

Rosie VENNEN

Empire, Religion and Society:

Reflections from the 2006 WSCF Inter-regional Conference in Nairobi, Kenya.

In my preparation for attending the 2006 WSCF inter-regional conference on Empire, a friend lent me Arundhati Roy's "An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire." It seemed like a good place to begin. Roy argues that "our strategy should be not only to confront Empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness – and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe." At the conference, as we shared our experiences of Empire and resistance, we realised the dynamic nature of our

stories. We found common threads running through them that crossed cultural and regional boundaries. We helped educate each other and unveil hidden truths about Empire in each of our different contexts. We left feeling inspired and encouraged at the stories of resistance in the many student movements of WSCF. The following is a brief report from the conference and some further reflections.

WSCF INTER-REGIONAL PROGRAMME ON EMPIRE

In August 2006, I attended the WSCF's inter-regional programme in Nairobi, Kenya as one of the delegates from WSCF-Europe. Gathered together from over twenty different countries, our focus was on "Christians, Empire and Basilea." Our understanding of Empire was informed by the WCC Agape document as "the coherence of economic, cultural, political, religious and military powers that constitute a global system of domination." In contrast to this, Basilea is a Greek word used by Jesus in the Gospels when he speaks of the Kingdom of God. Through Bible studies and discussions, we found

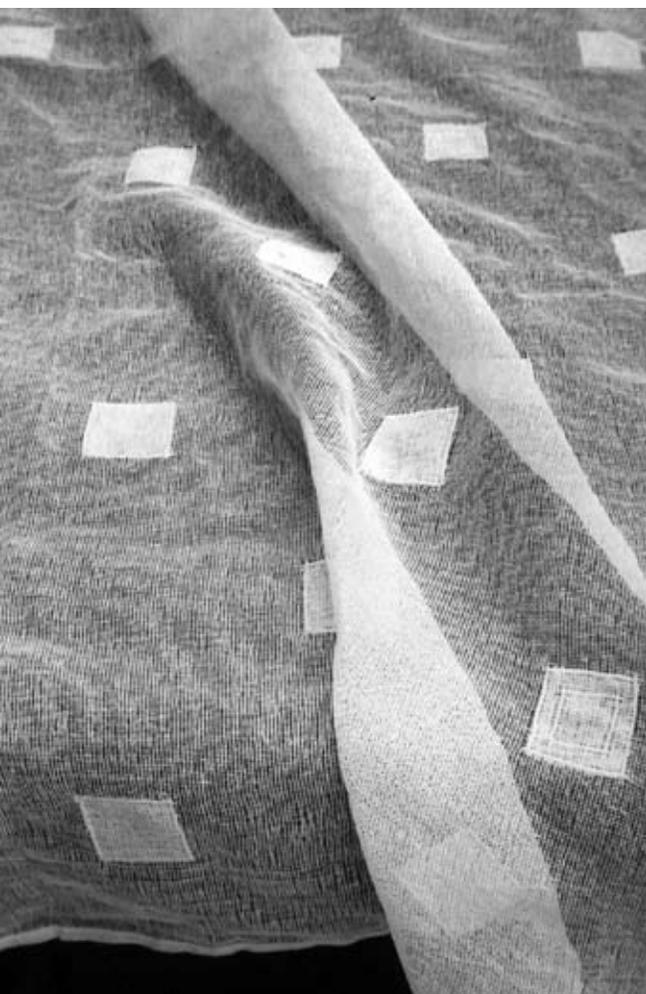
that the teachings and life of Jesus present us with alternatives to Empire. Basilea is a political, challenging and radical vision which we are called to work towards today.

NAMING THE POWERS

During the programme, we spent time 'naming the powers' and recognising the manifestations of Empire in our various contexts. The Empire of today portrays itself as rational, intelligent and beneficial, making it important to reveal its true nature. We heard presentations from each region and reflected on economic injustices in Africa, the effects of debt and global warming in Asia-Pacific, corporate power and restrictions on the movement of people in Europe, political corruption in South America, control over the media in North America, and military violence in the Middle East.

