in the face of our acknowledged complicity is not an option for a church such as ours who profess Jesus Christ as Lord of our time and our history. We understand confession to be an act of acknowledging wrongs and injustices. Confession thus also becomes a way for the church to imagine and discern a new future, a new way of being church, as a faithful response to God’s grace and call to new life.

The need to acknowledge our complicity with the imperial powers, and to confess the same, is shared by other reports. The draft Statement of Faith, which the Theology and Faith Committee has placed before the 39th General Council 2006, states in its preamble that “separated as we now are from the centre of power, the United Church has become aware of its complicity with historic oppressions and abuses,” and it notes the pervasive economic worldview of contemporary people, such that “our spiritual hunger is co-opted by the culture of consumption.” The statement itself notes that “by the tragic subversion of our potential, we are in bondage to and complacent within a matrix of false desires and wrong choices. In these are manifest the tragic outcomes of sin—the evil that is hatred, violence, greed, and selfishness; the domination of economic, political, and military empires; rampant consumerism and unchecked accumulation of wealth; limitless growth and damage to creation.” Finally the statement says that the church after Constantine “grew in number and power, allying with great cities and empires, silencing by force diverse expressions of faith, harming rather than caring for God’s children.... We carry sorrow, grief, and shame for our wounding actions across this whole beloved and beleaguered world.... We have often failed to be the church.”

We also acknowledge previous sincere attempts to confess our collective complicity in imperial forces, not the least of which has been the United Church’s 1986 Apology to Native Peoples, and our 1998 Statement of Repentance. We are also more aware, in part because the above apology and statement were received but not accepted, that mere words of sorrow and repentance are not enough. We are called by the Spirit to confess our sins and to live into our repentance, as faithful disciples of Jesus in our time and place.

Another challenge to transformation is what we call our “revolutionary theology.” We have been prolific as the United Church in addressing, over time, major social issues of injustice, greed, exploitation, etc. by passing resolutions, petitions, and reports at various levels (General Council,

Conference, presbytery/district, congregational). Yet such statements have not instilled in us a real change of heart and institution, in which we no longer presume to have all the answers, whether in the forms of doctrine or methods of social action. We are called, at all levels of the church, to live into the complex questions and concerns of our time, in solidarity with ecumenical, interfaith, and societal partners. We suffer widespread hesitancy regarding our needed conversion to new forms of mission and ministry. If newly energized by the Spirit, however, we may undertake a sustained new re-formation of the church, in part by working with renewed vigour in our carrying out of previous resolutions throughout the church and in lives.

Confession can evoke fear, and it seems that we are a fearful people, fearful of dying as individuals and as churches. Such fear, however, merely plays into the hands of empire. We need to confess our emphasis on maintenance rather than mission. We also need to confess our confusion of the authentic evangelism of the gospel (which is the sharing of God's good news as known in the witness, ministry, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus), with church growth, which is a by-product of the gospel rather than the gospel in and of itself!

This confession will require a new degree of humbleness and risk-taking of us all, as we seek to overcome specific sins of imperial complicity with regard to race, class, gender, age, clericalism, ecological destruction, discrimination, and the like. Over the next triennium and beyond we are called to ask ourselves difficult questions about living in the midst of empire, at every level of the church, about our goals and methods, focusing on

- our education and faith formation methods and models
- our mission and social action agendas
- our interfaith assumptions
- our expectations for lay and ordered ministry training
- the emphasis of our youth and children's ministries
- our pension and investment fund portfolios
- our spending, consumption and budgeting habits
- our environmental standards
- our stewardship patterns
- our methods of governance and decision-making
- our means of conflict resolution
- our forms of worship
- and a host of other practices of church life

Continued and renewed advocacy among the principalities and powers, including government and corporations, who are among the primary builders of empire, is important. But we are also called to re-examine our hearts and actions, as the principal architects and purveyors of empire count on our complicity to maintain their dominance. We are only beginning to understand the depth of confession necessary within the church to recapture a dynamic and passionate faithfulness to the vision, gospel, and mission of Jesus. Because we benefit in so many ways from the imperial forces at work in our world (economically, socially, ecclesiastically, individually, and otherwise) we may even resist the call to confession that this report, and its attached proposal, represents. Nonetheless scripture, our various partners, and the Spirit beckon, calling us to a broad analysis of our complicity

in empire, as a first step toward renewed integrity and faithfulness within all levels of The United Church of Canada. We need to examine our collective conscience, to name our sin, to ask ourselves how we are linked with the destructive forms and forces of empire in our time. Then and only then, having confessed in word and deed, can we begin to take up the challenge of God's call to renewed discipleship of Jesus Christ through the transforming and renewing power of God's Spirit of freedom and truth.



## CALL: Living God's Reign in the Midst of Empire

In making our confession, we seek to be a responsive and transformed people of faith, hope, and love. God calls us to fresh discernment about the shape of our mission and ministry in the imperial context of our time. This is a critical *kairos* time for the church. We must sharpen our attentiveness to God's call to us, as individuals, families, congregations/pastoral charges, mission units, presbyteries/districts, Conferences, and General Council. We seek to be in solidarity with God's mission in and for this world that God created and loves, and for the creatures of all kinds who have life and breath from God's life and breath. This section of our report, without presuming to speak for all within this diverse church of ours, seeks to express hints and glimpses of what that solidarity might look like in the midst of the destructive imperial forces of our day.

Discernment is an ongoing tradition for those in the church. Fortunately, we have sources of inspiration to guide us in this new context. For instance, our Affirmation of Faith, "A New Creed," reminds us that we are called by the God we trust "to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence, to live with respect in Creation, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope." And we know "God is with us. We are not alone."

But such faith is in danger of becoming nothing more than pious words if it is separated from the nitty-gritty of worldly engagements and entanglements. To move from confession to call is to move from the ideas, intentions, and actions that we resist as sinful, to those ideas, intentions, and actions to which God leads us. We seek a shift within the broad life of the church from a primary concern about preservation and maintenance toward a fresh vocation of vision, mission engagement, justice seeking, and transformative ministry.

The 39th General Council 2006 offers significant time for discernment about our just-beginning third generation of mission and ministry. Once again, the draft Statement of Faith offers points of convergence, as it states: "With God's help we turn from our sin and seek to be agents of God's healing and reconciliation....We choose to listen to our neighbours in faith...to work together for a whole earth of peace and justice. We participate in God's work of healing and mending creation expressed in both personal and communal dimensions."

Becoming more specific, the statement says: "Christian communal responsibility in our day especially includes: attending to the well-being of our home the earth; repenting of European-Canadian hostility toward Aboriginal peoples; resisting economic exploitation, the idolatry of the market economy, and the marginalization of people because of gender, ethnicity, or sexuality; challenging the misuse of Christian language to promote hatred rather than love, and war rather than peace; fostering a climate of faithful hope in opposition to a culture of covert despair; and constructively recreating our identity and role in the community of the earth." While this is an exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, vocation for us as individuals, it is far less difficult as people of various gifts within diverse communities of faith, at all levels of the church, and among people of conscience everywhere.

Inklings of God's contemporary call to the church have been discerned here and there, among diverse people of faith in various contexts. The United Church has a rich history of prophetic and pastoral involvement, and has over the last few decades addressed numerous specific issues of injustice, exploitation, and greed. Nonetheless, far too few of us have transformed our habits and our patterns of behaviour. Rather, we have conformed ourselves more to imperial practices of efficiency and success, rather than to the radical, alternative, and anti-imperial gospel of good news, which has unselfish love at its heart. Among a host of potential actions we may consider, it is time to revisit, in a systematic fashion, the practical implications for our future church, at all levels, of the various resolutions and petitions that

have guided our policy and program making in the past.

We are invited to return to the core questions of our faith tradition if we are to discern God's will in the midst of the daily lies, deceptions, and lures of empire. This invitation has been extended by various sources and most recently by the World Council of Churches' Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth (AGAPE) initiative. It invites member churches "to recommit themselves to reflect on the question of power and empire from a biblical and theological perspective, and take a firm faith stance against hegemonic powers because all power is accountable to God." The fundamental questions we need to ask are these:

- What is the gospel?
- Is God's mission primarily about this world or the next?
- What is a church for?
- Is faithfulness as much about right practices as it is about right beliefs, and if so, what are they?

A core conviction of many in our church is that it exists for the transformation, mending, and new life of the world. The church is called to live in trust, grace, and risk and to live out the gospel of God's reign of justice, peace, reconciliation, and healing. Of course it is difficult to say what this looks like concretely in the variety of contexts—personal, communal, social, cultural, ecclesial, regional, ecological, etc.—in which we find ourselves.

Nonetheless, some broad hints exist. Clearly we are called to a primary emphasis on mission, rather than on maintenance or survival. That means we are called to personal, congregational, and ecclesiastical transformation. We must tune our hearts, lifestyles, and structures to the profession, in word and deed, of good news in the midst of ever-present imperial bad news. We are called to a deeper discipleship as individuals and as church. That means an emphasis on committed faith formation and re-formation, on learning again who we are as followers of Jesus, rather than as followers of Caesar. We are called to speak gospel truth to the imperial powers, to challenge systemic injustice, exploitation, violence, and death wherever we find it, including in the church! Through it all, we are called to trust God.

