Abundant Life for All: Reflections on the Ecumenical Debate about Economic Issues
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Economics is about the daily life of people; it is about procuring food, clothes, and shelter and performing meaningful work. Therefore it should not come as a surprise that churches and Christians have always been concerned about economic issues. Christian faith cannot make a separation between body and soul: God became incarnate through Christ in order to share the human condition with us, and the Lord’s Prayer, taught to us by Jesus, is about spiritual as well as material life. It would be heretical to separate the prayer for “our daily bread” from the eucharistic bread. If we want to be disciples of him who came to give abundant life for all (John 10:10), economic life is part of our ministry.

These basic convictions guided the life of the first Christian community in Jerusalem which shared property and possessions and distributed means according to needs (Acts 2 and 4). Church fathers like St. John Chrysostomos, St. Basil, and St. Ambrose never tired of denouncing unjust economic systems and took initiatives to protect the poor and the sick. Later, certain religious orders and monasteries, like the Waldensians, followed similar lines of action, while economic issues were also taken up by reformers such as Luther and Calvin. The modern ecumenical movement, therefore, stands in a long tradition when it tries to address economic issues.

I. THE MODERN ECUMENICAL DEBATE

The ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches (WCC) do not have an official social teaching or doctrine. It is better to speak of the ecumenical debate about social issues. Only in this way can justice be done to the wide variety of opinions which exists within the ecumenical movement. The partici-

pants in this ecumenical debate come from very diverse historical, cultural, and political situations and backgrounds. Rather than trying to find one homogeneous and uniform position on social issues, the ecumenical movement recognizes that social issues almost always need to be addressed in particular contexts.

Most of the overviews of the modern ecumenical debate about economic issues start with the Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work, which was held in Stockholm in 1925. Stockholm resisted the idea that Christian faith and economics are two separate categories and strongly emphasized the necessity of applying the spirit and teaching of Christ to economic and industrial life. It strongly affirmed that the gospel is for all realms of life, and thereby expressed
the wholeness of the ecumenical calling.

As historical developments have always influenced the ecumenical debate, the great depression and the rise of totalitarian ideologies in Europe in the 1930s necessitated a reassessment of the approaches taken in Stockholm. More thorough studies needed to be undertaken about the social and spiritual situations in the world. Stimulated by great ecumenical leaders like J. H. Oldham and Archbishop Söderblöm, churches embarked on a number of study programs. This culminated in the famous World Conference on Church, Community, and State, which took place in Oxford in 1937.

Whereas Stockholm tended to focus on the responsibilities of individual persons, Oxford was also aware of the need to test economic institutions in the light of their understanding of God’s will. Consequently, Oxford was critical of both capitalism and communism. Recognizing that capitalism had brought enormous advantages and progress in the field of improved technology and increased production, Oxford was highly critical of the accompanying acquisitiveness, the concentration of wealth, the existence of centers of economic power not responsible to any organ in the community, and long-term and mass unemployment. Communism was criticized because of its utopianism, its materialism, and its disregard for the dignity of the individual.

The ecumenical debate about economic life entered a new phase when the WCC was established in 1948. At its first assembly in Amsterdam, the traumatic experiences with the Second World War were still very fresh in the minds of people, and the cold war chilled the world. Seen in this context, it is no surprise that the central ethical motif in this period became the defense of human freedom against the domination of the state and the “vast concentrations of power—which are under capitalism mainly economic and under communism both economic and political.” It is a false assumption that a choice would have to be made between communism and laissez-faire capitalism because:

Each has made promises which it could not redeem. Communist ideology puts the emphasis upon economic justice, and promises that freedom will come automatically after the completion of the revolution. Capitalism puts the emphasis upon freedom, and promises that justice will follow as a by-product of free enterprise; that too, is an ideology which has proved false. It is the responsibility of Christians to seek new, creative solutions which never allow either justice or freedom to destroy the other.

The concept of the responsible society was proposed as a framework in which this search for new solutions could take place. The responsible society was

not meant to be a blueprint for an alternative political or economic system. Rather it would serve as a criterion to judge all existing systems.

In the search for a responsible society, the concept of middle axioms played an important role. Middle axioms can be seen as ethical criteria, mediating between the fundamental convictions of the biblical faith and the specific challenges of contemporary ethical issues. Formulating middle axioms was an effort to find a middle way between proclaiming general but
rather useless platitudes on the one hand, and outlining detailed policy proposals, which might soon be outdated, on the other. Although the concept of middle axioms has come into disuse, the idea behind it is still valid for ecumenical social thinking today.