REVEALING THE ALTERNATIVE

The Empire fools us into thinking that 'there is no alternative.' But the thread running through the WSCF conference was a phrase from Liberation theology: "The world is not as it should be. It can and must be changed." We discovered that, although the signs of Empire were present in all of our contexts, equally present were the signs of resistance. Empire rebels were present in co-operatives,



Suggested reading

ROY Arundhati, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*. Cambridge, MA, 2004.
Commission for Urban Life and Faith, *Faithful Cities*, www.culf.org.uk.
WSCF Solidarity Plan on Empire, www.wscfglobal.org.
World Council of Churches AGAPE document. WSCF, *Talitha Cum! The Grace of Solidarity in a Globalised World*. Geneva, 2004.

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intentional communities, the trade justice movement, women's groups, grassroots activism, and, of course, in the many and diverse Student Christian movements that make up WSCF's global community!

Living and working together for the ten days of the programme as representatives of our various SCMs, we found that a way forward in the face of Empire is to create communities that reflect the values of God's Basilea. As part of the "exposure" programme organised by WSCF-Africa, we visited the Utooni Self-Help Community Group who have collectively transformed their local environment and livelihoods by building sand dams to collect rainwater and irrigate land that has grown arid through deforestation. In Kibera – Africa's largest slum – we were inspired by young people creating alternative media through a radio station which gives a voice to a marginalised community. At the end of the programme, we produced an International Solidarity Plan to guide WSCF's response to Empire (details below).

2. REFLECTIONS ON EMPIRE, RELIGION AND SOCIETY

Within Europe, the International Solidarity plan calls us to recognise and respond to the manifestations of Empire in our local contexts and to promote and engage in community-based initiatives within our localities as a way to create alternatives to Empire. Our response to

Empire must be unashamedly practical. But as we fight Empire at a local level, in the Church's response to poverty and inequality, what relationship should we have with government and secular society? Since returning from the WSCF conference I have looked at these questions in the context of the United Kingdom with a new perspective.

Should we be filling in the gaps in social provision? Using a specific example, should the Church be providing hospitality and support for asylum seekers who are forced into destitution after failed applications or should we be challenging the state policies that cause this to happen and lobbying the government for a change in its asylum procedures?

In the United Kingdom in recent years, the government has taken an increasing interest in the capacity of faith communities to tackle poverty and to be involved in regeneration of deprived areas. At the same time, statutory buzz words like "community cohesion" and "social capital" have entered the Church's vocabulary. Partnerships between faith-based groups and state bodies are becoming common. But with the power structures of Empire in mind, how concerned should we be by these developments? Churches and congregations of other faiths are attractive to the state because they are present and active in a cross-section of society. Partnership between statutory bodies and faith groups gives government a foothold in difficult-to-reach communities.

On a positive level, this can increase access to public services like healthcare and education, and the voices of marginalised and deprived communities are more likely to be heard in public consultations. However, what constraints do these partnerships place on the Church's response to the inequalities of Empire? Do the State and the Church have the same vision for community regeneration?

The publication of a

document by the Commission on Urban Life and Faith in the United Kingdom called "Faithful Cities" has sparked a debate about the relationship between faith communities and Government in urban regeneration. The contributors suggest that the Church and other faith groups who work in partnership with government and statutory bodies should maintain a critical and prophetic stance. We should be suspicious of regeneration that is based simply on economic terms or that has only cosmetic effects rather than addressing the real problems of deprived areas. In a culture of social entrepreneurship there is the potential for rivalry rather than co-operation between faith groups as they work to address the needs of their communities. Increasingly, churches are in receipt of government funding for their social action work. How prescriptive is this government funding? Does it look for short-term success or long-term transformation? Is what we are doing 'measurable?' We can measure indices of poverty and unemployment, but can we measure the extent to which individuals in communities feel welcomed, respected, encouraged, safe and fulfilled? In brief, how do we know if we are speaking the same language as the State? Accepting funds from those in power can limit the Church's capacity to be prophetic.

PARTNERSHIP

Who should the Church work with in its fight against Empire? I believe we should be committed to working with those who share our concern for those marginalised by Empire and not only with those who share our particular religious values and traditions. This is likely to mean working more closely with secular NGOs and people from other faith communities and networks. It means that student groups should work more closely with community groups and trade unions. It means looking outward from the Church and from academia and building a diverse democratic base from which to demonstrate our alternatives to Empire.