We receive inspiration from the World Council of Churches' 2006 Assembly in Porto Alegre, and this thematic affirmation: "God, in your grace, transform the world." How can another world, and a different and transformed church, become possible? We know that solidarity with our various partners—ecumenical, interfaith, and all people of goodwill—is a key component in forging a new future. There are some hopeful church and community models for transformation, which can ground and sustain us. Such stories of God's grace-filled transformation, if shared, will help us live into the gospel in our time and place with integrity and hope. Resources for sharing these models and stories will need to be developed.

Without a doubt, this discernment of God's call to live the gospel in the midst of contemporary imperial powers will require our boldest and most passionate humanity, as God sets before us nothing less than a daily choice between life and death, blessings and curses (Deut. 30:19). The implications of God's call to us for all mission and ministry areas of our church life is staggering and daunting, as we go deep to get in touch once again with the Spirit's risky pentecostal adventure. Our various ecumenical and interfaith partners, in Canada and globally, will be our companions on the way, as we develop tools over the next triennium and beyond to help us. This is a long-term process of discernment, as the imperial powers will not stop luring us, inevitably changing in order to tempt us and to attempt to weaken the gospel. May we all live deeply and joyfully into the call to live God's reign in the midst of empire in our time and place.

# COMMITMENT: Actions and Recommendations

## PROPOSAL

### WHEREAS

We have heard anew the witness of the gospel in theological reflection discerned from the Bible and its various historical contexts, primarily from the first-century context of Jesus and the New Testament;

### WHEREAS

We have been called by United Church partners to work with them to speak the truth of the gospel to empire in its various manifestations, and have heard testimony like the following:

As third world peoples, ours is the constant plight and recurring experience of standing helplessly in various “Praetoria” (John 18:28) of the powerful contemporary Pontius Pilates—be it the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, or otherwise—and being reminded who has “power to release” us and “power to condemn” us (John 19:10). (Caribbean Council of Churches)

Empire has been sustained by the unbridled capitalist system backed by military force. Therefore the most effective way to resist it is to render the production base of Empire impotent. When we resist the consumptive lifestyle of Empire, the production base will gradually lose ground to a non-capitalist lifestyle (or economic system) based on the spirit of justice, sharing and cooperation which can be termed a “divine economy.” (Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea)

### WHEREAS

We have heard our partners speak of the complexity and threat to life of imperial power in many ways, and have discerned, through theological reflection, a striking similarity between the biblical first century imperial context and our own North American 21st-century imperial context, we have defined empire, for the purposes of this report and proposal, as follows:

The convergence of economic, political, cultural, geographic and military imperial interests, systems and networks that seek to dominate political power and economic wealth. It typically forces and facilitates the flow of wealth and power from vulnerable persons, communities and countries to the more powerful. Empire today crosses all boundaries, strips and reconstructs identities, subverts cultures, subordinates nation states and either marginalizes or co-opts religious communities;

### WHEREAS

We are called to confess our complicity in the maintenance of empire as a global system of domination, control, and oppression;

### WHEREAS

We have reviewed previous resolutions, related to the following four program areas (economic justice, human rights, peace, environment) which the General Council had previously adopted, and failed to identify major gaps in existing United Church policies, yet discerned also a lack of transformation and concentrated action on the part of the whole church at its various levels as a result of previous resolutions;

### WHEREAS

We have heard the call of God anew to be disciples of Jesus and live God’s Reign, in a multitude of ways, in the midst of imperial powers, systems, and networks; and

**WHEREAS**

We have been encouraged by ecumenical and interfaith partners such as the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and others, to undertake with them, in solidarity and mutual support, a sustained reflection and action process to renew faithful living in the midst of empire in its various forms;

**THEREFORE**, be it resolved that the 39th General Council:

1. Call on all courts, mission units, and related bodies of The United Church of Canada to:
  - a) name our complicity in empire;
  - b) covenant to live faithfully in the midst of empire.

Specifically the General Council shall:

Receive with appreciation the document “Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire” and authorize its use to develop resources for study within The United Church of Canada, including:

- the development and application of an “empire lens” (available by early 2007) to assist congregations and other mission units in identifying opportunities to pursue justice and confront, challenge and transform empire; and
  - the development of a proposed covenant, witnessing to empire, confessing our complicity, and calling individuals, congregations and other mission units to commit to living faithfully in the midst of empire;
2. Direct the Permanent Committee on Programs for Mission and Ministry to establish a process of response from the church and further development of the covenant, and report to the 40th General Council with recommendations concerning the proposed covenant and living faithfully in the midst of empire.

# Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

## *AGAPE*

Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth.

## *Basotho*

People of Lesotho in the Sesotho language.

## *Commodification*

The transformation of what is normally a non-commodity into a commodity, to assign economic value to something that traditionally would not be considered in economic terms, for example, an idea, identity, gender.

## *Complicity*

Association or participation in or as if in a wrongful or unjust act or system.

## *Counter-insurgency*

The combating of insurgency, by the government (or allies) of the territory in which the insurgency takes place.

## *Empire*

The convergence of economic, political, cultural, geographic, and military imperial interests, systems, and networks that seek to dominate political power and economic wealth. It typically forces and facilitates the flow of wealth and power from vulnerable persons, communities, and countries to the more powerful. Empire today crosses all boundaries, strips and reconstructs identities, subverts cultures, subordinates nation states, and either marginalizes or co-opts religious communities (World Alliance of Reformed Churches).

## *ICIF*

Interchurch Interfaith Advisory Committee

## *International Monetary Fund*

The international organization entrusted with overseeing the global financial system by monitoring exchange rates and balance of payments, as well as offering technical and financial assistance when asked.

## *Imperium*

A Latin term can be translated as power. In Antiquity this concept could apply to people, and mean something like “power status” or “authority,” or could be used with a geographical connotation and mean something like “territory.”

## *Interdependence*

The dynamic of being mutually responsible to and dependent on others.

## *JGER*

Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit

## *Kairos*

A Greek term meaning literally “the right or opportune time.”

### *Neo-liberalism*

In its dominant international use, neo-liberalism refers to a political-economic philosophy that de-emphasizes or rejects government intervention in the domestic economy. It focuses on free-market methods, fewer restrictions on business operations, and property rights. It upholds and promotes the market as the judge of the common good and enshrines competition as the supreme good.

### *Market capitalism*

In common usage, an economic system in which the means of production are overwhelmingly privately owned and operated for profit, decisions regarding investment of capital are made privately, and where production, distribution, and the prices of goods, services, and labour are affected by the forces of supply and demand in a largely free market.

### *Praetoria*

The name given to the elite bodyguard of a Roman emperor (approximately the size of a legion) or to a member of this bodyguard. The term is sometimes applied to the inner circle of advisers to a major political figure.

### *Preventive war*

A kind of war whose public justification is proclaimed as “self-defence.”

### *Privatization*

The process of transferring property from public ownership to private ownership and/or transferring the management of a service or activity from the government to the private sector.

### *Transnational corporations*

Corporations with investments or that operate in more than one country and that regularly transfer capital across national borders.

### *U.S.*

United States of America

### *UNICEF*

United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund

### *Unilateralism*

The practice of a single country acting alone outside of the parameters of international law to which that country is obligated.

### *WARC*

World Alliance of Reformed Churches

### *WCC*

World Council of Churches

### *World Bank*

A group of five international organizations responsible for providing finance to countries for purposes of development and poverty reduction, and for encouraging and safeguarding international investment.

## Appendix A

# Christianity and Empire

By Douglas John Hall

Christianity came into the world half a century after the founding of one of history's greatest empires, the Roman<sup>1</sup>, and throughout most of its own 2,000-year history the Christian religion has functioned as the *cultus* of imperial peoples. Yet at its biblical and doctrinal roots, Christianity is fundamentally incommensurate with the concept of empire. There is indeed something almost ludicrous about a faith at whose very centre stands the cross of one executed by Rome becoming, in the short space of three centuries, the official religion of the Roman Empire. Empires, whether ancient or modern, do not adopt crucified criminals as their principal symbols—and especially not when they are themselves the crucifiers. As they regularly are! Empires want symbols of power, triumph, superiority. The eagle, a powerful, flesh-eating bird of prey, has long been a favourite with empires. How, then, is this centuries-old association of the Christian religion with imperial peoples of the Western world to be explained?

There is, I think, no simple, straightforward answer to that question. History does not answer to logic. Life, whether corporate or individual, is full of contradictory elements and incompatible combinations. Certain observations about the nature of the *modus vivendi* [working arrangement] between Christianity and Empire may help us, nevertheless, both to understand this relation and to clarify for ourselves ways in which *today*, as precisely this relation comes unravelled, we may as Christian persons and institutions think and act faithfully.

## Empire Needs Religion

There is nothing particularly mysterious about the fact that religion—some religion or other—has been a prominent aspect of nearly every empire.<sup>2</sup> From the first intentional *imperium*, that of Sargon of Akkad in Mesopotamia, to the greatest contemporary “superpower” (the American), empire has manifested a vested interest in religion. Superficially considered, this may be attributed to the fact that the bulk of humanity is inherently “religious,” and political schemes always need as much popular support as they can get. We all know, for instance, how greatly the present Republican administration of the U.S.A. relies on the vote of the “Christian Right.”

