

Arbeitspapier zur Tagung:

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Handlungsmöglichkeiten und Gestaltungsoptionen der Politik

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Chapter 9

Religions in Europe for a Just and Sustainable Economic Development

In previous chapters we have dealt with various aspects of spirituality. In this final part we will look at the relevance of spiritual values in actual policies in three crucial areas. How are these values translated in the field of economics, in that of peace and security (chapter 10) and finally in the European Union (chapter 11)?

A just and sustainable development is of course a world wide issue. The reason for the emphasis on Europe in this chapter is the conviction, that our continent is called to assume a constructive role in promoting new thinking and acting in this field. This European responsibility should not be drowned in a vague world-wide approach, which so easily risks to dissipate its energy in an 'after you approach'. Europeans should become far more determined in proposing new ways of economic acting. Only then they will be in a position to further the great cause of a global change in economics, so urgently required.

Why should religions in Europe be concerned about a just and sustainable economic development? It seems to me for mainly two reasons.

First of all because of the the human urge to survive. This down-to-earth argument is based on a realistic analysis of hard facts, showing clearly that the present way of managing the resources of the planet, constitutes a serious threat to survival . Those who still have any doubts about this point should take a hard look at the reports presented during the two major UN Conferences, the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and the Social Development Summit in Copenhagen in 1995.

The second reason is related to religion itself. Religions appeal to the whole person. Their message of life is relevant for all our relations with man, goods and nature. Nothing is beyond the prophetic challenge. There is therefore not such a thing as an 'autonomous ' province of economics, in which the iron laws of the market are accorded an absolute precedence over the basic teachings of religion on justice, solidarity, peace and respect for the integrity of creation. ¹ But today nearly everything seems to be subjected to economics. We witness a large scale destruction of our natural habitat and a blatant social injustice in a world with ample resources. As a result a sharp conflict between modern culture and the essence of religions and their values, is developing.

The reasons for religions to be serious involved in the debate on a new, more promising approach, are indeed compelling. The present course of economic development in Europe and in our world, is neither ' just' nor 'sustainable '.

Neither just ...

From an economic angle the European Union(EU) looks quite impressive. The list of achievements is long: the world's largest trading partner, a large internal market, a strong industrial base, massive financial power, an attractive per capita income, a sophisticated infrastructure, a high level of education, good health conditions and so on.

No wonder, that the high standard of living works as a magnet on those who live elsewhere under less fortunate circumstances.

A closer look however reveals a grim social situation in most European countries:

- unemployment has reached unacceptable levels, especially among the younger generation. EU statistics indicate figures around the 20 million unemployed in the mid nineties. The total number of those suffering from the negative psychological and financial effects of unemployment is even several times larger, if we take into consideration their next of kin.

- a widening gap between rich and poor. The EU counts nearly 50 million poor and marginalised people while others indulge in an extravagant style of living. At the same time of great pressure on social security systems we see a small group of people enriching themselves by collecting extravagant salaries and bonuses. Not seldom is the substantial increase in profits and managerial benefits going hand in hand with a large scale dismissal of workers.

Growing inequality is being reinforced by a shrinking sense for fiscal justice. The fair and just fiscal principle of taxing on basis of capacity to pay, seems to be forgotten. Even governments, in which socialists participate, tend to yield to powerful economic interests. The fiscal burden is as a result shifting more and more to middle- and lower-income groups. A development, which is aggravated by large scale evasion of taxes and partly facilitated by fiscal loopholes, tax havens and a lack of effective international fiscal cooperation. Another factor is here the widespread moral indifference among those in the higher income brackets towards basic human values such as decency and solidarity. So far governments have been rather reluctant to address the problem of equitable taxes. Small wonder, that resentment is growing over the possibilities for the happy few to enrich themselves while pressure on lower incomes is increasing.

In a *just* economic order all people would have adequate means to satisfy their basic needs and reasonable wants. This definitely does not mean the imposition of a rigorous redistribution of wealth and income in order to assure that everyone has the same. The central idea of a reasonable relation between efforts and income should not be given up. But the present situation, in which relatively few people enjoy enormous incomes while a much larger group lives in poverty, has very little to do with a just society.

The spectre looms of a society in which 1/3 of the people will be marginalised. The number of desperate people, who are practically excluded from normal life, is growing, especially in the big cities. If no effective measures are taken at very short notice, we will enter into a highly unstable situation with a rapid increase of violence, criminality, drug abuse and even terrorism. It would be a fatal illusion for governments and for those who are on 'the safe side', to think that somewhat more discipline and extra security forces will preserve the status quo of law and order.

A Europe divided between two classes: those who count and those who are superfluous is heading for serious conflicts. It will be inevitably confronted with acts of despair and violent protests. Democracy and political stability will be undermined. Disintegration looms !

From a global point of view the situation is even much worse as anyone following the daily news can confirm.

Since ample literature is available on the shocking injustice in our world only a few facts will be mentioned. According to the World Bank more than 3 billion people in 49 countries live in the low income economies(within a range from \$80 to \$ 730). More than 1 billion of them with a per capita income of \$1 or less per day. On the other hand we find that about 900 million people in 25 countries live in high income economies with a per capita income ranging between \$ 9.700 to over \$40.000 per year. In most western and northern European countries as well as the U.S and Japan this per capita income is well over \$ 20.000 per year! 2

Nor sustainable ...

The present dynamic economic expansion and extravagant level of consumption in Europe and other industrialised regions is not only unjust but also unsustainable. The EU is one of the greatest consumers of energy and polluters in the world. This large scale process of destruction and deterioration of the natural environment impairs not only European conditions of life but seriously affects other regions as well. Natural environment, the basis of our existence, is now destroyed at a frightening rate. In Chapter 2, we have already given an indication of what is going on: a rapid decrease of bio- diversity , depletion of fish resources, dying forests , changing climatic conditions a growing ozone hole, and so on. Industrial activities together with an excessive mobility is causing severe pollution of air, water and soil. Non- renewable natural resources, built up in millions of years, are now consumed within decades. Last but not least: unspoiled nature andsilence, are more and more difficult to find.

