

A Layman's Concerns about the ELCA's Response to President Trump's Ban on Immigration

Below is the text of a letter sent to the ELCA Presiding Bishop in response to the "pastoral message addressing President Trump's executive order to restrict entry by refugees and visitors into the United States from seven predominately Muslim countries." The letter raises basic issues of the relationship between politics and religion generally, the status of that relationship in present day America and how that status affects the American church.

Rev. Eaton:

I am writing in response to your pastoral "message addressing President Trump's executive order to restrict entry by refugees and visitors into the United States from seven predominately Muslim countries." I write because I believe it shows and further betrays a lack of understanding on your part, and, if you sought counsel from the ELCA's best thinkers, a lack of understanding on the part of the organization, of the only way the Christian church can serve in the capacity of that third basic social institution, the religious one.

In the case of the executive order and your message, the issue is the relationship between politics and religion. By "politics" I mean those issues within a society on which its members are free to differ, and any member of that society could sleep well at night knowing that the position most different from his or her own had prevailed, and that same member could regard fellow members of that society who hold the position most different from his or her own as good friends and neighbors. Politics is supposed to be about "the little stuff," the stuff on which we may all differ, while still respecting all others, and having the assurance that respect shown to them is returned.

With one major exception, until fairly recently America has been able to devise political solutions to most all of the country's problems. The major exception is, of course, slavery. There came a time when many in the north would not accept the political solution that had been worked out regarding slavery and those in the south would not allow that in-place solution to be changed by merely political means. The result was the Civil War. As Clausewitz put it, "War is the continuation of [politics] by other means."

Of the three basic social institutions: the family, the civic one (the state) and the religious one (in western civilization, until sometime in the mid twentieth century, the Christian church, manifest in America as "mainline Protestantism"), it is the religious one that allows the civic one to work. The religious institution allows the civic one to work by setting the boundaries for it. What allows politics to operate within the sphere of "the little stuff" is that "the big stuff" on which there is, and must be, general consensus within the body politic is handled by the religious one, the institution that addresses "the big stuff." As we should remember, the root Latin meaning of "religion" is "to bind together."

Typically, the way the way the religious institution, whatever it is, binds the society together is by answering for it the ontological questions, questions of origins, purpose and destiny—where we came from, where we're going and why we're here. For most of its history, western civilization was provided answers to these questions by the Christian church, and western civilization thought of itself as "Christendom." (As late as World War II Churchill could say that we were fighting Nazism to preserve Christian civilization, and after the war that communism represented a great peril to Christian civilization.) Christianity taught first that our origins were at the hand of a creative God, an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent personality, on account of whose personality we, too, created in his image, also had personality. Our purpose was the duty, commensurate with having been made in the Creator's image, to love him above all else, showing him the thanks and praise of which he alone is worthy; and to love our neighbors as ourselves, serving them as we can. And, our destiny was redemption through the

re-creative work of his Son. Thanks to that redemption, we might be spared the judgment that would otherwise befall those, namely all of us, who did not fulfill their purpose of loving God above all else (most particularly self) and serving neighbor.

The places where the civic realm and the religious one intersect most definitely and noticeably are with regard to the taboos (punishable behaviors) of the culture and with regard to those positive things on which the Creator smiles. It is true that there are legal codes outside the Judeo-Christian tradition that are based on respect for “the big four”: life, marriage, property and reputation, and that fact is only evidence that the law is written generally on the hearts of all humankind, as well as specially on the tablets of stone. It is also true that only within the Judeo-Christian tradition are there “the big five”: life, marriage, property, reputation *and neighbor*. (This fifth biggie is lost in part by the screwy way in which the Roman church re-numbered (or numbered, depending upon who you ask) the commandments, and, for Lutherans, the way Luther, unlike other reformers, did not “fix” the problem at the time of the reformation.)

Nevertheless, within the West’s Judeo-Christian past the commandments of God have given sanction to taboos regarding murder, adultery, theft and slander within the civic realm. The fifth taboo, jealousy, didn’t make into the taboos of the state because, as the Romans put it, “A man isn’t punished for his thoughts.” (This maxim which has stood western law well for centuries has been lost in modern day America with the introduction of supposed “hate crimes” (but that is another story).) God, alone, could instruct us not to deprive our neighbors of their lives, marriages, property, reputations, *and* not to deprive them of their neighbors—us. The civic institution, the state, can only deal with what behaviors are proscribed for everyone: crimes (basically, as above stated: murder, adultery, theft and slander), and those matters on which all of us are free to differ (the “political” matters).