But imperial interest in religion has a deeper explanation than the quantitative. Beneath the rhetoric and the bravado of empire, there is a profound if repressed undercurrent of doubt—as there is whenever human beings set themselves up as bearers of extraordinary power, authority, and permanence. Empires are “tragic” in the same way that the protagonists of Shakespeare's plays are tragic: they court a state of transcendent significance that, subconsciously, they know they're incapable of attaining. Empires are the fruit of human dreaming, but there is a hidden “weeping” in such dreaming because the fragility of what is dreamt of is darkly sensed by the dreamer. Human beings, individually and collectively, are capable of great things; but there is a limit to our greatness, and when our pride (*hubris*) tempts us beyond that limit we know, at some deep level of awareness, that we are courting the “fall” that pride “goeth before.”

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1 As empire, Rome dates to 31 BC.

2 Including the USSR. For, as many have observed, the ideology of history's inevitable progress toward the classless society is as much a religious faith as any explicit theism.

The quest for religious undergirding and legitimation on the part of empire-builders is born of that inner knowledge. They seek in religion the security that they know they cannot assume as mere human enterprises. The builders of that mythic city, Babel (Genesis 11), knew intuitively that the kind of ultimacy and certitude they craved for their state required a Guarantor more reliable than themselves or the fortunes of history; thus the tower they erected, a specifically religious venture without much practical use, became the most important part of their project. They needed access to God, or what they imagined God to be: they needed to control the Controller.

When the Emperor Constantine invited the Christians to become, as it were, chaplain to his imperium, he was not just doing a favour to his mother's religion. The diverse and quarrelling old religions of the classical period had failed, and so had the contrived new "state religion" of emperor-worship. The empire of the Caesars was beginning to collapse. Constantine saw in the Christian religion some of the ingredients he needed to ward off Rome's decline.

## What Empires Find Attractive about the Christian Religion

One of those ingredients—perhaps the most attractive of them—was the Christian emphasis upon unity. The unity of the deity.<sup>3</sup> The unity of all things "*under* God." The perceived unity and intelligibility of God's historical purposes (*providentia Dei*). After all, empires are rather artificial and usually enforced collectivities of very diverse elements—diverse historically, racially, ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and religiously. The "natural" tendency of such immense collectivities is for their various components to maintain a stubborn distinctiveness or, having been forced into conformity, continually to resist its constrictions. It is not enough to have conquered other tribes and territories, they must be governed—kept in the fold! Like empires before and after it, Rome, we know, expended immense energy and resources on the maintenance of the unification it imposed upon subject peoples. How desirable, then, is a faith which, working *within*, motivates divergent groupings to believe that the greatest good is unity and not distinctiveness.<sup>4</sup>

A second attractive element of Christianity, from the perspective of empire-builders, is its potentiality for triumphalism. I say "potentiality," because, in order to actualize this potential, a certain ideological sleight-of-hand must be performed: that is, those elements of the Christian account of reality which are apparently consistent with the mandatory power-and-glory rhetoric of empire must be accentuated, and those elements of the biblical message that remind us of the vulnerability of the human condition and the ambiguity of all our victories must be de-emphasized. A *crucified* Messiah is an embarrassment to empire (as Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 1—2), but a crucified Messiah *resurrected to ultimate and universal sovereignty* could be a positive boon! Can there be any doubt why Easter Sunday and not Good Friday constitutes *the* religious feast day of the United States of America? Or for that matter why Christmas could be so easily incorporated into the bourgeois triumphalism of the consumer-driven West?

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3 A decisive factor in the evolution of the doctrine of the Trinity, which was "settled" only after the Constantinian beginnings of the establishment of the Christian religion, was the need of Rome to combat the existing polytheism of its territories, and therefore to accentuate the principle of *unity* in the discussion of the triune God. Particularly in the West, the unity principle practically ruled out the notion of distinctive "persons" in the godhead.

4 I am tempted here to comment on the Canada crisis. A forgotten element in the discussion of Canadian unity and the threatened "break-up of the country" is the role that the Christian religion played in the maintenance of confederation. It is not accidental, surely, that the separatist movement has achieved its greatest influence in a post-Catholic, highly secularized Quebec. In this situation, there is no longer an internal, "spiritual" influence quietly at work persuading people to suppress their long-cherished distinctiveness in order that the greater good of human harmony might prevail.



A third advantage that empires have found in Christianity (as in some other religions) is its tendency to foster *personal* morality and to downplay or neglect social ethics. This too, of course, requires a generous application of the aforementioned ideological sleight-of-hand. Yet the transformation is not so drastic as in the previous point; for in the first place the biblical (explicitly the newer Testamental) ethic itself tends to stress the personal and ecclesial, and the “religious impulse” in humans generally manifests itself in a no-doubt-understandable concern for the self—which is why Marx could call religion “opiate of the people.” The Christian faith has been mistrusted (and sometimes persecuted) by worldly powers only where it has led to radical concern for or interference in social and political conditions—that is, concern for *the world* as such.

Fourthly, empire, having once embraced the Christian religion, could almost always count on that religion to support, encourage, or even enthusiastically promote imperial authority. Indeed, the *potentiality* for such support is already to be found in the New Testament. Not only its concentration on the personal and the ecclesial, but in some explicit directives (notably Romans 13), the New Testament seems to assume, if not positive support of the “governing authorities,” a certain political passivity. So much of the spiritual focus of the earliest church was centred in faith’s eschatological expectation of the *Parousia* [the inauguration of the Reign of God] that the glory and power of “the kingdoms of this world” could seem ephemeral indeed. Why raise questions? Their prominence was strictly transient, their fate was already sealed.

From such observations, we can appreciate the attractions of Christianity, not only for the *Roman* Empire but for every subsequent imperium with which the Christian religion has co-mingled. But by the same token we can also notice something of what Christianity had—and has still—to relinquish and de-emphasize in order to function in the role of imperial religion. What should astonish us today is not how appealing Christianity could be to empire, but rather how uncritically the dominant forms of the Christian religion have adapted themselves to the roles that successive empires have recruited them to play. Whether in its various *de jure* [legal] expressions or in the *de facto* cultural forms of North America and elsewhere, Christian “Establishment” has meant that the whole *prophetic* side of the Judeo-Christian tradition has been greatly reduced where it was not dispensed with altogether.

## Empire and Prophetic Faith

By prophetic faith is meant the faith that is exemplified especially by the prophets of ancient Israel as they are testified to in the Hebrew Bible, and in the New Testament’s witness to John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. Contrary to the tendency of conventional Christianity to relegate prophecy to the past,<sup>5</sup> however, responsible Christian theology today insists that the prophetic calling is essential to the very being and mission of the church.<sup>6</sup> Jesus Christ, especially in the classical Protestant theological tradition, is understood to be the inheritor and (for Christians) supreme exemplar of the *three* Old Testament “offices” of prophet, priest, and king.<sup>7</sup> From its fourth-century inception

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5 This tendency can be noted already in the New Testament, which values Old Testament prophecy for its (real or imagined) “predictions” of the events on which the Christian message is based, and their meanings, but does not sufficiently stress the prophetic vocation of the church as participant in the same work of witness as that to which Israel was called.

6 This is true not only of Liberation and other explicitly “political” theologies; it belongs to the Social Gospel of the late 19th and early 20th Century and (what is often overlooked today) the so-called “Neo-Orthodox” renewal of Christianity spearheaded by Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others, all of whom confronted “the powers” of the turbulent mid-20th century.

7 The “threefold office” [*Munus Triplex*] of the Christ—prophet, priest, and king—was a particularly important teaching in the Reformed tradition.

onwards, Christendom was prone to covet for itself both the priestly and the kingly aspects of its christological foundation, though often in questionable forms; but, precisely on account of its close ties with “the governing authorities” (Rom. 13), established Christianity found it awkward if not impossible consistently to take up the prophetic office that belongs to the church’s participation in the being and work of the Christ. For that vocation presupposes an exceptional spiritual and intellectual independence of existing structures and a courageous readiness to critique the *status quo*.

Prophetic faith clashes with empire almost inevitably because of the priorities inherent in it. Without exhausting these, we may name some of the most elementary: First, prophetic faith is oriented towards truth.<sup>8</sup> The prophetic community does not claim to *possess* the Truth (for Truth biblically understood is a *living* reality and does not admit of possession), but prophetic faith is driven by an insatiable *thirst* for truth that cannot be satisfied with half-truth or comforting fictions any more than with deliberate falsehood. As suggested earlier, the dream of empire as such involves a certain suppression of truth, or at least a willing suspension of disbelief. Questions about the desirability and even the feasibility of such extensive power, or the potential for evil within it, or the worthiness of those who wield it, or the discrepancy between its rhetoric and its reality must always be repressed. The propaganda of empire (for instance the incessant use of the word “freedom” in present-day America!) invariably cloaks reality. Prophetic faith cannot maintain silence in the face of such distortions of actuality. From Amos to John the Baptist, prophetic consciousness is impelled to name deception, even when it seems innocent or unintentional—and especially when it finds echoes in the religious community itself. Jesus was crucified not only because he threatened the oppressive hegemony of Rome but also because he named the hypocrisy of the religious who made an easy alliance with Rome.

