



Whose Justice?

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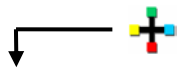


The programme on "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation" (JPIC) has been for some years, and remains now, at the heart of the work of the WCC. I wish here to reflect only on what is involved in the churches' action for justice. I was not present at the Seoul convocation on JPIC, but I have studied the documents with care and listened to verbal reports. In all this I hear a long cry of anguish and protest. And who can be deaf to this cry? All human beings long for justice and peace; our tragedy is that we seek them on our own terms. It is in the name of justice that nations make wars and that oppressed peoples take to violence. If justice may be defined as that situation in which everyone has what is due to him or her, the problem is that I overestimate what is due to me and underestimate what is due to others. And so the one given to me as a neighbour becomes a threat. In the primal human family Cain becomes the murderer of Abel. We long for peace and justice, and to secure them we make war. There is nothing specifically Christian about a longing for justice and peace; is there a specifically Christian way of seeking them?

The social thinking of the WCC since the 1960s has been shaped by the model (perhaps most decisively formulated by Paulo Freire) of the oppressor and the oppressed. Human situations have been seen primarily in terms of this model. This contrasts, as already suggested, with the biblical tendency to see conflict situations in terms of strife between brothers – Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brethren. And many of the most bitter wars in our own time are of this kind.

But there is a reason for the recent dominance of the Paulo Freire model. The huge expansion of laissez-faire capitalism in the past forty years and its integration into interlocking power complexes which penetrate into every part of the globe, has created and continues to create huge disparities of wealth both between nations and within each nation (it also creates, of course, a massive threat to the human environment). Until recently this expansion was limited by the existence of powerful Marxist states. Marxism appeared to offer a radically different alternative. The sudden collapse of Marxism as a world force removes this limit. There is nothing to stop the

relentless expansion of the ideology and the practice of the free market. Inevitably the gulf between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, widens and the cry for justice becomes more insistent.



Capitalism in its modern form and Marxism are both products of the European Enlightenment. In contrast to the understanding of the human situation which prevailed in medieval Europe and to those of the cultures of Asia and Africa, modern Europe is governed by a view of the human situation in which the centre-piece is the autonomous human subject equipped with a reason which can understand and cope with the world without any need of divine revelation or divine grace, a human being who has the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and (most important of all) the right to decide for oneself what happiness is, without reference to any given public doctrine about the ends for which human beings exist. The liberal, democratic, free-market form of this world-view sees human society as consisting of individuals, each of whom has rights which can be claimed simply on the basis of being a human being. But this way of understanding the human situation makes it impossible to give any clear meaning to the word "justice".

It is notorious that philosophers within this secular liberal tradition hold radically opposing views. On one side (normally identified with the political right) there are those who affirm that justice requires that a person should have the freedom to choose in what way he or she will use the resources which have been lawfully earned by skill, hard work and enterprise. Such a person may, of course, freely choose to use these resources for charitable purposes; but to use the coercive power of a government bureaucracy to deprive the owner of lawful possessions is unjust. The farmer who has laboured in the field has a just claim to the harvest.

On the other side (normally the political left) are those who argue that justice requires that basic human needs be met. The right to life is the most fundamental right and a system "which takes away this right from people is unjust. Both sides use the language of "rights" (the common language of the Enlightenment). But the conceptual framework in which both are working provides no basis for adjudicating between the two claims. Both sides also use the rhetoric of "freedom": on the one hand, freedom to choose how to use lawfully possessed resources; on the other, liberation from an oppressive power that threatens life.

One could approach the problem by looking at the concepts of needs and wants. The successful farmer (or entrepreneur of any kind) claims the right to spend his money as he chooses. No one, no government, has the right to control his choice. He can do with his money what he wants. Human desires ("what I want") are – unlike human needs – infinite. It follows, in a free-market economy, that more and more resources are spent in satisfying wants, while basic needs are unmet. Moreover, in a modern consumer society, vast resources are employed and sophisticated techniques are developed to stimulate desire for new goods and services. We reach the ultimate irrationality of the consumer society. In a rational society industry exists to meet the needs of people; in a modern consumer society wants are manufactured to meet the needs of industry, while the needs of people remain unmet.

Within the conceptual framework of "modernity" there is no way in which "wants" and "needs" can be weighed against each other. A rational person would *want* those things which human beings need to fulfill the purpose for which human beings exist, to reach the goal of human being. But in a "modern" society any doctrine of human nature and destiny is a matter of private opinion. In Scottish schools two centuries ago children were taught that "the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever". This teaching would not be permitted in a school today. Teaching about human

origins is given, but teaching about human destiny is forbidden. That is a matter for private opinion. The only basis upon which "needs" and "wants" could be weighed against each other is excluded.