In the west, its religious institution (until recently), the Christian church, could and did go beyond the big (civic) four, not only by giving sanction to those things we cannot do without suffering civil punishment, but also by informing us of what we “ought” to do. If in negative terms the big five, addressing the relationship among neighbors, are: do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not slander and do not be jealous (that is to say, do not deprive your neighbor of his or her life, spouse, property, reputation or neighbor), the church alone could turn those proscriptions into positive attributes we ought to embrace: take care of your neighbor’s life, respect his or her marriage and property, speak well of your neighbor and be magnanimous toward your neighbor.

And, this brings me to the issues with the pastoral message. The religious institution must restrain itself to speak only on those matters on which there can be no difference of opinion or stance. If it goes beyond that, it loses its “binding together” (dare I say, “unifying”?) purpose, steps outside its charter and becomes merely political.

This is especially important for the Christian church, if the church either serves that religious function with approval (tacit or earnest) from state and/or family, purports to do so, or (for post-Christian America) strives to re-gain that binding together (“unifying”) function. (The other option for Christians within America is to become “a separate people.”) It has been several years since the Holy Father had to remind some of his priests (two of the American ones even becoming members of Congress) of their proper role and tell them to give up their political positions.

The most important practical reason for the church being above and separate from politics is that, if the church is to serve that religious function, it is the church alone that can do so by connecting the secular to the sacred, the material to the spiritual, the temporal to the eternal. Alternative choices for fulfilling this religious function are all merely temporal. They are all either nationalistic or individualistic, group-ism

or self-ism. The Almighty does not choose among options for which differences of opinion and action are reasonable and to be expected.

Only an institution that represents the eternal can instruct humanity in matters of good and evil, right and wrong, life and death, blessing and curse, in any meaningful way apart from “strong and weak.” Without an “external referent” for what is good and evil, without the revealing God of Christian teaching, there is really no such thing as “good and evil.” There is only “strong and weak.” More precisely, without an external referent for what is good and evil there is no such thing as good and evil *in an absolute sense*. There is no such thing as good and evil that applies to all humankind. Some may define “good and evil” in a relative sense, as in what is good *for me* or what is good *for my group*. As one of Dostoevsky's characters theorized, “Without God everything is permitted.” Nothing is off limits, if the Creator doesn't set any.

It is the church's job to connect us mortals in special, formal ways (for Christians this means baptism and the Lord's Supper) with that “external referent” whose good news is that he is not merely a principle, but a person—and not just one person, but three persons in one. It is the church's job to proclaim that, because there is a God who is love, love is permitted, and not only permitted but sought of us by him who makes it possible for us-- and nothing less than that.

I must respectfully suggest that by what you have said about your communication with the Government and by what you have put in your pastoral message you have taken the church to operate beyond its proper sphere of informing us what God, himself, would have us do: take care of each other. The church must shout that it is the duty of all humankind to take care of all of its members. That is such an incredibly big order as to be entirely meaningless and ineffective in any doable, operational sense. That is why, with the rich young ruler (but not with his motive of seeking to justify himself) we must ask, “Who is my neighbor?” But, while proclaiming what we *ought* to do, the institution that connects us with the personal external referent, in order for its salt not to become paving material, merely going the way of the world, or its light to become merely a mirror of nationalism or “enlightened self-interest,” however difficult it might be to exercise restraint, it must stop at telling us *what* to do, refrain from telling us *how* to do it (except possibly at the farthest place where “reasonable minds cannot differ”) and allow us all to work out how to do what we ought to do, sinning boldly, and believing in the grace of God more boldly still.

It is the job of the church to set the overall goal of doing good and defining what “doing good” means, which is, as stated above, taking care of each other. How the society goes about doing good is properly left up to be worked out by authorities responsible for different social relationships within it. Those other intrinsic institutions are, as noted above, the state (at whatever level) and the family. Families are supposed to have responsibility for as much as they possibly can, and when things are beyond what families can work out for themselves, there is the civil authority the purpose of which, according to St. Paul, is that we might live “peaceful and quiet lives...” The church sits, or should sit, above those other two institutions (families and civil authority (whether a tribal chieftain or the American bureaucratic nightmare)).

The job of the church, once again, is to proclaim what is good (taking care of each other) and only in the rarest and most egregious of circumstances, how to do it. (St. Paul also wrote that everyone should be “subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.” At the farthest example this admonishment was a problem to Christians, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in Nazi Germany, asking if St. Paul really had Hitler in mind as he wrote the above.)