Secondly, the prophetic tradition never allows its hope in the ultimately benevolent purposes of God to blind it to the actual negations that mar existence under the conditions of history. Not only in Jeremiah and the so-called pessimistic Wisdom literature (Job, Ecclesiastes) but in the Psalms, 2nd Isaiah, the Pauline letters, and most of the other biblical writings, there is a remarkable and sustained testimony to the suffering, evil, finitude, death and despair to which human life is heir. Overtly optimistic Christianity, which empire invariably prefers, has characteristically neglected or expunged whole sections of the Bible for this very reason. (They do not sing the hymns of passiontide at the Crystal Cathedral!) But prophetic faith knows that when the depth of creaturely vulnerability is denied expression, the gospel that speaks to it will also be cheapened. The great problematic of imperial peoples, especially visible in our time, is their psychic imprisonment in ideologies of success. They cannot face the data of despair, and therefore it plays havoc with them all the more—for instance making it necessary for them to locate the sources of their fear and insecurity outside themselves. In contrast, prophetic faith gives open expression to all forms of human and creaturely pain; the language of lament is not only allowed, it is nurtured; for prophetic faith locates its hope precisely in the belief that God *participates* in this suffering and is redemptively at work within it.

Thirdly, it follows that prophetic faith manifests a particular awareness of and concern for those whose suffering is greatest: the poor, the excluded, the infirm and all whose condition is at least partly a consequence of their victimization by the dominant culture. The Liberationist motto that the biblical God has “a preferential option for the poor” is the other side of the truth that the biblical God has an abiding suspicion of the rich and powerful. (“He hath put down the mighty from their seats and exalted the humble and weak....”)

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8 There is a German word for this: *Wahrheitsorientierung*.

## Living on the Edge of Empire

For these and similar reasons, prophetic faith has always recognized that it cannot be part of the human fascination and experimentation with empire. “Christendom,” namely the alliance of the Christian religion and imperial cultures, was always something of a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron!<sup>9</sup> But throughout the 15 or 16 centuries of Christendom in the Western world, there were also Christian individuals and movements that recognized this fundamental incompatibility. They include not only martyrs and saints, but theologians, activists, and ordinary folk who sensed, in the gospel of the cross, a Way radically different from the way of power and glory.<sup>10</sup> This recognition meant that they would have to live on the edge of empire—even when, as was the case with many of them, they were citizens of some imperium.

Today, and in consequence of a transformation that has been occurring in the West for two centuries or more, Western Christendom is in its final stages of decay. Predictably enough, this prompts some to make extraordinary—and even frantic—attempts to reinstate Christianity as the dominant religion of our civilization. But those who have taken seriously both biblical and traditional warnings against the assumptions of imperial religion experience the end of Christendom as opportunity, and not defeat. From now on, all serious Christians will know themselves to be living on the edge of empire. This is not a positioning they shun or resent: it is the stance that prophetic faith finds most natural. It is not accidental that the prophetic consciousness of the biblical tradition evolved precisely in a small nation that found itself on the edge of one empire after another.

In this new, post-Christendom situation, the question arises—as it did for the early Christians and for many at the time of the Protestant Reformation—what attitude ought to be taken by Christians towards empire generally, and specifically towards the empires on whose edges they actually find themselves. From what I have said heretofore, it will be obvious to the reader that I am among those who believe that Christians cannot embrace the ideology of empire as an acceptable way of organizing public life. I believe that Christian faith engenders in one a deep suspicion of the dream of empire, including an informed awareness of empire’s inherent weaknesses and contradictions, and (especially) an active vigilance in behalf of empire’s victims.

But precisely as natural critics of the ideology of imperialism, Christians should be careful to avoid ideology themselves—the ideology of an *a priori* anti-imperialism, that is, a rejection of empire at the level of abstract theory that is not sufficiently grounded in existing conditions. There is an ideological component in all human thought, including theology; but Christian theology differs from ideology specifically in its commitment to *this world*, that is, to actual contexts. Because of its inherent contextuality, this theology constantly involves the submission of its theoretical ideas, doctrines, concerns, and “hunches” to the realities of the “here and now.” Therefore it is ready to make distinctions and to entertain paradox and nuance.<sup>11</sup> It knows that thought, however impressive and compelling, must be tempered and corrected by history.

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9 On “Christendom” see my *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 200); also my *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* vol. i (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 200ff.

10 Luther named these two ways *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) and *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory, i.e., religious triumphalism). For details, see my *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

11 Perhaps the most “telling” statement of George W. Bush was his quip, “I don’t do nuance.” Interestingly, a recent biography of Abraham Lincoln pointed out that Lincoln, on the contrary, was “comfortable with ambiguity.” Ideology knows what is there in the world before it actually takes a look. It functions in the same way that religious fundamentalism functions, namely, to keep its adherents from the unsettling experience of realizing that life is far more complicated than their theories about life.

Thus, with respect to the discussion of empire, this theology recognizes that not all empires are the same, nor is the activity of empires—from the perspective of Christian faith—always only evil or unacceptable. Rome, by comparison with some other empires, manifested a surprisingly liberal tolerance of most religious and ethnic groupings, and often prevented their wrathful treatment of one another. Important distinctions are being made today between the British Empire, which at its best evidenced a certain maturity of world-citizenship, and the American Empire as presently governed, which by comparison many believe to be impulsive and naïve. Yet few would deny that even the American Empire serves humane and far-reaching global needs—needs for aid and order that cannot be met by less powerful nations.

The dream of empire is a dangerous dream—dangerous not only to the conquered but to the conqueror. But there are degrees of danger. The well-known aphorism of the 19th-century historian John Lord Acton is instructive here too: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Empires always *court imperialism*; but the degree to which powerful nations are swayed by imperialistic ambition is not predetermined or fixed. Even though the tendency to pursue power excessively is always present in the dream of empire, there may be countervailing forces at work. For instance, in the history of the United States of America there has always been (and continues to be) a persistent protest against imperial ambition on the part of an articulate and significant segment of the population that remembers the *republican* (small ‘r’!) intentions of the architects of the Union.<sup>12</sup> And while the media make much of the “Christian Right” in that country, there is a much older and much deeper form of Christian influence in the U.S.A. that is keeping alive that particularly classical Protestant witness which “protests” against the identification of purely finite institutions and philosophies with the infinite, and draws attention daily to the hypocrisies, failures, and corruptions perpetrated by government, business, industry, and the military.

Indeed, if I were asked to illustrate what I mean by Christians living “on the edge of empire today,” I think that I would be more apt to point to American than to European or Canadian examples. Serious Christians in the United States know themselves to be “on the edge” of their dominant culture today, in a way that Europeans and Canadians, whose nations are certainly on the periphery of power physically speaking, on the whole do not. For it is too easy for Europeans and Canadians self-righteously to attribute innocence and wisdom to our own less prominent, less powerful societies—which, however, are most of them as deeply implicated in the injustices and vulgarities of the possessing peoples of the earth as are the Americans. It would speak more appropriately of Christian contextual responsibility in such a world if Canadian Christians spent less of their time and energy pointing the finger of guilt at the United States and devoted more of it to the support of their fellow-Christians in the U.S.A. who must live spiritually and intellectually “on the edge of Empire” while being physically and as citizens part of it.

There have been at least 60 intentional empires in recorded history; no period has been free of them, and it is unlikely that the quest for empire will disappear in future. The task of prophetic faith is to capitulate neither to a fatalism that bows to the inevitability of *imperialism*, nor to a utopianism that imagines that the dream of empire will vanish from the earth. Our task is rather to continue faithfully to name the evils which unchecked power regularly evokes, while encouraging the good that power trained and corrected by virtues nobler than itself sometimes makes possible.

Douglas John Hall, December 2005 (By request of the Empire Task Group, The United Church of Canada)

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12 A fascinating treatment of this theme in U.S. history is found in Gore Vidal's historical novel, *Empire* (New York: Random House, 1987).

## Appendix B

# Where the Empire Lies, People Suffer, They Are Exploited, and Life Becomes Death

By Ofelia Ortega

## Introduction: “Vocation as Empire”

From September 18 to November 10, 2000, I had the opportunity to participate in the Campbell Seminar at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia, under the leadership of Dr. Walter Brueggemann. The theme of the seminar was Mission as Hope in Action.

In this meeting, almost a year before the World Trade Center towers were destroyed by terrorist forces (September 11, 2001), the dangerous convergence of political hegemony, military superiority, economic near-monopoly, and an ideology of exceptionalism was observed. World powers could produce a political-economic-military-ideological force in the world that seemed to proceed almost unchallenged and with impunity to have its way in the world.