II. FROM A WESTERN COUNCIL TO A WORLD COUNCIL

In the early phase of its existence, the WCC was still very much a western affair. When, in the course of time, more and more churches from other parts of the world joined the WCC, the emphases in the debate about social ethics changed. For example, the concept of freedom moved into the background, while increasing attention was given to concepts like human dignity and social justice. This was largely the result of contributions made by churches from the south which found themselves in situations of post-colonial revolutionary ferment and aspirations and did not recognize themselves in the concept of the responsible society which was coined by churches in the west.

These changes became apparent during the World Conference on Church and Society, in Geneva, 1966, which cautioned against calling any one particular economic system Christian and stated that there can be no universal prescription for economic development. Besides the recognition of the need for more contextual approaches, there was also a change in the methodology followed by the WCC: study and action became more closely interlinked. The action-reflection approach led to increasing specialization but also to a certain degree of fragmentation.

In spite of the fact that many realized the impossibility of designing universally valid and applicable models for society, the fifth WCC assembly, in Nairobi, 1975, asked for a search for a “Just, Participatory, and Sustainable Society” (JPSS). In a sense JPSS was the successor to the concept of the responsible society, but the issue of sustainability was a new concern for the WCC. The concept of the JPSS was, however, not itself sustainable and did not lead a long life. Nevertheless, it did promote efforts to elaborate the relationships among justice, participation, and sustainability, and it also stimulated the debate about the need to formulate a new paradigm for political economy. Several efforts to this effect were made by the WCC Advisory Group on Economic Matters (AGEM), which, since its formation in 1979, produced a series of studies on urgent economic issues.

Although the concept of JPSS moved into the background, the issues remained on the agenda of the WCC. At its sixth assembly, in Vancouver, 1983, the WCC stated: “We need ethical guidelines for a participatory society which will be both ecologically responsible and economically just, and can effectively struggle with the powers which threaten life and endanger our future.” This led the assembly to ask the WCC “to engage member churches in a conciliar process of mutual commitment (covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of creation” (JPIC). A world convocation on JPIC was held in Seoul in 1990, and economic issues were high on its agenda. The world convocation affirmed God’s preferential option for the poor and resisted the idea that anything in creation was merely a resource for human exploitation. One of the adopted covenants was for a just economic order on local, national, regional, and international levels for all people, and for the liberation from the foreign-debt bondage that affects the lives of hundreds of millions of people.
III. TODAY’S POLITICAL-ECONOMIC SITUATION

The first part of this essay very briefly outlined the history of the ecumenical debate about economic life. This debate never took place in a vacuum; it has always been influenced by historical developments. The present historical moment necessitates the rethinking of where we are in our debate.

The year 1990 was a major turning point in history, witnessing the end of the cold war as well as the conclusion—at least formally—of the decolonization process (when Namibia gained its political independence). With the end of the so-called second world as a political entity, the division among the first, second, and third worlds has become obsolete. The term “non-alignment” has lost most of its meaning. Ideological oppositions which existed a long time are evaporating, but new cleavages are emerging. Commentators tell us that the classical opposition between centrally planned and free market economies will no longer represent alternative political economic orders and that we are moving towards a global system of organized market economies that might differ in certain respects but follow one basic economic model. Some have even argued that the changes in 1990 meant the “completion of world history” in the Hegelian sense.

Whatever we may think of analyses like these, it is clear that the ecumenical debate about economics is confronted with new issues that necessitate fresh analyses. Given the present confusion, it will probably take some time before such new analyses will have matured. An effort is, however, already being made: the WCC is presently engaged in a process that will lead to an ecumenical study and discussion document on economic life. The first draft of this document was discussed by the WCC Central Committee meeting in September, 1991, and it expected to discuss the final text during its meeting in August, 1992.

The first draft of this ecumenical document warns against the tendency to put all our faith in free market systems after centrally planned economic systems in central and eastern Europe have failed. In this sense, the ecumenical debate follows the tone that was set by the Oxford Conference and the Amsterdam Assembly: we should not get trapped in an either/or debate about centrally planned and laissez-faire economic systems. That is why the WCC Assembly in Canberra, 1991, emphasized that the market economy is also in need of reform. The reasons for such reform become evident when we look at some of the major issues related to the present global political-economic situation.

