

THE CHURCHES AND DEMOCRACY:
HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

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The phenomenon of globalization is one of the defining characteristics of our time. It has affected almost all human societies - not only in their economic lives but also culturally, socially and politically. The nature of globalization's effects, and whether they are positive or negative, are matters of great controversy. This controversy has spilled over onto the streets of Geneva, Seattle, Washington, Bangkok, Melbourne, Gothenburg and Genoa, and from there into the public debate internationally. Until the events of 11 September 2001, the issue of globalization and its social impacts was quickly becoming a dominant theme in the international discourse. Some have even suggested that those events were not entirely unrelated to the arguments over globalization.

There are several principal *engines of globalization* in the modern era:-

- television, and increasingly sophisticated electronic communications;
- the increased speed and reduced cost of international travel;
- increased migration; and
- the progressive removal of barriers to trade and financial flows, resulting in an explosion in international trade and financial transactions.

The pace of globalization has increased dramatically in recent years, but *the basic processes of globalization - travel, communication and trade - are ancient, and common to almost all societies.*

Another ancient process of globalization - *imperialism and conquest* - is also, tragically, a common experience of almost all societies throughout human history. But military conquest and colonial acquisition is not the only form of 'political globalization' evident in world history. The United Nations is the noble but imperfect product of a commitment to an alternative form of political globalization:- the creation of an international community of sovereign states bound together by a common commitment to peace.

The history of this region provides evidence of the long career, and mixed outcomes, of globalization. The development of the Austro-Hungarian Empire contained elements that today would be identified as part of a process of globalization. On the positive side, the transnational and transcultural structure of the Empire proved in its time to be able to stimulate the exchange not only of goods but also of ideas between the different regions. Neither Austrian nor Hungarian culture would have become what they are today without the cross-fertilization of the two (and of their internal subdivisions) during the times of the Empire. But the Empire's transnational political and economic system also exhibited some of the negative features associated with globalization today, such as:

- the subordination of the organization and execution of political power to unrepresentative interests;
- the division of society into those whose connections afforded them political and economic influence and those who today we would call 'marginalized'; and
- the suppression of 'indigenous' national identities and aspirations.

Whether the motives are power and domination, profit, exploration, empathy, the simple desire for community with others, or a combination of these, humanity has been embarked on the process of globalization for centuries. Now, as in the past, this process has always had deeply *ambiguous outcomes when judged according to standards of justice and ethics.*

The Moral Ambiguity of Globalization

In the economic sphere, where its impact is most directly felt, globalization has enabled an explosion in commercial transactions across national boundaries. It has opened new market opportunities for local and national producers and generating increased wealth for many. But its practical implementation has been very biased in favour of powerful economic actors, and it has been implicated in the growing gap between rich and poor and the destruction of vulnerable communities and ecosystems.

In the political sphere, globalization is frequently accused of being an undemocratic and oppressive force, favouring corporate interests over democratic processes and decisions. It has certainly weakened the nation state in a way that lessens its capacity to act as the guardian of its citizens' rights and interests. However, increasing economic integration internationally has also, at least to a certain extent, weakened the capacity of governments to act in totalitarian ways, and has made international armed conflict less feasible. It is true that the vision of international cooperation embodied in the United Nations has remained more vision than reality. However, political globalization has helped to overwrite the long history of conquest, imperialism, colonialism and slavery with aspirations of peaceful cooperation among sovereign states, based upon principles of freedom and democracy.

In the social sphere, increased contact between different communities through travel and improved communications, has undoubtedly expanded the opportunities for people to experience each other as members of the same human family. At the same time, that contact has often led to oppression and exploitation of the vulnerable by the strong, rather than to practical expressions of human solidarity. Television and other forms of electronic communication bring almost instantaneous news of wars and disasters affecting people on the opposite side of the globe into our own homes and hearts. But the result of this unprecedented level of exposure to human suffering is often 'compassion fatigue' rather than an enhanced humanitarian response. Increasing migration has enriched every society by bringing new perspectives and talents to the nation-building process. But it has also set the stage for the rise in xenophobia, and electronic communications have enabled the rapid and widespread dissemination of hate as well as information.