For a long time people have presumed that the resources of the earth were infinite. The small number of inhabitants and their low impact on environment did not cause great problems for thousands of years. The regeneration capacity of nature and the climatic conditions were not endangered through human activities. 3 This situation has changed dramatically since the revolutionary modifications in production- and consumption patterns in the industrialising states coincided with a spectacular increase of world population. Since the UNCED Conference on Environment and Development ' 92, in Rio de Janeiro, nobody can any longer ignore the seriousness of the present situation. The world is indeed falling into an ever deeper ecological crisis. 4

Striving after permanent ' material growth', under leadership of the industrialised countries will inevitably lead to environmental suicide. The amazing thing is that governments, economic institutions and the general public are reluctant to draw the consequences. It is as if they are still hoping for some sort of miracle, which will solve the present crisis. A rather naive, yes irresponsible, attitude if one knows that, within 20 -30 years, drastic changes have to be made in order to head off a total collapse of the present system.

At the same time of this disproportionate impact of the 'northern nations' on world environment, several billions of people are eagerly trying to copy our model of development. China, with more than 1200 million inhabitants, is already going through a phase of spectacular economic development. There should be no illusions about the environmental impact of continuous material growth in the prosperous 'North', together with the persistent drive for economic development of several billions of people in other parts of the world. This combination will put a crushing burden on our planet, which is already now under severe strain. A strain, which will even become greater with the rapid growth of world population.

The threats of this unjust and unsustainable development create a high potential for social/political conflicts and environmental disaster.

We actually live-as we have seen in chapter 2 in the presence of three immensely potent time bombs, each one capable of destroying our civilisation. For the time being, public opinion is not much

concerned about the nuclear threat. But closing our eyes for the imminent threats of the social- and ecological time- bombs is more difficult as unpleasant facts remind us practically every day of their existence.

Sustainability-according to the Brundtland Commission- is an economic development in which the needs of the present generation are met without impairing the possibilities of satisfying the needs of future generations. In view of the confusion around this concept I prefer a definition which is more precise and closer to WCC- thinking. " *Sustainability is the capacity of social and natural systems to survive and thrive together, indefinitely* ". 5

It is indeed a world wide concept with economic, ecological and social dimensions. All of these are closely interrelated and complementary. By now it should be clear that sustainability requires from modern economies a substantial shift in production- and consumption patterns, leading to a substantial decrease in demand for natural resources and energy. More qualitative instead of quantitative growth. In short, to a much smaller impact on world environment. This not only because of the absolute need to halt the present degradation of environmental conditions, but also in order to create the necessary 'eco space' for nations in need of economic development. Naturally part of this could be achieved by new technologies reducing waste of resources and energy. 'Immaterialisation of production', which is already now responsible for an increasing part of GNP, offers another interesting possibility. In the long run however a moderation of consumer demand for material goods will be unavoidable. But whether such a marked shift of consumer attitudes will take place, depends ultimately on the motivation of people.

The link between a *just* and a *sustainable* development is a close one. A *just* economic order, not respecting environmental limits, makes no sense because it would -sooner or later- destroy the basic conditions for life. Moreover it could never pretend to be 'just', since vital interests of future generations are sacrificed in order to satisfy the consumer demands of those living now.

It will be equally difficult to imagine a sustainable economic development without justice. For those who risk to be marginalised it would be hell. An unjust society is unsustainable and will ultimately be destroyed as a result of social tensions.

The dominance of economics

One of the striking features of modern society is the dominance of economics. Practically no sector of society is immune for the onslaught of economics. Money, profits, competition and extreme efficiency are rapidly replacing notions of solidarity, decency, respect for life and other humanitarian considerations.

A notable 'hardening of society' is going on, directly affecting the quality of life. This phenomena is manifest nearly everywhere. We see it in the progressive deterioration of social and medical care and equally in the degradation of education. Schools tend to be more and more 'product- oriented'. Universities have to be 'result' oriented . Above all they must be 'relevant for the economy' , even when this goes at the detriment of formation. The slogan , 'knowledge is chip', seems to be the highest wisdom for politicians and some educational authorities.

The commercialisation is also exercising a disastrous influence on the media. Quality- and educational- programmes are hard to spot among the overwhelming supply of trash and filth. The 'money value' of a programme is mostly what counts.

The resulting appalling mediocrity is increasingly estranging all those interested in quality programs. Even sports are no longer immune for the degrading influence of commercialisation. Players, fetching exorbitant prices are literally sold to other clubs, a modern form of slavery (in July 1998, Barcelona offered \$22 million for the transfer of two players to Ajax). The listing of football teams on the Stock Exchange gives another indication of what is happening in the world of sports.

Another recent development, with great consequences for citizens in many countries, is the large scale privatisation of public services. Not seldom this results in greater profitability for a few at the cost of a notable deterioration of public services at a higher price. With remarkable little resistance the public has by and large accepted the not so subtle change in emphasis between 'service' and 'profits'.

Without trying to be complete, I would like to conclude this paragraph by mentioning one symptom of excessive attachment to economic advantages to be enjoyed by the present generation. This is related to the substantial public debt in most countries. With the exception of capital investments, these are largely incurred because of an unwillingness of those living now, to refrain from satisfying their 'wants', for the benefit of those who will come after us. The actual fixation on 'economics' is doing a gross injustice to future generations who are saddled up with debts, which have to be met in an overall situation, most likely be less favourable than at present. If no adequate action is taken to correct the present economic misbehaviour we will leave our children and grandchildren not only a degraded environment, but also an impoverished world.

The dance around the golden calf

Europe is mesmerised by the dance around the golden calf. A calf with greedy eyes, commanding everyone to consume more and more. In trance everything should be sacrificed in the name of the iron laws of the market: social standards, natural environment, human relations, even the Sunday as a fixed day of praise and rest in a hectic existence. What communist regimes did not succeed to abolish in nearly 70 years is now achieved in a few years in western European countries.

Nearly everything is considered from the economic and financial angle. 'Profits' and 'competition' are the key-words, whenever crucial decisions have to be made. The moral imperative to act as responsible stewards of the earth is relegated to the back benches.

Not only the Brussels machinery but also EU member states take part in this frenzy, with greater or lesser enthusiasm. And the former communist states do their utmost to catch up with the now so popular tunes played by the capitalist pipers. Yes, even churches are not immune for the flat, materialistic tones. Some of them are even so secularised that they do not perceive the wide gap between the Gospel and our present materialistic culture.