At this gathering, we referred to this agenda of the powers as “vocation as empire.” Walter Brueggemann affirmed in the book *Hope for the World*:

Vocation as empire has its roots in the Monroe Doctrine that was redefined at the end of the twentieth century, when policy-makers together with image makers set the United States on a course of expansionism and domination. The interplay of policy and ideology through the twentieth century has come to dramatic fruition with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the emergence of the United States as “the last superpower” and an uncritical claim that we have reached “the end of history,” history that culminates in the perfect hegemony of the United States, which lies beyond challenge. This political-military conviction is powerfully linked to the unanticipated globalization of the economy that has been powered by new technical competences but that was perhaps already implicitly present in the Dumbarton Oaks agreements that led to the formation of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.<sup>1</sup>

To have “vocation as empire” means that we are not in front of a simple economic fact, but rather of an ideology that reaches all the levels of social relations. For this reason, there are authors who have described it as a civil crisis and called it a “civilization of inequality.” Therefore we should reject the myth of the “termination of the bipolar order.” The bipolar order, in fact, has not vanished, but the orientation of the poles has been changed. The centrality of the East-West relationship has gone, turning the centrality into the North-South relationship, to name it in geographical terms. This is not a rhetorical shift: it is a fact that we have not become either a multi-polar or uni-polar world, but a world in which the poles are marked by poverty and wealth with signs of irreversible division.

## Characteristics of the “Inequality Civilization”

Within the Cuban Council of Churches’ Centre of Study, we have a group known as ARA (the Current Reality Analysis). Here, we identified some of the characteristics of that “inequality civilization.”

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Communities of Hope midst Engines for Despair” in *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context*, ed. Walter Brueggemann (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 152.

The appearance of new agreements: associations among the hegemony of transnationalized capital and the states of the central capitalist countries, and with the subordinate bourgeoisies of the outlying countries and their states.

The subordination of investment for production to investment for speculation in the cycles of capital distribution and reproduction.

The subordination of the relationship between the centre and periphery to the relationship between debtors and creditors (we speak of the “debtor countries,” as if it were a natural condition). This is another of the great myths of the neo-liberal ideology; thus, the richest are the greatest debtors, in financial terms and historical terms. The important thing now is that the indebtedness has become the main way of bleeding the Southern economies and the main instrument to exert economic and political power by the North over the South.

A new conception of war, in which the winner is known beforehand. The opinion of the defeated, of course, known beforehand as well, means nothing. Again war becomes the safety valve for growing economic tensions, and a way of strengthening domination interests (gas resources, for instance).

The weakening of the nation-state in peripheral countries in subordination to the transnationalized capital and the international economic institutions: loss of economic power through privatizations, management of natural resources, responsiveness and resistance capabilities, and sovereignty.

Today, there is not a “free market” but a managed market. There is not a world market, since this only includes between 15 percent and 20 percent of the commercial transactions. The other 80 to 85 percent is under the management of the transnationals, decided through central planning and not through the law of supply and demand.

The dynamics of impoverishment in the world population, as well as the differences among nations that show the asymmetry with great harshness, cannot be reversed through the logic of capitalism. We have to analyze the concepts of structural poverty (behind the entrenchment of current poverty), marginalization (linked to a concentration that favours ownership over labour in the production network), and exclusion (which sees the population as a disposable remainder).

The technological revolution of the 20th century, which should have been used to enrich and educate every human being, has become a maintenance structure, creating inertia, the widespread diffusion of myths, and support for desensitization within a capitalist market economy.

Desensitization continues to grow: society becomes dehumanized. The image of the child that dies of starvation has lost its impact among the inhabitants of the first world. The tragedy of the sub-Saharan African population, year after year being swept away by AIDS, escapes the sensibility of the Northern populations. It is not human solidarity that caused the enthusiastic reaction to the speeches of the antiterrorist crusaders after September 11, 2001, but panic, insecurity, and distrust. What matters is not the answer to the question: How was it possible it happened? What matters are other questions: What do we do to avoid this happening again? How can I prevent this happening to me? In other words, what worries me does not have to do with those who died, but rather that I might be the next victim.

## Prophets Confront the Empire

According to José Luis Sicre “the imperialism phenomenon could not go unnoticed by prophets.”<sup>2</sup> Every prophet heard “the boots of the tramping warriors” and saw “the garments rolled in blood” (Is. 9:5). They were witnesses of military invasions that Joel compared with a plague of locusts. The best text in the whole Bible about the problem of imperialism is Isaiah 14:4–20. The poem highlights, in the central section, the pride of the emperor, who thinks about climbing up to the sky and matching the Almighty (vs. 13–14).

However, the sin of the tyrant does not only lie in pride. There is something more important that the introductory verses highlight. The perspective is ethical and universal, as Judah and Israel are not mentioned in the passage. What concerns the prophet are the people, the nations, beaten and oppressed by the tyrant. The final verses repeat the idea, talking about who made the earth shake and makes the kingdoms shudder, who made the world deserted and devastated cities and who did not let the prisoners loose (vs. 16a). The prophet ends with this magnificent reflection: “you destroyed your land, you have killed your people” (v. 20). From the prophet’s perspective, imperialism is an ill from which not only vassal countries suffer, but also the dominant peoples, victims of the ambition of their rulers, decimated by continuous campaigns.

We have to analyze the world situation today in the light of this biblical message. Invasions, wars, and the impoverishment of victimized people by imperial power must be concerns of our churches. The prophet poetically outlines the future reality of a world in peace, where “they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Micah 4:3).

## Fall of the Empire

Revelation (chapter 18) is built on the model of Ezekiel 27–28. This late prophetic text is a lamentation due to the fall of Tyre. Most of Revelation 18 is a lamentation because of the fall of Babylon/Rome, announced by its own party members, who are presented in a way that shows the influence of Ezekiel 27: in fact, it is about sailors (Ezekiel 27, 29 ff.), traders, and kings of lands who are mentioned in Ezekiel 27 as well.

The international market (Rev. 18:11) degrades and destroys human lives (at the end of verse 11). The blood of the martyr-prophets and saints was the result of imperial force. Revelation is a strong answer to oppressive imperialism. The emphasis on the economic field is prevalent in chapter 18. As Ricardo Foulkes affirms<sup>3</sup>, John wants to explain Babylon’s irresistible charms. The nations, the kings, and the traders all found delight in it—and it is precisely through traffic with it, that the empire brought prosperity beyond its borders. The original financial motive led to idolatry, in a way that could describe our current situation: the economic system is built on competition and exploitation, causing ever-widening division between rich and poor. Technological solutions remain in the hands of the rich, and there is no solidarity among people.

The figure of Babylon not only represents the city of Rome, but the whole Roman Empire. We have to metaphorically understand the call of leaving it (18:4) as a call to abandon injustice, idolatry, and the

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2 José Luis Sicre, “Profetismo y Ética,” en *Conceptos fundamentales de ética teológica*, ed. Marciano Vidal (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1992), p. 62.

3 Ricardo Foulkes, *El Apocalipsis de San Juan; una lectura desde América Latina* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Nueva Creación, 1989), p. 189.

crimes of the empire. As Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza says, “in the midst of tribulations, those who have remained faithful until the Judgment Day are encouraged to take up the scatological exodus.”<sup>4</sup> We have to interpret “getting out of the empire” as the search for alternatives, realizing that the alternative is not in a system that dominates, but in one that achieves equity and social justice from its differences. So to pursue alternatives leaves people no other choice but to go in a direction against the hegemony of the imperial power.

It is true that the empire is always present in the biblical pages, from Genesis to Revelation. In Latin America we believe that the conflict with the empire is the theological place that makes us know who our God is.<sup>5</sup>

The biblical text is outstanding (Rev. 18):

Murders have been committed (18:3*a*). The empire has built its wealth on foundations of blood. What should be a source of life has become a death dealer.

There has been political manipulation: The kings of the earth prostituted themselves with the empire (18:3*b*). They have turned the policy into a deception, destroying the poorest.

There has been economic injustice: The city has made the traders of the earth rich (18:3*c*). It has not been a bread-sharing table, a home in which human beings are equally well received, but rather a place of favour for rich traders who live on the blood of the poor.

That is how John has condensed the history. The Romans were proud to expand their “divine” peace throughout the empire. John knows that the imperial peace is an intoxication of blood, political deception, and economic injustice.

The Christians leaving the empire (18:4–8) are called to a positive creativity: they do not leave in a geographical sense; it is not an exodus to a new land. They are still in the empire, but seek to create an alternative community to express a purer social and political order on the earth.

The city falls easily into an abyss from which it will not escape (18:20–21). Life stops, as the empire has also destroyed the beautiful cultural works of the people (18:22–23). The signs of full city life—the world conceived as a household (*oikos*) where there is joy (music and work, light of love, engagement and hope) for all—have ended. God has not destroyed it, but the three powers of violence in history:

- traders (18:23*c*): the selfish economy of a few who oppress others
- sorcerers (18:23*d*): the empire has its religion and religious language as well
- murderers (18:24): responsible for the death of prophets and saints, and all the murders on the earth

When reading Revelation chapter 18 it is evident that Yahweh and the empire cannot live together.

The conflict with the empire makes us know who our God is, which side of history God is on, and what God wants us to do. Thus we do not have to be afraid of the imperial forces because we have the affirmation of Psalm 73: Nevertheless, God.

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4 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Apocalipsis: Visión de un mundo justo* (Navarra, España: Verbo Divino, 1991), p. 141.