If we turn to those whose claim for justice is based on need we meet another set of problems. What are the basic human needs? It is possible to define them in terms of what is necessary for survival – food, clothing, shelter. If every human being has the right to life, then these are basic needs. But, as we well know, it is the tragedy of much "welfare" provision that it interprets human needs in these terms – the biological need which we share with animals. We know, however, that this is to dishonour human beings. Human beings will surrender these things for something greater. Human beings need things which are prized more highly – respect, dignity, friendship, love. Human beings will be willing to die for their friends. But these are things which can never be claimed as rights. The tragedy of King Lear begins when he claims the love of his daughters as a right, and takes him inexorably to the place where he is reduced to the level of an animal struggling for survival. The things which are needed for true human fulfilment are things which can never be claimed as a right. They can only be received as a gift.

There is, in other words, simply no possibility of achieving an agreed definition of justice within the conceptual framework of secular liberalism. It is bankrupt. Its fundamental error is to see the human person as an individual monad, guided by an autonomous reason in the pursuit of self-chosen goals which have no necessary relation to purposes for which human beings actually exist and were created. And it is at this point, it seems to me, that the church must be quite frank and explicit both in unmasking the web of illusions which constitutes the reigning conceptual framework, and also in setting forth the quite different conceptual framework which is offered by the Bible and the Christian tradition. If I am right, the church is not doing its proper work if it simply aligns itself with the cry for justice without at the same time offering the new conceptual framework within which alone that cry can find its true answer. In contrast to the radical individualism of secular liberalism, the biblical understanding of justice is relational. Justice is a function of interpersonal relationships. The source of justice is in the being of the blessed Trinity, in the eternal giving and receiving of love which is the being of the Godhead. God's justice in its relation to human beings is expressed in his relation of covenant faithfulness to all peoples, even to those who are stubbornly unfaithful. Therefore (to the scandal of rationalists) God's justice is manifested in the justification of the ungodly. At the centre of the Christian understanding of justice there stands the cross, not a symbol but a historic deed in which the justice of God was manifested in his covenant faithfulness right through to the point where the just died for the unjust. The church, admitted to the secret of Christ's resurrection, is the bearer through the history of the nations of this open secret – that the justice of God is manifested in his justifying of the ungodly – that is, in his establishing of a relationship with himself which makes it possible for injustice to be overcome by God's justice, for sin to be recognized, acknowledged and forgiven, and new relationships established through which even the unjust (as we all are) may learn to live in peace.

Here is an understanding of justice which calls into the question the view of human nature and human society upon which both the political left and political right depend. It is hard to challenge this view because it is taken for granted as part of "modern"

culture. As long as this whole conceptual framework is not challenged, the words of the churches about social justice will be interpreted as merely one element in a political debate. The church is, and must be seen to be, in the business of radical conversion, the conversion of the mind to a

different way of understanding the human situation. The church does not discharge its full responsibility if it looks only to the conversion of individuals without tackling social structures, or if it tackles social structures without challenging the "root-paradigms", the unstated assumptions on which these structures depend. The target for the church's message has to be the entire culture of "modernity" which, with greater and greater rapidity, is undermining and destroying more ancient cultures all over the world.

Let me come to the point and make it sharply. If we continue the rhetoric of justice without at the same time challenging the fundamental assumptions of "modern" culture, we are only fostering illusions. The WCC has produced a truly splendid "Affirmation on Mission and Evangelism". I suggest that the JPIC programme can produce only illusions if it is not seen always in the context of that affirmation. Church bureaucracies, whether national or international, keep "social action" and "evangelism" in separate departments with the inevitable tendency to defend separate identities. But the real existence of the church is in the thousands of congregations all over the world. Here is where it becomes possible for the church as a local fellowship to be an agency of God's justice. In its liturgy it continually relives the mystery of God's action in justifying the ungodly. In its corporate life and the mutual care and discipline of its members it embodies (even if very imperfectly) the justice of God which both unmasks the sin and restores relation with the sinner. In its action in the society of which it is a part it will seek to be with Jesus among those who are pushed to the margins. But in all this it will point beyond itself and its own weakness and ambivalence, to the One in whom God's justice has been made manifest in the strange victory of the cross. I have often had occasion to recall a word spoken by Desmond Tutu during the plenary debate at the Nairobi assembly on the Programme to Combat Racism. He said, as I remember: "The important thing is that such action should be seen to arise out of our life in Christ." If it does not, it only fosters illusions. If it does, it can continually nourish a combination of realism and hope which finds expression in concrete actions which can be taken in the local community and more widely, which reflect and embody the justice of God.

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