In the cultural sphere, globalization helps to promote awareness and appreciation of the great diversity of human cultures, and to enrich each culture through contact with other cultures. But too often the fear of 'cultural imperialism' through mass communication and trade proves to be well-founded. It is difficult not to be concerned for the future of cultural diversity in a world in which Hollywood, Coca-Cola and McDonalds are present everywhere. It is the cultural values of vulnerable communities such as those of indigenous peoples and minorities that have been first to be overtaken by market-driven 'values'. The loss of those traditions impoverishes the whole human family - a family that globalization has paradoxically brought more closely together than at any other time in history.

The Churches and Globalization

The churches are as deeply affected by, and implicated in, the process of globalization as any other human community or institution. But the moral ambiguity of the process is a special challenge for us to struggle with, from our faith perspective.

Churches are themselves 'globalizers'. Our mission is to bring the Good News to the whole Earth, and to serve all the people of God. The body of Christ - which is what we are, and are called to be - is a global body. A shared faith, contextualized in the many cultures of the people of God, is our prayer and desire. But the history of the mission of the churches is full of evidence of the sort of cultural imperialism for which globalization is now attacked.

Churches have prayed for the unity of the whole human family, and globalization seemed (and still seems to some) to advance that cause. But it also causes fragmentation, in churches as well as in society. Churches in some parts of the world, through their members or as institutions, have been the beneficiaries of the imbalanced prosperity that globalization has brought, whilst many other churches are part of communities marginalized and impoverished by the 'invisible hand' of market forces.

Just as the Church's mission was often compromised in the 19th century by Western imperialism and colonization, so globalization, and churches' relationship to it, is likely to be a central challenge to the Church's witness in the 21st century.

The consumer economy demands ever cheaper commodities. Churches and church members in some places are the, often unwitting, consumers of the products of the labour of people forced by the same 'invisible hand' to work in exploitative or even hazardous conditions. Ironically, despite the powerful communication technologies available to us in the era of globalization (and the persistent prodding by fair trade campaigners), the physical distance between points of production and points of consumption in the global economy often 'helps' us not to see those conditions and their moral implications for our choices as consumers.

Church members in many different places follow the movements of the 'invisible hand' in order to ensure the security and profitability of their investments, whether made on their own account or as good stewards of church funds entrusted to their care.

Within our churches we count both North and South; chief executives of multinational corporations, and anti-globalization protestors; consumers of the products of cheap labour, and the 'cheap labourers'; government economic policy officers, and community development workers; home Internet investors, and members of indigenous communities completely marginalized by globalization.

The 'invisible hand' is our own hand, and recognition of this fact is essential to any response churches might seek to address to the processes of globalization. As churches, we acknowledge the God-given dignity of every human being, but at the same time as proclaiming this truth we are complicit in the devaluation of the human dignity of people who are exploited and marginalized in the global market.

Engaging Economic Globalization as a Communion

The Lutheran World Federation is a 'globalized' *communion* of churches, and with member churches in 72 different countries around the world. For the LWF, therefore, the moral ambiguity of globalization and the role of the churches within that ambiguity are brought to a very sharp point.

LWF member churches in the North and the South minister in very different contexts of relative wealth and abject poverty, and observe closely also the 'North within the South' and the 'South within the North'. This reality calls us to examine what it means to be a global communion of churches in the midst of the dilemmas and ambiguities of globalization.

A working paper on "Engaging Economic Globalization as a Communion" has been prepared by the LWF's Department for Theology and Studies, and is currently being circulated among the member churches. The purpose of this working paper is to stimulate a process in LWF member churches and in their relationships with other churches, faiths, and sectors in society "for reflecting on the dynamics and effects of economic globalization and discerning how to respond in light of the faith we confess, the values we uphold, and the communion which we embody."¹

The challenge "is how to engage economic globalization in ways that reflect who we are as a communion - as the body of Christ *throughout* the world - rather than in ways that are driven primarily by our economic self-interests. Some of us reap enormous benefits, while others find our communities and lands devastated by these forces. These disparities cut across our communion ..."² and challenge our self-understanding as being part of the one body of Christ in which, if one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers.