IV. THE GROWING GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR

One of the greatest scandals in the world today is the growing gap between rich and poor, both at the international level and within individual countries. The average income-per-person in Sub-Saharan Africa declined almost 20% in the 1980s, whereas per capita income in the industrialized market economies increased by more than 18% in the same period. Within individual countries like the United States the gap is also growing. The New York Times (March 5, 1992) reported that the average family income of the poorest fifth of the population in the United States declined by 9% between 1977 and 1989. The richest fifth increased its income by 29% and the richest 1% of American families reaped a 77% increase in income.
World-wide, and within many individual countries, we are presently witnessing a major redistribution of income from the poor to the affluent. Instead of a “trickling down” of wealth, there is a “trickling up.” Some have cynically called this the “Matthew effect”: “To him that hath shall be given, from him that hath not, even the little he hath shall be taken away” (Matt 13:12). A sad illustration of these dynamics is the debt crisis. Countries in the south presently owe about US$1.3 trillion to western banks, governments, and international financial institutions. Since 1983, there has been a net transfer of financial resources from south to north. From member churches in the south we hear stories of deteriorating education and health care and the re-appearance of diseases like cholera and polio. All this is a clear sign of the failure of present economic systems and policies.

V. THE THREAT TO CREATION

Besides the increasing gap between rich and poor, the second alarming global trend is the growing threat to the environment—indeed, to creation as a whole. These two major trends are closely related: economic deprivation and ecological degradation are two sides of the same coin. Just as the growing gap between rich and poor reveals the unwillingness of human beings to share God-given resources in a truly ecumenical way, the destruction of the environment shows a lack of respect for God’s creation as a whole.

Ecological degradation is the result of many interrelated causes among which are anthropocentric world views, philosophies, and theologies; world population growth; war; modes of production and consumption; economic policies that often regard economic growth as a goal in itself and a solution to all problems; and simple greed. A major link, however, is the one between environmental destruction on the one hand, and poverty and inequity on the other. Poverty is both a result and a cause of environmental destruction. Without realizing this we will not be able to make fundamental progress in efforts to halt environmental degradation.

VI. HOW TO RESPOND?

How should we respond to these two alarming world trends: the growing gap between rich and poor and the threat to creation?

First, we must realize that these trends are not the result of inevitable and unpreventable processes. The economy is not governed by independent laws which are untouchable or unchangeable. Economic policies and systems are designed and constructed by human beings and can also be changed by them. One of our first tasks is to demystify the supposed independence of the economic realm and to make the “invisible hand” visible.

Second, we have to resist the temptation to design blueprints for a political-economic order that would be valid and applicable throughout the world. The detailed prescriptions for economic policies that we find in the Old Testament illustrate that it is indeed a human task to devise policies for the purposeful ordering of society. Apparently such prescriptions and regulations were deemed necessary because a totally free market would not produce a just society. Of course we cannot copy the Old Testament prescriptions in the modern world, but we can try to follow their basic intentions to protect the poor and the weak and to safeguard creation.
These basic principles can only be worked out, however, in concrete policies at local and national levels. If we would try to design globally applicable models, we would make the same mistake as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Economic systems and policies have to take account of differences in historical and cultural situations. Paralleling our debate about the “enculturation of the gospel” and “contextual theology,” we should probably also have a debate about the “enculturation of economics.” Economic policies which work in the United States might not work in a country like Tanzania because of the enormous historical and cultural differences between the two countries. The debate about economic policies and systems should be based on the recognition of these differences.

In this debate, the methodology of trying to identify middle axioms (see above) might be useful. What are some of the hinges, valid in all societies, which mediate between fundamental convictions of Christian faith and everyday life situations?

Affirming life is a first criterion which should guide economic policies and the shaping of economic systems all over the world. Every human being has a right to live a full, dignified life in society, and every society has a duty to enable each person to do so. The basic requirements for living a genuinely human life include material survival needs such as food, clean water, clothing, shelter, and basic health services. But human needs go well beyond these to include education, a safe environment, and participation in household and community life as well as in society’s decision-making processes. It is the duty of every society to enable and empower their members to seek the fullness of life. However, it has to be realized that these aspirations cannot be endless since there are both spiritual and material limits. The quest for material things can transmute into the idolatry of consumerism and lead to an irreversible destruction of the environment.

Koinonia and the unity of the human community is a second criterion which can serve as a hinge between faith convictions and economic policies. When Christ said: “One does not live by bread alone” (Luke 4:4), he was reaffirming Deut 8:3 which links the community’s spiritual duty with the socio-economic needs of the poor.

Human beings are created to live in community, koinonia, to sustain and stimulate each other. Economic policies which build on the survival of the fittest and on the right of the strongest, which glorify the victors and blame the victims, are, by that very fact, anti-ecumenical. Rather than building on pure self-interest, egoism, and individualism, economic policies should aim at promoting and stimulating caring and sharing, participation and cooperation, responsibility and stewardship, fellowship and koinonia.

