

Bishop Atle Sommerfeldt:

What can we learn from July 22 as it pertains to the nature of evil?

Contribution to a panel discussion in the context of the Consultation Interrogating evil: Responsible and critical engagements with church, ideologies and persons after July 22/2011.

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Evil is part of even Norway and Norwegians

On July 22/2011 Breivik reintroduced in the Norwegian public space the enormous capacity humans and humanity have for evil acts. He was and is one of us! We are living in a society which has managed to curb a major portion of societal evil. Our culture is marked by the belief that science and technology, in combination with political decisions and awareness raising campaigns, have the capacity to solve all major human and societal challenges and even give security to all of us. And anyway, humans are good at the bottom of the barrel.

Evil has very little space in this worldview. We are seduced by many forces to believe that the eradication of evil is possible. Evil acts most therefore either be linked to "the other", pushed under different types of carpets, described as acts of demons or be diagnosed as an illness which can be cured with pills and therapy.

If this description has some truth to it, the church need to explore, in line with the South African Kairos document, whether we have developed a "Church theology" which harmonize conflicts and cover the reality of evil as it is experienced by people and performed by people.

Are we silent in the face of the evil realities people in Norway experience? And do we seduce people to believe that they will be able to avoid experience of evil or overcome evil in themselves and in their lives? Do our theology alienate all those in our communities struggling with anxieties and sadness?

Breivik motivated his acts with an idealistic motivation which had the intention to defend the Norwegian people against islamisation. Breivik is not alone, history as humankind, not least in the area of Enlightenment is covered with victims of idealistic intention which led to oppression and evil acts. Do we as a church have an inclination to excuse evil acts with idealistic intentions and in that way side with the perpetrator, rather than the victims of evil acts?

The need for a theology stimulating church-involvement in society

Secularization makes religion and church to a sector and segment in society, closely linked to individual statements of faith. Faith is seen as an individual decision, and religion is therefore a private matter and limited to the religious arenas, sermonizes and spaces.

When the church accept this sectorization of religion and hide herself in the church buildings, the society will potentially loose an important voice in the public space interpreting trends and events. That space of interpretation is then filled by other actors who use religion at will like Breivik and his

use of Christianity. In today's contemporary Europe the public space is being invaded by extremist theories which explain reality and pretend to defend society using religion as part of their ideology, but with no link to legitimate religious institutions. Breivik, Fjordmann and Gates of Vienna are examples, as well as several different jihadist-groups.

We therefore need a theology which encompasses the whole societal reality. This is not an ambition to re-establish church-dominance as we have seen it previously in Europe. In our generation the involvement in society cannot any longer be based on a position of power and privileges, but by giving people an interpretation of societal realities and participate in a way which is perceived as relevant, advice in the public discourse on how to combat evils and to accompany those who suffer. A «theology of accompaniment», which is a central element in the ecumenical movement, is a fruitful concept.

Simul justus et peccator

The "simul iustus et peccator"-concept is a relevant key for interpreting evil.

Firstly, this insight makes it impossible to sanctify any societal order. All human constructions have the possibility for evil, including churches and those with idealistic intentions.

It follows secondly from this insight a reluctance to classify a societal system or religion as evil. Such a labelling will imply a denial that any good can come from such a system, and that all persons in the system are evil and their potential for doing any good is excluded.

Thirdly, you don't negotiate with evil. You combat and over win evil. In our generation this leads to wars that never ends.

Signs of Evil

It is complicated to use the term «evil» in any operational form, without ending up in an abstract way of thinking. In order to avoid unhealthy thinking and practice, it may be useful and more correct to use the concept "signs of evil". This will contrast the concept "signs of hope" which are increasingly used in the ecumenical movement, also this inspired by the South African Kairos-document..

Conclusion

I think it is relevant to say that our society experienced a moment of truth at 22/07/2011 – a Kairos-moment – on our understanding of evil acts motivated by an idealistic, but evil intention. This demands a much deeper reflection that exceeds security measures. The church, with her theological institutions, should find ways of stimulating that process – our vast historical and contemporary experience on this issue gives us a rich well to drink from.