The unquestioning acceptance of economic liberalization and growth as a 'value' and an end in itself also raises the issue of idolatry. Jesus warns us that we cannot serve both God and Mammon.³ The paper challenges us to re-examine our priorities and allegiances and to work for the re-establishment of a right relationship.

As the paper points out, the fundamental purpose of the economy (*oikonomia*) is to serve the well-being of the whole household of God (*oikos*). In the pursuit of individual profit, this has been lost sight of. 'Economic growth' has been substituted for the well-being of the *oikos* as the objective of economic policy. "In contrast, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity focuses on the relational character of God, of human existence, and our interdependence with the rest of creation. God is community, relationship, self-giving love. Created in God's image (Genesis 1:27), we exist in relation to others. The dignity and value of each person emerge in community. The welfare of the whole community is important for individual well-being. ... Vast inequalities between those whom God has created [in God's own image] are troubling because of this relational nature of life".⁴

Throughout the Bible, the ethical priority is on what happens to those who are marginalized or impoverished as a result of certain policies, practices or power inequalities in society. This speaks directly to a situation in which the 'losers' in the global marketplace are largely overlooked in favour of overall economic growth.

However, we acknowledge that even such all-pervasive powers as globalization belong to and are accountable to God. Through Christ's death and resurrection the 'powers and principalities' of this world are disarmed⁵, and lose their claim to ultimacy. Salvation in Christ does not remove us from this world, but involves a change of allegiance and frees us from captivity to the powers of the world.

The discussion which is thus being advanced among the member churches of the LWF seeks to examine ways in which the unjust and inequitable relationships in which we are enmeshed through globalization can be transformed through *communio*. "Communion points to close organic relationships, mutual participation, *and* imparting of life benefits. In communion we are bonded

¹ Engaging Economic Globalization as a Communion, Lutheran World Federation Department for Theology and Studies, May 2001, title page.

² *Ibid.*, p.5

³ Matt. 6:24

⁴ Engaging Economic Globalization as a Communion, *op. cit.*, p.14

⁵ Col. 2:15

together so that when one suffers, all suffer (1 Corinthians 12:26)."⁶ This is a truly radical Christian contribution to the building of the human family. "The sharing of spiritual and material gifts, which is implicit in communion, cannot be isolated from examining the causes of inequities in wealth and joining with others to change such."⁷

Drawing on the Lutheran Tradition

The Lutheran tradition, as expressed in the writings of Luther, is rich in challenging perspectives on the dilemmas of globalization. Whilst Luther's social ethics are always to be examined critically, there is much in his writings that gives us important impulses for our understanding of and response to globalization.

Christian freedom, in Luther's understanding, was expressed in relation to others - a freedom to serve the neighbour in love. "Economic activity is fundamentally activity in relationship to neighbours, and therefore is to serve their well-being. Economic practices that undermine the good of others, and especially of vulnerable people, are to be rejected and replaced by alternatives."⁸ Economic globalization on the other hand is based on a different sort of freedom - a freedom to pursue what is in one's self-interest, restrained as little as possible by regulations, borders or traditions.

Luther lived at a time of "economic revolution which was gradually transforming Germany from a nation of peasant agriculturalists into a society with at least the beginnings of a capitalist economy."⁹ It was a time of high prices, growing disparity of wealth and increasing poverty, especially for the economically and politically vulnerable. The poor "were a cheap labor pool for an expanding profit economy."¹⁰ In this context, the principle of neighbour-love meant, for Luther, denouncing any form of market activity that enabled a few to make a profit at the expense of the many or the well-being of the poor, and promoting economic practices that served the common good, especially the good of the poor.