It will take some time before a new vision on a fuller life, in which quality counts more than quantity, sets through. For the moment it seems hard to offer a perspective to the countless millions, who are now trampled or kicked out during the deadly dance: the unemployed, the poor, the marginalised. Before answering the question how to break the spell of this fatal dance, we have to look at the mechanism behind it.

The driving forces behind the economic mechanism

The mechanism, behind the fatal dance around the golden calf, looks solid. It won't give up easily. In essence it is composed out of three myths reinforcing each other: *unlimited needs, permanent growth, and the free market.*

a - The slogan of unlimited needs

The obsession to consume more and more is based on the misconception of man's 'unlimited material needs'. It is the cornerstone of the economy, the oil of economic life. Nobody is supposed to question this dogma underlying the dynamism of our present economic model. Vigorous growth of consumer demand is considered to be good for profits, for producers, managers, shareholders and even workers. No wonder that great efforts are made to assure an ever increasing demand. Considerable

funds are spent on aggressive advertising and publicity in order to enhance mode consciousness and the creation of demand for all sorts of non-essential goods and services. A relentless, irritating campaign on TV and other media intrude daily in our private sphere. Young and old are constantly indoctrinated with vain promises of a better life whenever a particular product is bought.

b- The myth of permanent growth

The 'permanent growth' ideology, another sacred cow, is venerated with the same respect as her twin sister, called: 'endless needs'. Mainstream economists still think that permanent material growth is a good thing. It is supposed to stimulate employment, increase welfare, profits and incomes. It should also provide the financial means for environmental and social policies.

c- The idolatry of the market.

Since the collapse of the communist system many people are in a state of euphoria about the blessings of the free market system. The market is considered to be the ideal place to bring demand and supply of goods together. An 'invisible hand' is supposed to guarantee the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.

Although the market-economy has indeed considerable advantages over the communist system, its shortcomings are manifest. Some of these are partly corrected in the social-market economy.

Globalisation - acceleration on the road to chaos?

According to a definition of the OECD, globalisation of the world economy is the process, in which the interdependence of markets and production in various countries, grows as a result of the dynamics of the trade in goods and services, and movements of capital and technology.

The dynamics of the globalisation process in the past decade has greatly enhanced the impact of the three above mentioned elements-*unlimited needs, permanent growth and the free market*- on the living conditions of people everywhere on the globe. The all overriding urge to make money is the glue holding them together.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) and a strong drive of 'deregulation' expose even markets in the remotest corner of our planet to the full thrust of powerful economic forces. Multinational corporations and financial institutions determine more and more the living conditions of millions of people. The one global consumption culture -aggressively pushed forward- is destroying traditional cultures at great speed. 6 One sided fixation on private gain and financial calculation is rapidly replacing high moral values

The strong push for world wide access to markets, together with revolutionary developments in communications and information, have vastly increased the mobility of capital, technology and labour. The great influence of small, powerful groups on financial markets is a ground for particular concern. Huge capital transfers, decided upon in the board room of a London or New York office can -within seconds- have a deep impact on the lives of numerous people, located thousands of miles away. Uncontrolled financial movements of vast dimensions- are now a daily phenomena. These operations constitute a permanent threat for currencies, stock exchange and above all the wellbeing of countless people. Actual speculative capital movements are standing in no relation whatsoever to normal transactions in goods or services. 7

The great power of multinationals, operating in many countries, is vastly underestimated. Few governments are in position to ignore their wishes. In the absence of effective world-wide institutions and strictly applied rules of conduct, these multinationals can operate on the basis of a position of strength in a *world* market. Profits and other 'ultimate interests' of the corporation tend to subordinate human rights as well as social- and ecological considerations. Although some multinationals are making a serious effort to conduct their operations in accordance with general

interests of the public, it cannot be denied that this unchecked power is creating a very unhealthy situation in opening the way to gross abuse of power.

Since individual nations are unable to control transnational corporations there is a real urgency for developing adequate countervailing power on an international scale. 8 Hence the great importance of a considerable reinforcement of international rules, institutions and Ethos. In this process- which has hardly begun- world wide non-governmental organisations together with religions, have to play a constructive role. 9

Occasionally multinationals show a growing sense of public responsibility and acknowledge the need for self discipline. An interesting example was recently given by Royal Dutch Shell, which established- after persistent pressures of some ngo's- a code of conduct for its national managers. 10 Mention should also be made of the activities of the Inter Action Council. 11

But positive developments like these should not close our eyes for the serious negative consequences of globalisation such as growing fragmentation of societies and the exclusion of more and more members of the human family. It should be clear by now that the prevailing vision of globalisation as 'one world' fostered by transnational and increasingly world wide structures of economy, finance and communication, is in marked contrast with the vision of human unity advanced by the ecumenical movement.

Konrad Raiser, Secretary General of the WCC, did not mince his words when he wrote in his recent Report to the Central Committee:

"...globalisation is increasingly being turned into a political project. In fact, the present extent of globalisation, rather than being the sheer manifestation of historical necessity, is to a large degree the consequence of deliberate decisions on the part of governments, reflecting the neo-liberal economic theory. The goal of the globalisation of markets increasingly replaces the search for a viable order of world community. The call for the liberalisation of capital movements, for the deregulation and privatisation of social and economic systems and for the expansion of free trade is considered the only valid response to the processes of globalisation on the national and regional levels. This project has been given the status of unquestioned truth by the policies and actions of the international financial and economic institutions- the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation.....The dramatic and destructive effects of these policies of globalisation are before our eyes: they have led to an unprecedented concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a small minority, thus widening the gap between rich and poor both within and between countries." 12

This disquieting situation demands new questions and new approaches from churches. In a publication of the WCC on the eve of its World Assembly in Harare some of these are raised: " *As the forces of globalisation put on the cloak of "internationalism" and even of "ecumenism", how can the church, the one body of Christ, make its understanding of universality heard? How can the ecumenical movement manifest in social and political terms the unity given in Christ and the sovereignty of God over all human powers? How is the moral voice of the church to be used in the face of such widespread economic , cultural and political immorality?"* 13

Towards a just and sustainable economic development – a pragmatic approach.