5 See the article of Sandro Galazzi, “Otro Imaginario es Posible” in RIBLA Magazine N. 48, *Los pueblos confrontan el imperio*, Quito Ecuador, 2004.



For that reason our churches are against the establishment of the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

That is why we march along with Asian people against the plans and programs of the World Trade Organization.

That is why we accompany the voices of the social forums and support the alternatives that are emerging beneath the imperial powers of our time.

That is why we are in solidarity with all the efforts of the churches to respond, from our faith, to inhumane projects of the globalizing economy and the neo-liberal ideology that progressively impoverish our people. For instance:

- the declaration of Accra of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches
- the call of the Lutheran World Federation to participate in transforming globalization
- World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Association of Ecumenical Development Agencies in Europe (APRODEV) document on “Christianity, Poverty and Wealth in the 21st Century”
- the Pacific churches’ initiatives on the concepts of the Island of Hope as an alternative to globalization
- the proposals of the churches in Eastern and Central Europe on Serving God, not Mammon
- the call by churches in Latin America and the Caribbean to globalize the fullness of life
- the call by U.S., Canadian, and Mexican churches: “What Does God Require of Us? A Declaration for Just Trade in the Service of an Economy of Life”
- the program of The United Church of Canada on Education for Justice: a partnership approach to global education
- the AGAPE document of the World Council of Churches (“Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth”)
- any other initiatives that are directed at looking for alternatives to the neo-liberal globalization agenda

The prophetic hope of Revelation is manifested in the double oracles (18:4–8) and the call to joy (18:20). As Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza affirms, “the symbolic narrative of Revelation should be read as an attempt to sow the seeds of hope and encouragement in those who struggle for economic survival and the liberation from persecution and murder.”<sup>6</sup>

Néstor Míguez reminds us of the “fetishism” that the empire makes out of the fullness of life (vs. 23), because the fullness of life does not need the products of luxury, outlined in this 18th chapter, but rather the capacity of enjoying laughter, working, creating, listening to music, and dancing. This chapter compels us to claim that the economy should not be at the service of the enrichment of some, but for the right of all to have a full life.<sup>7</sup>

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6 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *op cit*, p. 141.

7 Néstor Míguez, “Economía y vida plena en la apocalíptica neotestamentaria en la economía y vida plena,” *Revista Ribla* No. 30, San José, Costa Rica, 1998, p. 146–147.

## The Crisis of Life Today

In the 2003 South-South Forum held in Buenos Aires, we witnessed the untold sufferings caused by the economic crisis. We were shocked at hearing that 25 years ago Argentina's population was 22 million people, but only 2 million were poor, while today, out of a population of 37 million, 21 million are poor. The people of Argentina, as in other parts of the world, have been led by illusion. In the last 25 years, the growing number of poor people has advanced faster than the population growth. The middle class, which represented 50 percent of the population in the past, has now diminished dramatically. Only 30 percent of the population have steady jobs.

It is obvious that we are undergoing a new phase of capitalism and that it uses all the different forms of power and affects every aspect of life. The capitalist system of production has become a totalizing financial system. Its far-reaching and all-embracing strategy has also changed, and the global financial market is its empire and its god. The empire is a global financial empire that rests on military, political, and ideological power, and it has an impact on the survival of the countries of the periphery. The market empire and the military forces oppress at every level—social, political, economic, ecological, and spiritual—generating crisis for all the people and all the countries of the world.

In this gathering the experience of the member churches' representatives of the South was heard as they expressed the realities of their current crisis. Argentina and South Korea were used as examples of the depth and extent that can be reached by the neo-liberal strategy of submitting the whole world to the privatization laws and the unchallenged expansion of the capitalist markets.

The Latin American churches represented there spoke about the way in which economic globalization has provoked the debt crisis, marginalization, insecurity, economic inequality, unemployment, and the destruction of the environment. The lie that the free market was and is the solution to all economic and social problems has been unmasked. Likewise, it has not fulfilled its promise of health and prosperity (investment-growth-employment). In its place the neo-liberal economic policies have resulted in economic crises, especially for the middle class and the poor.

The threats posed by economic globalization in the Caribbean reflect what is happening in the rest of the world. But of course the problems there are even more dramatic due to the small population and fragile nature of the islands' economies and ecosystems. Economic globalization has promoted loss of jobs and extreme poverty, an unprecedented growth of crime and violence, ecologic degradation, and the spread of HIV/AIDS. All this has degraded life.

The Asian countries have also felt the negative effects of neo-liberal strategy. It all started with the unexpected and serious economic crisis of 1997. In South Korea, for example, when the Western banks stopped giving loans to Korean corporations overnight, the value of the Korean Won as compared to the U.S. dollar changed from 800 Won to 2,400 Won for a dollar. In other words, the scarcity of foreign currency pushed the fall of the Korean Won till it was lowered to a third of its value. Thousands of companies and enterprises went bankrupt and hundreds of financial institutions, mercantile banks, and credit unions were closed. Millions of employees were laid off. As to the social consequences, there was a tremendous growth of homeless people, disrupted families, suicide, and violence. Five years later, in spite of the Korean government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) assertions that there was a sound economic recovery, the structural crisis got worse and the suffering of the poor people, the unemployed, and the underemployed has increased. More than 600 important banks and industries have been sold to the multinationals, which are controlling more

than 30 percent of the stock market. It is believed that the Korean economy may be on the verge of a new impending crisis as a result of the loans and debts both at home and abroad. The IMF program of structural adjustment increased structural injustice, widening the gap between the rich and the poor. In Indonesia, the IMF intervention failed completely. It has removed the mask of the neo-liberal system.

The crisis experienced in Africa reveals the systemic exclusion of Africa from the world economy, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, social disintegration, hunger, and diseases. The effects of the free market system are evident in the way the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been faced and treated. The policies and operations of the transnational pharmaceutical companies have put earnings on top of the agenda over the people's health, and the high costs of the HIV/AIDS medicines and the commercial treaties exclude the poor from effective treatment and prevention plans.

The economic and ecological problems of the island nations of the Pacific are closely interrelated. The ecological problems are real and dangerous. Global warming jeopardizes the lowland islands, nuclear tests contaminate the sea, the earth, the people, and every living organism. This is especially true for the people of the Marshall Islands and Tahiti. Mining extraction and the cutting of trees increase deforestation, damaging the forests and waters of the islands. Economically the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. At a social level there is increased violence and suicide.

The most significant characteristic of these reports is the dramatic crisis convergence in the countries of the South. We are quite aware of the new signs of our time: the unparalleled integration of economic globalization and of global geo-politics. We unanimously agreed in recognizing the negative effects of the IMF, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization regarding their domination and exclusion of the countries of the South. We are sharing the negative and destructive effects of deregulation and of speculative investments on our national economies. We recognize the current trend of militarization as a total war strategy for guaranteeing the global market. We realize the way in which our hearts and minds are controlled by the press and electronic media through "consciousness colonization." We are convinced that the neo-liberal model cannot be transformed or adapted. It has inherent contradictions and it has failed over and over again in the attempt at leading the countries, the people, and the environment of the South toward life. We are united in the rejection of this model. We are not alone in our rejection. Significant movements of the global civil society, including the global peace movement, are resisting and rejecting a model that is destructive of creation.

## **Visions and Alternative Projects for Life**

The system tells us: "there is no alternative." Jesus helped the poor and hungry multitudes, guiding them to share what they had at hand. In this way he wanted to build what we call the economy of the grace of God (Mark 6:35 and 8:1). The early church challenged the system of private property and emphasized the necessity to share all possible resources. This allowed those early Christian communities to become a witness to the full life of God—that is to say, the resurrection—since they sought to have no poor among them (Acts 4: 32). This implies that there are local and regional alternatives that can be implemented and supported by the churches and the congregations.

We would like to finish with the proposals of Franz I. Hinkelammert and Henry M. Mora in *Coordinación Social del Trabajo, Mercado y Reproducción de la Vida Humana*, a book in which they say there is a necessity that we have a fair ethic of the common good.<sup>8</sup> This ethics of the common good has to be of resistance, of intervention, and of transformation. This ethics introduces values to which any calculation of utility (or of interest) has to be subjected. They are the values of respect for the human being, for life in all its dimensions, and for the life of nature. They are the values of mutual recognition among human beings, including the recognition of the nature of all human beings and the recognition on behalf of the human beings toward the nature external to them. They are values that are not justified for calculable advantages in terms of utility or of personal interest. Nevertheless, they are the basic values of humanity, without which human life is destroyed in the most elementary sense of the word. Its principle is: Nobody can live, if the other can not live.

These values question the imperial system, and on their behalf we are called to exercise resistance to intervene and transform it. The common good is this process in which these values face the system to question it, to intervene and transform it.

We have to actively work together on concrete and feasible alternatives to the neo-liberal pattern of economic integration in service of the great transnational corporations. The time of the social movements will come, strengthening the great dream to which we, all the people of Latin Americans and the Caribbean, aspire—that we are able to live in a society where we all fit, in a humanized society in which the values of life, peace, solidarity, and coexistence are always stronger than the values of war, power, vanity, and vengeance.