From this does not necessarily follow a plea for community ownership or against private property as such. When God gave stewardship over creation to Adam and Eve, it was meant to be responsible stewardship: responsible to God, to the human community (present and future generations), and to creation as a whole. The confession that “the earth is the Lord’s” (Psalm 24) implies that private ownership cannot be exclusive or absolute. Human beings have the right to use the resources provided by God’s creation but not the right to abuse them.

There can be tensions between the second goal of promoting koinonia and the third criterion of freedom and human dignity. The enlightenment’s emphasis on individual rights and
freedom was a reaction to the stifling emphasis on community during the preceding period of European history. Especially in the west, this emphasis on individual rights has degenerated into individualism at the expense of the search for community. Economic systems and policies have to find a balance between human freedom and dignity on the one hand and social responsibility and community on the other, trying to avoid the destruction of either one by the other.

One example in this respect is human labor. Work is crucial to every human being. For most people, work is the primary route for fulfilling their basic needs and aspirations for a fuller life, and for participating in the community. Through their labor, human beings participate in creation and are thus co-creators with God. Work enables people to use their divinely given abilities in a responsible and creative way, relating to each other in community as well as to God’s creation as a whole. It is all too easy to become romantic about work; for far too many people in this world, work is dehumanizing and debilitating. Nevertheless, work is both a right and a need for human beings. To deny this is a threat to the fullness of life and, at the extreme, to life itself. Providing opportunities for meaningful and rewarding work, with adequate recognition and remuneration, is therefore an obligation for each society and a universal goal for economic policies.

A fourth overarching goal for economic policies and systems is justice. Although this is an obvious goal, it is at the same time very difficult to define what the pursuit of justice means in specific situations. Often, justice is described in terms of the right to receive what is due a person. The biblical concept of justice is richer than that. In the Bible, justice is a relational concept. Biblical justice is about establishing right relationships between people and with God. In terms of political economy this means the affirmation that all human beings are children of God, deserving of equitable opportunities for self-development and sharing in community. Policies based on doctrines of inequality, discriminating against specific groups of people, violate biblical justice and contradict the Christian affirmation of the worth of all persons. Therefore, economic institutions, which often reflect prejudice related to class, gender, race, or ethnicity, need to be scrutinized carefully and continuously. Similarly, careful attention should be paid to major disparities in the distribution of wealth and economic power which tend, over time, to increase the gap between rich and poor. Justice requires a commitment to affirmative action and structural changes that redress the effects of discrimination, dominion, and exploitation.

Justice also requires that power is exercised responsibly; power must be transparent and accountable to God and to the people whose lives are affected by it. Freedom of expression and a just legal framework are important conditions in this respect. Without these, participation of all who are affected by decision-mak-

ing processes cannot be achieved. Weaker and disadvantaged groups in society need to be empowered in order to enhance participation and countervailing power. Participation and solidarity are both end and means for a just political-economic order.

When the goals discussed above are pursued simultaneously, tensions can arise among them. These tensions cannot and should not be denied; they are the very reason we need purposeful and deliberate economic policies.
VII. THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The role given to markets is of crucial importance for economic policies. In the euphoria about the collapse of centrally planned economic systems in central and eastern Europe, we can observe a tendency to see free markets as a panacea for almost all problems. Given the many serious problems related to the operation of free markets, a more realistic position is called for. The basic challenge for political economy is how political freedom can be combined with economic freedom while also maintaining social security networks. The real debate is not about whether a choice has to be made between centrally planned or laissez-faire economic systems. Neither is the issue whether economic decisions should be made exclusively by the state or the market. Both have a role to play. In each situation it is important to decide how the two elements combine to bring about abundant life for all. The answer will have to be found through participatory political processes in which a crucial role is played by civil society, e.g., workers’ organizations, consumer movements, and voluntary organizations like churches and church-related organizations. The precise answers will differ from place to place, and therefore it is good to recall the observation of the Geneva Conference on Church and Society, 1966, that a choice among alternative arrangements cannot be made on theological grounds. The conference warned:

There is no kind of economic system within which the Christian Church is not found, and on the whole Christians tend to support the kind of society in which they live. This fact should not occasion surprise; what is surprising is that Christians have so often argued that only one economic system is Christian.

This warning is in place because too often churches have been and still are part and parcel of existing political-economic systems. At its first assembly, in Amsterdam, 1948, the WCC said:

We have failed because we ourselves have been partakers in man’s [sic] disorder. Our first and deepest need is not a new organization but the renewal, or rather the rebirth of the actual churches. May God grant that we hear the call of the Spirit.

Today we may need the guidance of the Holy Spirit more than ever. The prayer of the seventh assembly of the WCC, in Canberra, 1991—“Come Holy Spirit. Renew the Whole Creation”—is highly relevant in the context of the present world economic situation.