For an answer to the question, how to achieve a just and sustainable economic development, we may look into two directions. 14 In the actual discussion attention is mostly concentrated on the pragmatic approach.

Especially for the ecological problem great hopes are established on practical measures and technological improvements. Although I am convinced of the relevance of this approach, I do think that it should be combined with a fundamental change of attitudes towards man, goods and nature. A mutation however, which will -as we have seen in Part Two- not be realised without a spiritual renewal.

Hence the importance of religions, who are in a unique position to orient hearts and minds towards the origin of our existence. Organised religions may, among other things, consider to support the following proposals currently under discussion:

- 1 - redefining economics
- 2 - creating a reliable instrument for measurement of growth
- 3 - establishing a more realistic cost and price structure.

ad 1)- Redefining economics

The previous criticism on the dominance of economics does not want to belittle the spectacular achievements over past centuries. Economics have indeed brought a considerable improvement in living conditions. Technological progress has greatly eliminated much of the drudgery of heavy physical labour.

The question however which should be raised is, whether we have not been overshooting the mark. In principle one cannot object to *sound* economic acting and an optimal use of scarce resources in order to meet the material needs of human beings. The difficulty lies however in the careful definition of '*sound economics*'. Actually '*economics*' have been degraded to a set of rules on maximising profits instead of being a science, serving the wellbeing of humanity. The iron laws of competition and profit dominate practically all sectors. And the driving force, even behind Science and Technology, is to an ever greater extent: profit, not service to humanity.

It is therefore of some relevance to ask the question about the purpose of economics. A colourless definition says that: *economics are dealing with production, distribution and consumption of material goods and services, as well as the art and manner of managing these different processes.* This definition offers no perspective in today's world. Needed is now to develop a clear view on the essence of economics. A few courageous economists have done pioneering work over many years in charting a new course in economics, often against all criticisms of their mainstream colleagues. 15 Based upon their work I would like to submit the following definition:

Economics is the responsible use of the limited means at man's disposal in order to promote the common and individual wellbeing of present and future generations. Production, distribution and consumption of goods must be oriented towards a just and sustainable society in which limits of nature are strictly respected.

Indeed, the essence of economics is to serve man and society in such a way that all people can lead a decent existence, within the limits of nature. The sad reality shows us however that, economics, at present, are exactly operating the other way round: man and society serving economics! The original concept of economics as an instrument for the common good, for man's wellbeing, is perverted into a goal in itself in order to enrich a limited group of people.

ad 2- Creating a reliable instrument for measurement of growth.

Economics aim at '*maximising results*'. Fine, but there is one serious shortcoming: the present instrument of measurement-GNP- provides a distorted picture of reality. 16 The result is that we are counting ourselves rich at the expense of real well-being. A good example is the GNP(Gross National Product).

Its present calculation does not give a realistic picture of what is really going on. Elements- affecting our wellbeing in a negative way- are now incorporated as positive contributions to the GNP. If car accidents go up and insurance companies pay for the damages, GNP increases. Similar absurdities occur whenever increased pollution, leads to the sale of more air- and water- filters. Ecological costs, connected with the production of goods, are mostly ignored, instead of deducted from GNP. And a rise in military expenditures is automatically reflected in a corresponding increase of GNP. The considerable environmental damages, caused by military activities, are however not deducted. Notwithstanding these anomalies many mainstream economists and politicians still continue to proclaim in earnest that 'growth is good'. Governments are therefore very keen to publish every year detailed accounts of the growth of the national product. These figures look impressively precise. So exact even that occasionally governments tumble, whenever growth remains a small percentage point below the original expectations. Few people dare to question the sacrosanct nature of these figures. Truly surprising in these days of no-nonsense thinking and adulation of a calculating mentality. If environmental costs would be deducted from the present GNP, there could very well be a 'negative' growth!

Without the development of a reliable indicator for the measurement of GNP a well managed responsible process of change towards a sustainable economy, will be impossible to realise. We have to know what is really going on. In this respect the efforts to compose a more reliable instrument for measuring the state of health of the economy merits attention. The Human Development Index of the UNDP gives an interesting example of a much more realistic approach towards a true assessment of the welfare of a nation than the present clumsy way of calculating GNP. 17

Of equal importance would be a much more realistic pricing of goods and service. The 'polluter pays principle' should be strictly applied. In principle the full costs should be internalised and not passed on to the general public or to future generations.

ad 3 - Towards a more realistic cost and price structure

Not only the GNP, but also the cost and price structure, presents a distorted view of reality. Only cost factors expressed in monetary terms enter into the calculation. Ecological and social costs are only to a very limited extent taken into account. Nature, air, water, beauty, silence etc. are regarded as 'free goods', and are not accounted for.

The same applies to the 'human costs'. If a worker is dismissed, the 'costs' for the firm decrease and its rentability will increase, but what about the 'human costs' for the unemployed worker who is being marginalised? And what happens to those around him? The presented cost figures give therefore a distorted picture of the real situation.

A similar distortion occurs with profits.

The figures on the balance sheet may be positive but these reflect only part of the picture as the greater part of the 'real costs' (ecological and social) are 'externalised'. In the meantime producers may register higher profits and others, namely the public, will have to foot the bill. Under these circumstances nobody should be surprised that human relations suffer. The negative social and psychological effects of acting on economic principles alone are however considered to be of secondary importance.

Naturally, more elements for a common action with all those who are equally concerned about the sustainability of economic development, could have been mentioned. Of great significance for arousing public opinion have been the two major UN Conferences in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, on Environment and Development and the Social Summit in Copenhagen of 1995.

The gap however between high sounding and actual policies is considerable. There remains therefore for religions much to be done in insisting on the implementations of the numerous recommendations and commitments. It is obvious that not only in the case of the environmental problems but especially

in relation to the issues discussed in the Social Summit in Copenhagen a marked change in attitudes is required.

Much emphasis is in these days put on an increased efficiency and a better way of producing and using energy. The Wuppertal Institute, under Dr. Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker is working in this direction. In the publication ' *Factor Four* ', an interesting demonstration is given how twice the prosperity could be achieved with half the use of nature. I seriously doubt however whether the social- and environmental problems now confronting humanity can be solved with technological improvements alone. They also require a fundamental change of attitude among the 'haves'. Without a greater sharing and caring -on a world wide scale- the present crisis will not be solved.