You have told the body politic, as well as your ELCA flock, that we ought to welcome the stranger. You have also conceded that we ought to keep each other safe. Implicit in your “bottom line” is that when welcoming the stranger conflicts with keeping each other safe, you would opt for welcoming the stranger at the expense of safekeeping. But, you do not really do that. Instead, you discount one of the means employed to keep us safe (restricting immigration—not merely refugees and not merely Muslims pending a review of vetting procedures). You state that you are convinced that temporarily banning vulnerable refugees (once again, certain refugees are only a subset of those affected by the ban) will not enhance our safety. You do not state if this is your personal conviction (opinion) or if it is the Gospel message. But, you did not write as “Elizabeth Eaton, American citizen.” You wrote as the presiding bishop of the ELCA.

Nevertheless, ostensibly the conclusion that restricting certain aliens from entry into the country would do nothing to enhance public safety is your personal conviction, and I would hope you would concede that it is an opinion on which reasonable minds might differ. If you do not believe that reasonable minds might differ on this issue, then neither I nor anyone else could have anything further to say to you. But, if you would concede that reasonable minds might differ as to the value of restricting immigration as means of furthering public safety, then you must conclude that you have overstepped your proper role as a cleric. (If you would not concede that, then you are at least theoretically essentially in the same position *vis a vis* the American powers that be as Bonhoeffer was to Hitler.)

It is basic that love of God and neighbor is at the very heart of the Christian faith. The welcome of the outcast, the refugee, and the marginalized is one way we put in operational terms what it means to follow Christ. Keeping our neighbors safe from those who would do them harm is also at the core of Christian teaching, “there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” If you would also concede that these are times in which our country faces a particular threat to public safety from groups and subgroups within certain Muslim and Muslim majority countries and Muslim dominated regions of the world, then you might also concede that our civil authorities have a duty to protect the citizenry from such threats. (Those killed and maimed by criminal acts in New York, Orlando, San Bernardino, Paris and elsewhere and their families are no less worthy of Christian compassion than those held up in airports around the world.) Once again, if you would not recognize that there is a threat, or at least concede that reasonable minds might differ in that regard, then neither I nor anyone else has anything to say to you. But, if you would concede at least that reasonable minds might differ as to the existence of a threat or the extent of it, then, once again, you have overstepped your proper role as a cleric.

Further, if you would concede that reasonable minds might differ as to the means to address the threat to public safety, then the role of those of us concerned with the welfare of innocent neighbors affected by those means is to figure out how to address the needs of those refugees *in light of those means* rather than to discount those means altogether. As the representative of “the external referent” it is not (however much any of us might disagree with the determination that there is a threat to public safety or the means employed to deal with it) for the church, as such, to challenge the determination or the means, themselves. It is also the duty of the church, except maybe in the most extreme instance to suppose only the highest motives of those acting both to enhance public safety and deal with an international crisis of refugees. That is to say, if the political system is to work, we must initially suppose good faith on the part of Government officials when they address the issues the country faces, including international refugee problems, criminal threats and public safety.

What you have stated in your pastoral message about your communication with the state and what you have additionally stated in that message suggest to me that you have taken at least the ELCA part of the church from the position of standing above the “how to” political fray, and put the Gospel squarely on the side of a sectarian political position. Unless this is the only position thoughtful Christians, striving to live out their faith, may adopt, then it is not at all proper for the church in any of its parts to say that the

Gospel message is squarely on side of letting immigrants (or even refugees) into this country, and (on that account) opposed, in fact, to the measures taken in the name of public safety.

What makes all this particularly hard for the church in America these days is that the church hasn't really internalized what it means to be scattered in a post-Christian culture. That is to say that on some level the church doesn't get it that it is no longer the official religious (binding together/unifying) institution of the culture or even the unofficial, tacit binding-together-in-fact institution of that culture. And, instead of taking to heart that it is no longer serving that role and figuring out how the Christian community can unite as a "separate people" to remain salt and light, it in large measure has taken the only other approach there is and has become or is becoming merely political. In doing this it has merely followed the American model of having everything—even matters of life and death—being merely political.

The church (or at least parts of it) wants to use whatever power tactics are available to anyone in the political fray to force its morality on the culture. What it doesn't take into account is that a morality that needs to be voted in can be voted out. A morality that needs to go all the way to the Supreme Court to be sanctioned can be unsanctioned by that same body (the books are full of 5/4 decisions). What it also doesn't seem to take to heart is that its morality is not supposed to be parochial; it is for all.

In present day America both the church and families have largely been eclipsed by the state. When it comes to families this has been both because of power hungry state officials and families not doing what they should. (For example, teachers, much to their dismay, are constantly telling us about how the school (an arm of the state) has had to take over much of what formerly would have been done by families as a matter of course and, then, once state officials get hold of it and power over it, it becomes hard to let go. A "new normal" is established.