Luther proposed that the goal of any transaction should not be profit but rather "an adequate living" and serving the needs of the neighbour.¹¹ He declared that market activity should be subject to rules and regulations established by civil authorities to prevent the very wealthy from taking advantage of the poor.¹²

Luther described his era's version of 'big business' as "a bottomless pit of avarice and wrongdoing.... They control all commodities...raise or lower prices at their pleasure. They oppress and ruin all the small businessmen.... Because of it all the world must be sucked dry and all the money sink and swim in their gullets."¹³ He declared that public officials "should be alert and resolute enough to establish and maintain order in all areas of trade and commerce in order that the poor may not be burdened or oppressed...."¹⁴ Luther denounced monopolistic practices of buying

⁶ Engaging Economic Globalization as a Communion, op. cit., p.19

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Moe-Lobeda, C., *Journey Between Worlds: Economic Globalization and Luther's God Indwelling Creation*, published in the online *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, at www.elca.org/jle/articles/contemporary_issues/article.moe-lobeda_cynthia.html, paragraph [30]. (Also published in *Word & World*, 21/4 [2001] 413-423, Luther Seminary (USA).

⁹ *Introduction to 'Trade and Usury'*, *Luther's Works*, 45: 233

¹⁰ Lindberg, C., *The European Reformation* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 114

¹¹ See, for example, Luther in *Trade and Usury*, *Luther's Works*, 45: 247-252. Referred to by Moe-Lobeda, op. cit., paragraph [32]

¹² *ibid.*, 249-50. Referred to by Moe-Lobeda, op. cit., paragraph [32]

¹³ *ibid.*, 270-1. Quoted by Moe-Lobeda, op. cit., paragraph [33]

¹⁴ Luther, *The Large Catechism*, *The Book of Concord*, 398. Quoted by Moe-Lobeda, op. cit., paragraph [33]

the entire supply of a commodity and then raising the price, and of buying at a low price from one who has no option but to sell. He condemned the "free public market" and "trade and commerce" where they "burden and oppress the poor". He declared that stealing "is not just robbing someone ... but taking advantage of someone ... wherever business is transacted and money is exchanged for goods and services...."¹⁵

Quoting some of these references, the Lutheran scholar Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, a citizen of Seattle (USA), is right to point out the "startling coherence between WTO protestors and Luther".¹⁶ She comments that "Luther's economic ethics had subversive implications in his context, which bore uncanny resemblances to ours. The subversive nature of Luther's economic norms and the moral power for heeding them," she suggests, "stem from their foundation, neighbor-love, issuing in part from God's indwelling presence."¹⁷

It is true that Luther's critique of the economic trends of his day was based more on a conservative defence of feudal arrangements than on a commitment to progressive social change. Nevertheless, his description of each Christian as "a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none ... a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all"¹⁸ might qualify as a vision of the ideal model of globalization, in which freedom and service combine.

Human Rights in a Time of Globalization

It so happens that the principles of neighbour-love, the God-given dignity of every human being, and the integrated combination of freedom and service, are closely mirrored in the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the other instruments of modern international human rights law.

In these instruments, we find "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family"¹⁹, and the declarations that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights"²⁰ and that everyone is entitled to these rights "without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."²¹ We also find the call for "every individual and every organ of society ... [to] strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and ... to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance".²²

In these instruments, we find a catalogue of rights, to which the international community has accorded the status of binding international law²³, that cover a comprehensive range of the elements of human dignity commonly thought of as threatened by globalization. [Every human being has the right to "an adequate standard of living ... including adequate food, clothing and housing"²⁴ Everyone has the rights to education²⁵ and to "the highest attainable standard of physical and mental

¹⁵ Luther's explanation of the Seventh Commandment in *The Large Catechism*, Kolb and Wengert, 416-419

¹⁶ Moe-Lobeda, op. cit., paragraph [33]

¹⁷ *ibid.*, paragraph [36]

¹⁸ Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), *Luther's Works*, ed. Lehmann, H.T. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957), vol. 31:344

¹⁹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), first preambular paragraph.

²⁰ UDHR, article 1.

²¹ UDHR, article 2. See also International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), article 2(1), and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), article 2(2).

²² UDHR, proclamation paragraph.