The cue for this profound change is held by religions since they are entrusted with a calling to orient hearts and minds towards the origin of our existence .

The key to change- spiritual renewal

Nobody should underestimate the strong forces resisting any change of the present situation. As we have seen in the second part of this essay, horizontalism prevails in our post-enlightenment culture. With the marginalisation of Transcendence, the idolatry of materialism has taken over. Consequently economic thinking and acting are built on a very narrow base which completely ignores the basic teachings of religions. It is this loss of vision on man's place in Ultimate Reality which is now causing an intolerable situation. Basic values as solidarity, compassion and respect for life are undermined.

It is therefore most unlikely that without a spiritual renewal, the profound transformation in production, distribution and consumption patterns will be realised . This agonising reappraisal of our stand in reality, has however to be achieved under difficult conditions. The struggle for existence is fierce. Many are living under stress and in permanent haste. Time for reflection and meditation - even at the beginning or end of the day- is seldom made available. Most spare time is absorbed by watching time- consuming TV programme's, in which sex and violence compete with mass amusement. A meagre and unhealthy diet for both mind and spirit!

This now is a serious state of affairs as the far reaching, concrete commitments which have to be made, require a certain level of spiritual maturity. Otherwise governments and institutions will lack public support for policies initiating a new course in society. Actually many citizens are not yet prepared to make the necessary sacrifices and adaptations in their life style.

The eager acquisition of material goods and the immediate satisfaction of all sorts of desires get in our secularised society priority. These are seen as providing 'status' and 'acceptance'. And both are considered to be essential elements for one's identity in a world, in which many suffer from a widespread sense of disorientation and emptiness. Under these circumstances man will not easily give up material achievements.

The road towards a sustainable and just society is arduous and reliable road maps are hard to find. In religions however we can find some sturdy boundary markers.

True, neither Bible, Koran or any other sacred Scripture are holding a recipe for a new economic order. But they do provide us with a very pertinent orientation about the direction that should be followed. It would therefore be of considerable interest to go into a detailed analysis of the relation, between the basic teachings of various religions with the present economic thinking and acting.

Here in this essay I have to confine myself to a few observations on what I consider to be relevant elements in biblical thinking.

The Biblical challenge to the present dominance of economics

Of fundamental importance in the Bible is the notion that we are living in God's world, in a reality which is much greater than we are. For modern man, so full of an inordinate sense of self importance, this is a ludicrous thought. But wouldn't it, in a culture, in which systematic doubt prevails, be a good thing to raise the question, whether we are not making a colossal mistake in marginalizing Transcendence and in getting so absorbed by craving for material goods? In a culture, which has run aground and in dire need for sources of inspiration, this seems to me a sensible question to ask. The Bible constantly reminds us that we are standing on Holy ground and have to respond to the direct and pertinent question: *Adam where are you ?* Translated in terms of today this implies: *What are you doing with your knowledge, your possibilities, your whole heart, your mind and strength, at this crucial period of history?*

Isn't this, at the stage we find ourselves in, a question of the greatest relevance for all people, whether they are believers or not?

Biblical thinking directly challenges the present way of irresponsible human behaviour towards nature. No justification whatsoever can be given for the large scale process of destruction and pollution of our natural environment which is now taking place in the name of 'economics'. Certainly, in Genesis 2: 28-30 we can read, that God said to man ... "*and subdue the earth- mastering the fish in the sea, the birds of the air and every living creature that crawls on earth...*"

But this much abused text in the ecological debate definitely does not mean that man is entitled to do whatever he likes with the earth and its creatures.

Have we forgotten that God formed male and female in his own image? The earth is not entrusted to so-called 'autonomous beings ' who could do whatever they like to do, but to men and women challenged to respond to God's Word. To grasp where man stands in Reality, we have to ponder upon the significance in the actual world of the great commandment:

"You must love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with your whole mind. And you must love your neighbour as yourself. " (Mt 22. 36- 40)

If we would care to listen to these great words with new ears, we may suddenly wake up to a new orientation towards ourselves, society, goods and nature.

We will then finally realise the enormity of the mistake we are now making in our economic thinking and acting. The earth is indeed entrusted to human beings, who are *fully responsible* to God, and *not* to an abstract ' homo oeconomicus '! This is why all those, professing faith in God, should be far more active in protesting against the scandalous squandering and destruction now going on in the name of a false concept of economics.

Challenging the major forces behind the dominance of economics

Three major forces behind the present mechanism of economic dominance should be firmly challenged :

1- unlimited material needs

The concept of 'unlimited material needs' is for our prosperous part of the world not only *immature* but also highly *irresponsible* . Immature, because it ignores the basic truth: *"Man is not to live on bread alone. but on every word that issues from the mouth of God"*(Matthew 4;4 also Luke 4;4).

It is simply not true that "man has unlimited needs which have to be met in order to lead a satisfactory life. *Welfare* should never be confused with *wellbeing*.

Throughout the ages not only religions but also humanists have emphasised that material goods will never meet man's quest for happiness. They firmly rejected greed and lust for power and recommended restraint, moderation and above all respect for life in all its forms.

Man infinitely surpasses the voracious animal of a consumer society. Buddhism even speaks about craving as the main cause for unhappiness. For Christians it should be obvious that the insatiable appetite for goods in our present culture, stands in shrill contrast to the Ten Commandments and the preaching of Jesus. The Gospel *liberates* modern man from the suffocating embrace of materialistic bonds, it *redeems* us from the continuous pressure of social imitation of the neighbours. The teachings of Jesus Christ open indeed a perspective towards realistic and promising approach. The attitude of *craving*, so characteristic for our modern society, is clearly rejected in the New Testament. In John 6; 35 we read: " *Jesus said, I am the bread of life; he who comes to me will never be hungry, and he who believes in me will never again be thirsty...*" And in John 6;27 : " *Work for no perishing food, but for that lasting food which means eternal life; the Son of man will give you that, for the Father, God, has certified him,...*"

Already in Chapter 6 mention was made of the close link existing between the overestimation of material goods and the present spiritual void. Both reinforce each other. The widespread identity crisis stimulates consumerism and this in turn, blurs the sight on the deeper foundation of our existence.