## Conclusion

We are called to be nonconformist and transformative communities, because life is not possible unless we undertake transformation that addresses the roots of injustice. We are called to be transformed by the renewing of our minds from the dominating and egoistic imperial mindset, thus doing the will of God which is fulfilled in love, solidarity (Romans 13:10), and grace (Isaiah 55). Transformative communities are transformed by God's living grace and the practice of an economy of solidarity and sharing. We as churches are called to create spaces for, and become agents of, transformation, even as we are entangled in and complicit with the very system we are called to change.<sup>9</sup>

## Prayer

God in your grace, help us to obey your call to be agents of transformation.

“Be not conformed to [the structures of] this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

Ofelia Ortega, January 2006

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8 Hinkelammert, Franz I; Mora M. Henry, *Coordinación Social del Trabajo, Mercado y Reproducción de la Vida Humana* (San José, Costa Rica: DEL, 2001), pp. 327–331.

9 From the AGAPE document of The World Council of Churches.

## Appendix C

# Jesus and Empire: Then and Now

By Néstor O. Míguez

## What Do We Understand by the Term “Empire”?

Many have tried to establish the characteristics of what constitutes Empire. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) proposes a definition where Empire is the convergence of economic, political, cultural, military, and religious power, in a system of domination that imposes the flow of benefits from the vulnerable to the powerful. Empire crosses all boundaries, distorts identities, subverts cultures, subordinates nation-states, and either marginalizes or co-opts religious communities.

This understanding of Empire highlights the idea that it is a particular configuration of power characterized by the confluence of economic forces, government structures, and some political organizations and segments of civil society. While these forces normally hold each other in check, in an empire, they align together and are subordinated to a single objective, creating a dynamic that negates other forms of power and alternatives. Although these forces may retain some secondary conflicts and contradictions among them, within Empire, they are united in their will to control and dominate. The public space is subjugated to the coercion of cohesive power determined to control everything, to impose order, and to limit access to decision-making power. In short, it converts what is public into the restricted purview of the interests that dominate it.

Of course, no human power is capable of totally achieving this...that is our hope. But there can be historical circumstances under which, in some regions and for some period of time, this configuration of power manifests itself with such strength that it conditions all human action within its sphere of influence. Some authors distinguish “Empire” from “imperialism,” reserving this second term to the territorial or economic expansion that happens in the context of conflict among nations. It is possible for a country to maintain “participative” governmental institutions of a republic, but act in an imperialist way in its foreign policy. As a matter of fact, the Roman Empire, where the term empire was coined, and which provided the historical backdrop for Jesus’ ministry, was formally a republic during its existence.

While institutional forms of government are not always modified in the transition from Republic to Empire, they are forced to operate according to a new correlation of forces. In Rome, for example, the institutions of the Republic formally functioned, but they all responded to the same economic interests; they were aligned to achieve the same governmental objectives, and were subordinated to the mandate of the imperial elite. The wealth of the landed patricians presiding over the *Senatus*, the tribunes that represented the plebs, the military power, the official artists protected by *Mecenas*, the different schools of philosophy that dominated the intellectual world of the time, the spectacles that were offered to the masses, and even the architecture and statues of the cities, as well as the circulation of the Roman currency itself all served to reinforce a configuration of power that sought to deny all other alternatives. Even religion was not left untouched by Empire: the Roman pantheon included all gods, and while all of them were tolerated, they were subordinate to the only God that truly mattered: the *Divus Caesar*.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Míguez, Néstor O., *El tiempo del principado Romano [The era of the Roman Principality]*. (Mimeo: ISEDET, 1998). I ask for

## Aspirations of a Global Empire

We are now witnessing a time of imperial consolidation, with the variant that this empire aspires to be global (in fact every empire aspired to this, but historical and technical conditions did not allow it). The whole world is under pressure to mould itself to a single economic system and way of conceiving politics of managing power, as well as to a supreme military force. As in the Roman pantheon, the diversity of cultures and religions are accommodated as long as they live within the parameters imposed by the Empire. Perhaps the best metaphor to illustrate this is the food court in a shopping mall where it is possible to find all of the diversity cultures have to offer: from Thai food to Italian pizza, Chinese rice, German chucrut, Mexican tacos, Argentinean churrasco, and Japanese sushi. All of these are allowed on the condition that they are served as fast food, which is what the globalized model of consumption demands. And the dominant aroma will be the one imposed by air conditioning.

In the end, everything must fit inside the shopping mall; in other words, everything must be adapted to the framework of capitalist commerce and consumerist society. Because this global Empire is the empire of mature financial capitalism, the economic axis is the one that turns the other forces: political, military, and cultural. The rich diversity of the world is thus reduced to a question of economic management. The real scaffolding behind the empire is the international financial network, and it is to this logic that all peoples, expectations, cultures, and nations must submit.

The most visible consequence of this arrangement is that those who do not have financial capital are left out of the system; but the system proposes and needs to command all of the economic, energy, and technological resources of the world. In brief, those without money do not have the right to exist. On the other hand, where resources exist, they ought to be at the disposition, not of the imperial state (this differentiates it from the classic imperialism), but of those private interests that constitute the economic essence of the Empire. This is true even if in this case, one nation-state, the United States of America, constitutes the Empire's political-military centre. Thus, Bolivian gas is important, but not Bolivian people. Therefore, Bolivia's energy resources must be privatized. Iraqi oil is important, even if it has to be extracted from underneath the cadavers of Iraqis who do not want to give it up. In summary, the small global class (the elite composed of financial groups that also directly or indirectly controls productive enterprises) reserves the right to own the world. Everything becomes precarious before the power of Empire, yet in the end, Empire itself becomes precarious in relation to human law and the design of Creation. A sane theology of Creation should recognize that the ecological problem does not reside in a static conservatism, but in recovering the meaning of the first line of Psalm 24: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it."

One of the multiple consequences of Empire's financial rationale is the transfer of rights of human being to things and financial fictions. In this manner, capital can travel throughout the world without any borders, and products must be bought and sold without obstacles (especially those that favour the most powerful sectors); but people's mobility is ever more restricted, particularly if they are poor. The Berlin Wall has fallen, but a wall is built to exclude poor Mexicans from accessing jobs. The war of ideologies is transformed into a war against the poor. People's right to health is subordinated to the patent rights of legal entities and to "registered trademarks" that do not even recognize the scientist who contributed to their creation. In other words, the world of the virtual takes proprietorship of the rights of living human beings. By placing the love of money at the centre of its value system, the

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my readers' indulgence; most of the references in this text are from my own writings because its purpose is to outline my personal understanding of this topic. References to other authors will be limited.

financial empire distorts and reverses the meaning and sense of human life as we used to conceive it outside the Empire. Everything must be subordinated to the law of profit: Mammon is God.

Finally, although we are still far from exhausting the analysis of the reality of Empire, we must mention the role of communication. Communications media with global reach are manipulated by imperial interests to create the perception that they are the only valid ones, the only possible ones, the only way. Whether in the news or in soap operas, reality becomes virtual and is reduced to nonsense. Private lives are exhibited in public like spectacles, while public resources are privatized. Desire is shaped and oriented in function of commercial interests. The message is “just do it.” Immediacy is the norm, primitive impulse becomes the only engine, and appearance is everything. “What’s new?” “Where can I get some?” “How much does it cost?” These are the questions most frequently asked by our colonized youth. Individual satisfaction dissolves any sense of solidarity. This is how different forces come together to generate an imperialized subjectivity where the room for freedom is erased, and where human beings are either subordinate to the dominant interests or marginalized.

## Empires and the Biblical Tradition

The Hebrew and Christian sections of the Bible were written in the context of imperial enterprises that are recorded in their pages. When the people gathered together after the great flood (Genesis 10 and 11), Babel was established by Nimrod, the first potentate of the Earth (Genesis 10:10).<sup>2</sup> With his city and his tower, Nimrod aspires to dominate everything, to impose only one language (in contradiction with Genesis 10:5, 20, 31), and to make a name for himself. However, his imperial project is stopped by the liberating action of God who allows for a diversity of languages, cultures, and forms of life to flourish again. Nevertheless, imperial powers consolidate themselves over and over until the end of Apocalypse (18-19) when Babel/Babylon is destroyed forever and is replaced by the Kingdom of God and God’s people which includes all languages, races, and nations.

It is not possible in this brief document to develop a detailed account of all the forms and visions of Empire directly or indirectly described in the biblical pages. Nor is it possible to outline all of the consequences of Empire (in opposition to God’s will) for humans and the rest of Creation. It is possible to find prophetic denunciations, even of Israel itself, when it tries to be an imperialist nation, or when it makes alliances with the empires of the day (this is mentioned even in Psalms, for example Psalm 146).

Whether it is Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon in the case of ancient Israel, or the Hellenic monarchs of the deuteronomic period, or the Rome of the Christian pages, Empire is always seen as destruction, blasphemy, and pain. When it is tolerated or accepted it is to serve as a lesson or as punishment or consequence for ambition or a lack of justice. In opposition to the power of Empire and attempts to make it absolute, there finally appears in the last pages of Isaiah the idea of a renewed creation (65:17).<sup>3</sup>

It is necessary to recreate life after the destruction of Empire. In his visions, the prophet Daniel sees how empires are born and follow one another, but also how they fall in the face of divine power,

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2 For my interpretation of this text see “Comparative Bible Study, Genesis 10–11: An Approach from Argentina,” in P. Wickeri, ed., *Scripture, Community and Mission: A Festschrift in Honor of D. Preman Niles* (Hong Kong: the Christian Conference of Asia and the Council of World Mission, 2002).