²³ Treaties are binding upon those States that have signed and ratified them. 'Customary' international law, which is less easily defined, binds all States. The precise content of customary international law is always uncertain and subject to judicial interpretation, but certainly includes basic human rights principles.

²⁴ ICESCR, article 11(1); UDHR, article 25(1).

²⁵ UDHR, article 26; ICESCR, article 13.

health"²⁶. Everyone has "the right to work"²⁷, and to "just and favourable conditions of work".²⁸ No one shall be held in slavery or servitude.²⁹ Everyone has the rights to "freedom of thought, conscience and religion"³⁰, and to "freedom of opinion and expression".³¹ Everyone has the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.³² All peoples have the right of self-determination, and "may, for their own ends, freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources".³³ In no case may a people "be deprived of its own means of subsistence."³⁴ And everyone is entitled to a "social and international order in which [these] rights and freedoms ... can be fully realized."³⁵

In emphasizing the obligation of recognizing and realizing these 'rights' for all people, human rights closely match church teachings on the principles of neighbour-love, and the God-given dignity of every human being. When globalization threatens the principles of human rights, it threatens these faith commitments, and vice versa.

Human rights therefore provide legal 'tools' for the implementation of these faith commitments, in a context in which economic objectives otherwise reign unchallenged in the field of international law and policy.

International human rights law is itself the expression of positive globalization, in which fundamental elements of the dignity which all human beings share have been legally defined and accepted as law by the vast majority of the nations of the world.³⁶ Whilst governments may argue about 'cultural relativism' in human rights, victims of human rights violations in all countries and from all religious backgrounds recognize the applicability of human rights to their situations. With the spread of democracy across the globe, more and more people and communities have been enabled to claim their human rights.

But the outward forms of democracy by themselves are an insufficient guarantee of justice for all, since they can also become the tools of a 'tyranny by the majority'. Justice requires not only 'majority rule', but 'minority rights'. In the context of globalization, the losers may be in the majority internationally, but they have the minority of power, politically and economically. Human rights, fully instrumentalized by the churches and others seeking justice, can help to 'level the playing field'.

Conclusion

Far from being irrelevant to discussions on economic matters, human rights help to provide a legal framework which reflects our most fundamental faith convictions, and which should guide

²⁶ ICESCR, article 12

²⁷ UDHR, article 23; ICESCR, article 6(1).

²⁸ UDHR, article 23; ICESCR, article 7.

²⁹ UDHR, article 4; ICCPR, article 8.

³⁰ UDHR, article 18; ICCPR, article 18.

³¹ UDHR, article 19; ICCPR, article 19.

³² UDHR, article 20; ICCPR, articles 21 and 22.

³³ ICCPR, article 1(2); ICESCR, article 1(2).

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ UDHR, article 28.

³⁶ For example: 147 states are party to the ICCPR; 145 states are party to the ICESCR; 191 states (all the states of the world except Somalia and the USA) are party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child; 159 states are party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; 168 states are party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; 126 states are party to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. In addition, there is an African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, an American Convention on Human Rights (with wide ratification across South and North America), an extensive network of regional European human rights instruments, and the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam.

economic policy in the direction of solidarity and community, rather than competition and individual profit. Globalization has lost, or never had, the true objective of the well-being of the *oikos* to guide it. It is driven by narrowly economic and morally ambiguous objectives of efficiency and competition. It should therefore be no surprise that its outcomes fully exhibit that same ambiguity.

Churches, from the perspective of our faith convictions, must insist always that human dignity takes priority over economic advantage, and that the economy serves no other purposes than that of the well-being of the whole human family. Lutheran tradition sharpens this message, interpreting it in an historical context of economic and political upheaval that in many ways mirrors our own. This tradition calls for regulation of economic power and the channeling of those dynamic forces in order to serve the common good. Human rights law takes the same position, and provides the churches with tools and a framework of analysis for holding governments and other actors accountable in an era of globalization. As churches, we minister locally and nationally and are at the same time part of a global communion. Together with all people of faith and good will, we have the responsibility to claim human rights and to use them on behalf of our own communities and on behalf of the whole human family, in order to restore right purposes to the process of globalization.