The concept of 'unlimited needs', is also an *irresponsible* one in a world, in which more than 1,300 million people suffer from hunger and permanent misery. How can one, who is already indulging in an oversupply of goods, still maintain in good faith to have 'unlimited material needs'? All those, living in relative prosperity, should realise that there is a direct relation between a further increase in wealth in the economically highly developed nations and the poverty in others. Present production- and consumption- pattern in the economically 'highly developed countries', create serious negative social and ecological problems for the states in need of development. Maintaining the outdated concept of 'unlimited needs' is therefore an act of irresponsibility.

Our planet simply cannot bear the additional environmental consequences of a similar extravagant economic development as we have for the whole world population.

Yet, more than half of mankind is in urgent need for economic development in order to meet basic needs and acquire a reasonable level of human existence. Preaching to those nations, that they should refrain from doing so because of our concerns for the health of the planet, will be in vain. It would also be highly hypocritical in view of the extremely negative impact of our own environmental (mis-)behaviour.

Not only religions but also experience teaches us that we should adopt a responsible attitude towards material goods. Many in our affluent society have gone through the experience, that after a certain level is reached, an increase in wealth does not automatically lead to a greater happiness. In contrast herewith it may be observed that even a modest increase in income for the huge number of poor, now balancing between life and death would make a very great difference. Often, *all* the difference!

Acknowledgment of the basic solidarity between all inhabitants of our planet, means that we - in the North- will have to reconsider our extravagant consumption patterns in order to reduce substantially our impact on environment so that others, the majority of the world population, may live. 19

The concept of 'unlimited needs', degrading men and women to monsters of greed and lust, should be replaced by an attitude of " *enough is enough*". 20

The primary goal of economics should be to meet first of all the basic needs of all people. And as far as wants are concerned, they should be met within reason and in a responsible way, accepting the limits imposed by the environment.

2- the myth of permanent growth

Although most mainstream economists assume that; 'growth is good' it should be realised that not all growth brings an increase in welfare. It all depends on what sort of growth is meant. New

investments do not always lead to greater employment. Quite often this could even lead to the dismissal of large numbers of workers.

'Jobless growth', caused by technological developments and profit hunting, is a real problem. The serious structural unemployment problem in our societies demands a new approach, in which greater attention is paid to existing possibilities for employment opportunities in sectors dealing with the qualitative aspects of life such as: health, education, social care, infrastructure and maintenance.

Certainly, growth is for many developing countries an essential condition for the fight against poverty. But is it really desirable that the developed nations continue to grow in material terms? At present about 20% of the wealthiest part of the world population uses more than 80 % of the natural resources, leaving for 80 % of the world's population, in urgent need for development, not more than 20% of the resources. The degree of pollution corresponds with these staggering data. This situation will inevitably worsen with an expected increase of the world population of 3-4 billion people within the next 40 years. 21

Growth is inherent in nature. But not endless physical growth. Trees do not reach into heaven. At a certain point they stop growing in length and volume, still they continue to develop. Human beings are equally subject to limitations in physical growth. But the process of inner development is not supposed to stop.

Society, just as in the case of human nature, should strive to achieve a certain equilibrium between the inner drive to conquer new frontiers and the natural limits earth imposes. The latter are now foolishly pushed aside. Everything seems now under an obligation to grow: production, mining, harvests, fisheries, cities, airports, infrastructure, cars and many things more. The simplicity of this line of thinking is amazing because permanent growth within a limited space is impossible. Even a child experimenting with a balloon could enlighten grown up's, that one can't have unlimited expansion within a finite space.

The present urge for material growth in a finite world is nothing less than the growth of the cancer cell. 22 Growth, in the economically highly developed countries, should be directed towards qualitative instead of quantitative goals.

The fundamental error in the present growth concept is that, in order to realise a short term material benefit, the basic laws inherent to life on earth are ignored. An impossible undertaking, doomed to fail. The simple truth is, that the laws of nature have to be respected while otherwise the vital conditions for life will be undermined.

Religions could play a significant role in the radical revision of the present growth concept. They should clearly challenge the preposterous assumption underlying the dynamism of our actual economic growth model. Actually modern man seems to have forgotten the basics of the human condition. In the Bible, as well as in other sacred scriptures we are constantly reminded not to aspire to become gods. Human hubris, so typical for the growth concept, is indeed leading us into utter confusion and chaos.

The story of the tower of Babel is of particular relevancy for modern civilisation.

3- The idolatry of the free market

The market is a very useful instrument as a system for the allocation of resources and distribution of goods. In the present emulation of the free market however its serious limitations are often passed over in silence. Some of the most obvious ones are :

1- limited access. Only those can participate, who dispose over purchasing power. All others are excluded. A matter of grave concern in a society with a great number of poor and marginalised people.

2- the assumption of equal access of parties to the market seldom applies. Power decides as market conditions are in practice determined by huge agglomerates and mighty multinationals. A free market with a relative equality between the market forces is an exception.

3- the market does not register essential goods 'which have no price', such as the quality of human relations, nature, beauty, silence. All these precious values which make life worthwhile, risk now to be sacrificed under the great pressure of economics.

4- the market does not function on the basis of a long term vision which takes the social- and environmental interests of future generations into account. On the contrary, the market tends to operate on basis of a short term vision. The extremely low price of gas oil in the USA , notwithstanding the certainty that the present rate of consumption cannot be sustained over a longer period, is a case in point.

Notwithstanding obvious shortcomings of the market system the privatisation of public utilities is actively pushed through in quite a number of countries. For governments the advantages are obvious: less current expenditures, no risks anymore and no need to worry about huge investment outlays. But the general public pays a heavy price. The objective of public service at a reasonable cost is replaced by the profit motive. The result often is: less public service at a greater cost! Private investors however are assured about the rentability, as the privatised enterprises mostly operate on the basis of a strong market position. The growing tendency to liberate the free market system from all sorts of 'social fetters' brings us every day nearer to a situation in which the law of the jungle prevails. The inevitable victims are among the increasing number of those who are poor and weak. A development which runs directly against the ecumenical tradition of a radical choice for the poor and marginalised.