3 On the topic of Empire and new creation see my work in “The New Creation in the Old, the Old Creation in the New,” in D. Meeks, ed., *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation* (Kingswood Books, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2004).

which initially only presents itself as something small. This is also the hallmark of the final vision in the Apocalypse. It is precisely in the definitive chapters of the apocalyptic drama, with all its strong and ambiguous metaphors, that the author sees the powerful of the earth come together in an alliance that seeks total domination of the world, but that in the end is confronted with its Creator. However, the power of the redeemer of the world appears in the figure of a sacrificed lamb still standing.

It is worthwhile mentioning the spectacle of the fall of Babylon (Revelation 18),<sup>4</sup> because there, along with the moans of the corrupt kings, appear the cries of the merchants who see the source of their wealth disappear once Empire falls. Their wares included “slaves and human lives: (Revelation 18:13). For this reason, happiness does not exist in Babylon: “and the sound of harpists and minstrels and of flutists and trumpeters will be heard in you no more; and an artisan of any trade will be found in you no more; and the sound of the millstone will be heard in you no more; and the light of a lamp will shine in you no more; and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more; for your merchants were the magnates of the earth, and all nations were deceived by your sorcery” (Revelation 18:22–23).<sup>5</sup>

Although he uses a different language, Paul also criticizes imperial practices. Already in his first letter he announces the sudden end of those who proclaim “peace and security” (1 Thessalonians 5:3), the motto of the Roman Legion which was inscribed in standards and in money—curiously, this is the same motto used by NATO. Paul’s strongest words on the subject appear in his epistle to Romans. The second half of the first chapter begins by announcing that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18). These, claiming to be wise became foolish, and honoured creatures before honouring the Creator, and so became filled with the will to injustice, homicides, greedy and deceitful, among other wickedness. These know the will of God and nonetheless rejoice in these things. In this way, “creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” (Romans 8:20–21).<sup>6</sup>

## Jesus and the Empire

According to Matthew, Jesus’ first encounter with the forces of Empire occurred right at birth, when he escaped the massacre of the children of Bethlehem.<sup>7</sup> He lived his life under imperial governments, which is reflected in the dates set in the gospel of Luke. Jesus also dies at the hands of Empire’s soldiers, even if they were assisted by local clients. The control that Empire exercised is not necessarily made explicit throughout the gospels, but the careful reader can identify its practices as their background (this also applies to John).

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4 A detailed study of the interpretation of these texts appears in my article: “Revelation and the victims of economic exclusion: Reading Rev. 18 from a Latin American context,” in Segovia, A. and Tolbert, M.A. (eds.): *Reading from this Place: The Global Scene, Social Location and Biblical Interpretation* (Fortress Press, 1995).

5 In his speech to give courage to the population of New Orleans following hurricane Katrina, President G.W. Bush said that he could envision the city rebuilt, “with all its shops open, and people doing business as usual.” New Orleans is known worldwide for its music, its carnival, and the happiness of its population, however, [for Bush], these were not the things to recover; rather it was the possibility to conduct commerce. This neatly illustrates the mentality of the managers of the global empire.

6 A study of Paul’s theology as theology in confrontation with empire can also be seen in my commentary on Galatians “Paul to the Galatians: When Liberty is not (neo)Liberalism,” *Global Bible Commentary*, D. Patte, ed., (Abingdon Press, 2004).

7 Néstor O. Míguez, “*Los Santos Inocentes*” [*The Innocent Saints*], in *Página 12* newspaper, Buenos Aires, December 28, 2005. Available at [www.pagina12.com.ar](http://www.pagina12.com.ar)



Nonetheless, there are points at which Empire is clearly singled out. For example in the gospel of John, Jesus offers his disciples peace but “not in the way of the world,” in this way making clear reference to a contradiction of the Pax Romana. Further on, he points out to Pontius Pilate, Empire’s representative that he may govern the world but that he still does not know what truth is. Pilate becomes panic-stricken when his Jewish interlocutors tell him that the one who pretends to be the Son of God must die (Son of Jupiter was one of the titles of the Emperor), and then threaten to denounce him before Caesar.<sup>8</sup>

The synoptic gospels contrast the imperial government with what is expected of Jesus’ followers. For example in his answer to the question of power: “So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them’ (Mark 10:42). Luke adds to this by denouncing the clientelist practices of the Roman Empire “and those in authority over them are called benefactors” (Luke 22:25). None of their contemporaries would have been able to ignore their references (nor can we...). Our interpretations, which have taken these commentaries as decontextualized “universals,” often miss the dimension of prophetic condemnation of Empire they contain.

A similar decontextualization has occurred to one of the texts that speak most clearly of the confrontation with the Empire: the well-known passage of the taxes and the coin, which in our interpretations is often called “the question of paying taxes,” is really the place where the issue of the authority of the Empire is resolved. We have already established that the imposition of a national currency as the international standard is an imperial practice, and one of its tools for domination. All of this passage breathes the imperial atmosphere. At the opening we are told that they sought “to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor,” a clear reference to the power of the empire (Luke 20:20). When Jesus requests a coin and then asks about its image and inscription, his question is not an innocent one. He does not have coins; it is those who have them that have already included themselves in the orbit of Empire. The response given by the spies is “the emperor’s,” which hides a fact that Jesus will reveal in his own answer: most Roman coins bear in their inscription the phrase *divus Caesar*, of Caesar elevated to the level of deity. To give unto God what is God’s means to deny the divinity of Caesar, and thereby deny the ideological sources of imperial power. We are thus not witnessing discussion on “theology of kingdoms” here, but rather witnessing a repudiation of the deification of earthly power. God become human confronting the human that aspires to become God.

## Beyond Empire

Human history is full of surprises. Both good and bad take place many times unexpectedly. The current Empire began to encounter unforeseen sources of resistance some months back. Its existence is producing ever stronger responses. This does not mean that we can now predict with certitude the date when the Empire will fall; but it is now much less thinkable that its presence is permanent and definitive, and that we find ourselves at the “end of [a] history” which concludes not with the Kingdom of God, but with neo-liberal exclusion. The actions of the people and the Spirit of God will condition the development of life. Otherwise, human life on our planet may be extinguished as our current model of consumption and development is unsustainable.

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8 See: Hinkelammert, F., *El Grito del Sujeto [The Scream of the Subject]*, pp. 11–91 (DEI, San José de Costa Rica, 1998).

However, the consequences of this global empire must not only be measured in economic and military terms. Taken together, its political forces and cultural ethos, its technological structures and means seek to impose what may be its most lasting legacy: the shaping of a deep-seated, individualist, and selfish subjectivity. The Empire and the globalized consumerist market model with its totalizing tendencies destroys local networks of solidarity, the collective sense, and social contracts of co-operation. It replaces them with power as the only principle, personal satisfaction as its motto, immediacy as its only time, and precariousness in human relations as the only norm. Everything is disposable, from pop drink containers to “unproductive” human beings, or even worse, those who have been deprived of the capacity to produce and live by the only laws that must be obeyed: the laws of the market.

It is here that the power of the Christian symbols and narratives can once again demonstrate their relevance: in the struggle against the imperial world-view; in the decolonization of the minds (Romans 12:2); in the reconstruction of the *afecto societatis*; and in the need to locate real and concrete human beings (with their needs, hopes, loves, poverty, and current condition, and with their creative participation in the world we have been asked to steward) as the final receivers of the love and will of God.

Although some speak of the excessive anthropocentrism inherent in modernity, all that the post-modern empire proposes as an alternative is a “crematocentrism” (money as the ultimate end of all activities, and as the centre and source of life and power). In light of this, we are called to affirm the creative power of God: no human being is “disposable.” We are called to find again the sense of unity/connection of what is created in an economy—not of accumulation (in the final analysis, what is primarily accumulated in our economy of consumerism is garbage<sup>9</sup>), but of justice and life for all.

To locate ourselves in spaces of hope is to begin working beyond Empire. It is to create life-giving alternatives for everyone, because the Empire is a source of death. But for this faith to become reality we cannot wait for time to pass and for the governing powers to fall by themselves. It is necessary to begin to demonstrate in our perceptions, relationships, and communities that another world is possible; that other ways of living bring dignity and plenitude; at least to a greater degree than the devastation of empire. This was the hallmark and means of struggle used by the first Christian communities against Empire. It was not through the opposition of power against power which would have meant their annihilation, but rather through the extension of alternate symbols and lifeways, of which we are heirs. This struggle has been imperfect, it is true; we cannot deny the weaknesses and failures that are part of our human ambiguity. However, the Christian message will be relevant if it is able to pronounce and take part in realizing a vision of “life beyond empire.”

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9 Refer to the works of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman on globalization, especially *Wasted Lives* (Cambridge, GB: Polity Press, 2004), where he shows how the consumerist economy produces the continuous waste of human lives, as well as of natural resources and energy.