When it comes to the church, Winthrop Hudson (writing in the 1960s) might have come closest to it. He wrote that at America's inception Protestantism shaped America, but certainly by the mid-twentieth century America shapes Protestantism. George Carlin, the comedian, said it another way. He said, "I was raised Irish-Catholic, but then I became American." Americanism had replaced his Catholicism. He used the line to get laughs, but there is more than a kernel of truth in what he said.

When families don't act like families, when the church doesn't serve that overriding (above politics) religious function and the only thing in its place is Individualism, more and more, as a practical matter, the state is all there is. Or, maybe civil/secular power is all there is, whether the power of the media, celebrity, mobs, whatever gives individuals and groups means to have their way. Without an external referent for what is good (and the church should be what connects individuals, families and civic authorities to that good) there really is no such thing as "good and evil"; there is only "strong and weak."

The church joins the political fray (and, once again, in terms of power that is all that is left of the once tripartite structure of family, church and state), at the expense of being what it is called to be: the unifying organ that informs us of where we came from, where we're going and why we're here, namely to do good, defined as loving God and neighbor. If the world doesn't want the church to serve that function, and, at least in America, it is to the point at which we are told (by our political machinery) that our political machinery won't even allow the church to serve that function (in spite of the fact that it did so for a substantial part of America's history), then the church has got to figure out what it can do without becoming either the lackey of the state or merely one or more faction within it- just another political interest group or party.

President Trump has said he will work for repeal of the law that forbids religious organizations from taking political positions while claiming tax exempt status. There are religious organizations that seek this, and even demand it, as their "free speech" right. But, it seems to me the church should be saying and

even shouting that the state can do whatever it wants about tax exempt status, but the church is not here to take sides in political matters and is going to proclaim its message whether the state regards its message as political or not. When the church speaks it speaks for Jesus Christ. It does not speak of matters over which reasonable minds might differ; its speaks of the only law that can truly unite humankind.

Of course in present day America the issue that drives the church most decidedly into the political arena is abortion, which has become a merely political issue and, more than any other single issue, has caused the third branch of government, the judiciary, which is not supposed to be political, to become squarely political. What matters in the appointment of judges is not any jurisprudential qualifications that transcend politics, but where the candidate stands politically on abortion, an issue for which the only political solution is in who has the power—which faction has how many votes on the court.

In the case of that example, abortion, it cannot be both murder (as the pro-life camp would have it), and not-murder (as the right to choose faction would have it). To speak of the two sides being “unified,” getting along or being one people is hollowed out nothingness at best. Recently certain pro-abortion proponents have expressed concern that the present American civic machinery may place in jeopardy all the “progress” the country has made since *Roe v. Wade*, while others decry the descent into barbarism the country has purposely made as it casts aside principles that have been hallmarks of civilization at least since the time of Hippocrates. The same act cannot be both murder and not-murder; it cannot be both progress and regress. And, that is only one issue which can have no political solution. (I am aware of the implications the above has for at least certain parts of the ELCA’s Social Statement on Abortion (as well as other social statements the organization has made (the choice of the term “organization” was deliberate as I still have faith that there is one church)).)

As noted above, not so many years ago the Holy Father directed his priests to get out of their political positions. The most notable one to do so was Father Drinan, the Jesuit serving in Congress. He was passionate about his devotion to certain peace and social justice matters. When the Holy Father reminded him of his calling Father Drinan said, “It is just unthinkable of the idea of renouncing the priesthood to stay in office. I am proud and honored to be a priest and a Jesuit. As a person of faith I must believe that there is work for me to do which somehow will be more important than the work I am required to leave.”

It is my hope that the ELCA and those called to lead its clerical work, although they don’t have a John Paul II to give direction, might “self-regulate” and, to paraphrase Father Drinan, say something like, “It is just unthinkable for us to renounce the job of being the intermediary between God and humankind, between God and the culture, between the eternal and the temporal, between the sacred and the secular, to join the political fray. We are proud and honored to be representatives of the church of Jesus Christ, and as people of faith, we must believe that the unifying work that remains for us to do in calling God’s children everywhere not to be of the world, while they remain in it, is more important than the passing work we must entrust to others, and, if they will allow us, to inform them of the obedient ways that exhibit the good, and lead to life and blessing.”

Sincerely,



Stephen D. Hedlund

P.S. I have attached two related articles which further serve to explain where the above is coming from: “The Perversion of Religion and Politics in America” and “Freedom in America: Two Theories, One Practice.”