The prevailing line of thinking- and acting- subordinating man and nature to the iron laws of the market economy runs counter to the basic teachings of religions. Not man stands in the service of the economy but economics have to serve the legitimate needs of mankind in a sustainable way.

Religions should be very alert to the shortcomings of the market and come into action whenever the humanum or the integrity of creation risk to be endangered. They should strongly insist on the unequivocal right on a human, dignified life for all people, irrespective of race or creed. Basic essentials such as food, clothing, housing, education, social and health care, should be assured for all. Not only for the present but also for future generations !

What then should religions do ?

Religions, with their vast numbers of adherents spread all over the world, have a great potential to mobilise resources for the cause of a truly humane existence for all people on earth. They should give a high priority to be true to their prophetic calling and stand up whenever the humanum is threatened or the integrity of creation trampled upon. Churches have not remained silent in the confrontation with abject misery and gross injustices caused by the modern economy.

Since I cannot in this limited space do justice to the substantial work which has been going on in the past century in Christian churches, I will have to restrict myself to a brief sketch.

Of great importance has been the papal encyclical of 1891 *Rerum Novarum*, on 'new matters of misery, injustice and exploitation created by industrialisation'. The Roman Catholic Church has since then, in a series of social encyclicals, consistently protested against the subordination of human wellbeing to economic ends. It strongly affirms the priority of the human over the economic, and the spiritual and ethical over the material. 23

The beginning of an impressive development of ecumenical social thought is to be found in 1925 in Stockholm, during the world conference of the Life and Work movement. Since the formation of the WCC in Amsterdam 1948, the ecumenical movement has wrestled with the role of churches in a rapidly changing world. The persistency of poverty and misery and the limits of and threats to the earth's capacity to sustain human life became ever more clearly recognised. During the Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1990, the appeal was launched for a world wide commitment on the issues of justice, peace and integrity of creation. This was seen as part of the

essence of what it means to be the church. Since then considerable reflection has been going on in this area. In present efforts to develop a "theology of life", great attention is given to a number of affirmations such as: all exercise of power-including economic power- is accountable to God; the Biblical option for the poor; the equal value of all races and peoples, the creation as beloved of God, the peace of Jesus Christ. 24

A significant development is also taking place within church bodies such as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. During its general council meeting in Debrecen, summer 1998 it declared, that *the struggle against economic injustice and ecological destruction is at the very centre of Christian faith*. The 211 member churches are called upon to *"work towards a confession of their beliefs about economic life which would express justice... reflect priority for the poor and support an ecologically sustainable future"*. Here a process has started which could have far-reaching consequences. 25

Of immediate relevance is also the recent world wide campaign of the Anglican Church against poverty. Its strong advocacy for debt relief for the poor countries may lead to alleviate the misery of millions of people.

In view of the considerable power of vested interests and the surprising blindness for the nefarious consequences of present economic thinking and acting, organised religions in Europe would be well advised to establish a much more intense and structured cooperation among themselves in the economic and social field.

To this effect two suggestions may be submitted:

- 1- creating an Inter Religious Platform on Economic and Social Issues.
- 2- developing a common stand on some vital issues.

ad 1) Religions share in a multi-religious Europe, a common responsibility to prevent a social and ecological calamity. They will only be in a position to challenge the dominance of economics if ways and means are found to establish a much more intense and structured cooperation among themselves. In the actual world, dominated by huge economic and financial interests, it is illusory to think that religions, operating separately, will be able to exercise a constructive influence on a new course. The fact is that we are witnessing an inordinate increase of corporate and financial power, which is practically unchecked since national governments are too weak to do so and effective international control is lacking. As a result of this absence of countervailing power vital human interests of vast numbers of people are at mercy of a limited group of managers.

In view of the dynamics of the globalisation process religions are challenged to formulate a common response in global thinking and... acting. Or as Hans Küng formulated it succinctly, " there will be no new world order without a new World Ethos" 26

Recognising the responsibility of religions for a just and sustainable economic development is one thing, effective action is quite another story. High minded statements from religious bodies on pressing economic and social issues will be of little or no avail in a world with strong vested interests. These need to be presented in an appropriate way otherwise they will be met with a deafening silence by decision makers. Religions in Europe should therefore embark upon the venture of a much closer cooperation between themselves and create an effective instrument for a joint dialogue with decision makers on economic, social and environmental issues.

As a relevant step in this direction might be considered the formation of a *European Inter religious Platform on Economic and Social Issues*, which could:

- provide a platform for consultations on economic and social developments affecting humanity. Pooling resources of existing institutions.
- elaborate common positions on the basis of an analysis of crucial economic and social issues, each religion contributing on the basis of its own understanding of its sources of inspiration.

- develop a 'strategy of change' , including the identification of institutions and personalities to work with.
- prepare the creation of a common institute to monitor the decisions of the European Union.
- encourage the holding of seminars in which economic actors participate together with scientists, politicians, theologians and other people of faith.

ad 2) Developing a common stand on vital issues.

The above mentioned Platform could be instrumental in preparing a common stand on :

1) environmental deterioration. The large scale process of destruction and pollution of the natural environment now taking place as a consequence of a perverted concept of 'economics' has to be stopped. The ruthless exploitation of man and nature, in stark contrast with the essence of religions, should be clearly exposed. The vision should be kept alive on a society, in which love, beauty, truth and goodness, will not wither away under economic pressures.

2) the worsening social situation. Religions should accept full responsibility for effective action against poverty, unemployment and exclusion. Special attention should be given to the relations of the EU with the economically lesser developed countries. The present situation in which 1/5 of mankind is in dire need stands in shrill contrast to the persistent call of religions for justice and solidarity. Economic practices, leading to the crude exploitation of human beings and nature, should be clearly rejected.

3) the unjust relations of the EU with the economically less developed countries. Agricultural, development and trade policies of the EU should be revised, whenever these have a negative impact on the weaker nations. Proper attention should be given to the need for avoiding inconsistency in policies. The wealthy EU should assume a leading role in a world wide action against poverty. The two major religions in Europe share here sufficient common ground, the radical biblical option for the poor of Christians and the marked insistence in the Koran on compassion and charity for Muslims.

4) bridging the vast differences between the opulent western part and the countries in Central- and Eastern Europe. While there are good reasons for the western part to reconsider the prevailing growth model, there is a real need for further economic development in the eastern half of Europe which is making heroic efforts to overcome the great backlog incurred during the past 50 years.

5) the implementation of the recommendations and commitments of the recent UN Conferences in Rio de Janeiro on Environment and Development and the Social Summit in Copenhagen. Here the interdependence of economic and social development together with environmental protection, were clearly recognised. Although both Conferences confront the world with an extremely serious state of affairs, governments have been rather reluctant to implement the recommendations and commitments (notably Agenda 21). It is therefore up to religions, as well as non-governmental organisations, to mobilise public opinion for further action.

In conclusion

Our present economic and social development is neither just nor sustainable. It stands in marked contrast to basic human values of justice, solidarity, peace and respect for life in all its manifestations. Social and ecological disaster looms if there is no timely change in the actual irresponsible human behaviour.

Religions should- on the basis of their teachings- challenge the present premises of economic thinking and acting. The extravagant consumption- and production- patterns of the affluent industrialised states has to be adapted. Economic and technological developments alone will however never succeed in bringing about this radical change. Needed is nothing less than a spiritual reawakening.

Here religions in Europe are confronted with a special challenge. Since none of them is in a position to challenge effectively the actual dominance of economics, an effective cooperation imposes itself. Only

on that basis there is hope to prevent a further dehumanisation of society. Only then, it will be possible to set course towards a more just and sustainable development.

Notes

1- Lesslie

Newbegin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, WCC, 1986 see also: *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Eerdmans 1989.

2- World Bank, *World Development Report 1997*, Oxford University Press. p.214-215.

3- Clive Ponting, *A green history of the world*, Penguin Books 1993. p.36.

4- See important work of Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, WCC- Publications, Geneva 1996. Also; World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), General Council August 1997, Debrecen, Section 2 on Justice for all Creation.

5- Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, WCC- Publications, Geneva 1996. p.168

6- Clive Ponting, *A green history of the world*, Penguin Books 1993. p.140. And Sulak Sivaraksa, *Seeds of Peace*, Parallax Press, Berkeley, 1992. Offers an interesting vision of prominent Buddhist social thinker.

7- World Bank, *World Development Report 1997*, Oxford University Press. On destabilizing effects sudden capital movements see for Mexican crisis p.135. The Asian crisis offers another example of extreme vulnerability.

8- Hans Küng, *Weltethos für Weltpolitik und Weltwirtschaft*, Piper, München, 1997.

See also Bas de Gaay Fortman /Berma Klein Goldewijk, *God and the Goods- Global Economy in a Civilizational Perspective*, WCC- Publications, Geneva, 1998

9- L. Emmerly, *One world or several?*, OECD, Paris 1989.

10- As a result of the dialogue between Pax Christi and Amnesty International with Shell agreement was reached on a world wide code of conduct of this concern with regard to human rights. 121 Publication RKK, Utrecht, of 21 February 1997.

11- Inter Action Council; *Changing Course (A global Business Perspective on Development and the Environment)* S. Schmidheiny with the Business Council for Sustainable Development, MIT Press, Cambridge 1992.

12- Report of Konrad Raiser, Secretary General of the WCC, to the Central Committee, Geneva, 11-19 September 1997. *The Ecumenical Review*, volume 49, October 1997.

13- From Canberra to Harare, *Account of the Life of the WCC '91-'98*, WCC, Geneva, 1998 p.10.

14- For this section I am much indebted to: Daly/Cobb, *For the common good, redirecting the economy toward community, the environment and a sustainable future*. Beacon Press '89, Boston.

15- Notably: Galbraith, Tinbergen, Daly and Cobb, Goudzwaard and de Lange.

16- R. Hueting, *New scarcity and economic growth (More welfare through less production?)* North-Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam/ New York / Oxford, 1980.

17- See Human Development Report UNDP, Chapter 1 on *Concept and measurement of human development*, UN, New York 1992. also Reports recent years.

18- E.U von Weizsäcker, A Lovins and L.H.Lovins, *Faktor Vier: Doppelter Wohlstand- halbiertes Naturverbrauch*, München, 1995, pp.21f.

19- Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, WCC- Publications, Geneva 1996. For conflict between the carrying capacity of the earth and present notions see p. 111-120.

20- Goudzwaard and de Lange, *Beyond Poverty and Affluence?*, Eerdmans / WCC- Geneva, 1987.

21- For an interesting analysis of weight of numbers, see Clive Ponting, *A green history of the world*, (chapter 12) Penguin Books 1993

22- Goudzwaard has been using this term; see for analysis Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, WCC- Publications, Geneva 1996. p.113 -114.

23- Bas de Gaay Fortman /Berma Klein Goldewijk, *God and the Goods- Global Economy*

in a Civilizational Perspective, WCC- Publications, Geneva, 1998, p.1.

24- From Canberra to Harare, *Account of the Life of the WCC '91-'98*, WCC, Geneva, 1998 p26.

25- ENI-Bulletin, WCC, Geneva, 3 September 1997, item 0411.

26- Hans Küng, *Weltethos für Weltpolitik und Weltwirtschaft*, Piper, München, 1997.p.132

== This applies notably to the Roman Catholic-, Orthodox-, Anglican- and Protestant church, together with Islam. The gravity of the situation demands effective instruments, as well as a strategy for the dialogue with decision makers.

As far as global thinking is concerned mention should be made of the substantial efforts to create a common basis for essential values. Since a number of years is Professor Hans Küng working on the Project World Ethos. 20

Other interesting examples of growing awareness of the need for common ethics are the declaration of the Inter Action Council on Human Responsibilities and the yearly Davos Meetings. 21

=The cold war legacy was a Europe, with vastly different economic conditions between the Western countries and those who did belong to the former Communist bloc. On the one hand the EU as a shining example of welfare and relative stability. On the other hand a number of impoverished nations, struggling to attain a decent level of subsistence under incredibly difficult circumstances. Notably the former Soviet empire is at prey of widespread corruption and gross social injustice. Here the forced adaptation process to the free market system has led to a crude form of jungle capitalism, in which a new class of 'capitalists' is amassing great fortunes and the large majority of the population suffers great misery. =

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