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RELIGION, PLURALISM, THE COMMON GOOD AND POVERTY²

ABSTRACT

Poverty is a scourge that threatens the common good. This contribution analyses situations of poverty in South Africa as well as globally and seeks to explore the ways in which the shared values of the three Abrahamic religions which feature strongly in South Africa, can address this situation. The author does not plead for a blend of these religions, but instead for a search of those values at once shared by and unique to each that can make a contribution to the common search for justice in a pluralistic society such as ours and thereby serve the common good.

GOD IS A GOD OF JUSTICE

Let me be up front and declare where I will be coming from in this paper. There is a standard view about the role of religion in public life that sees religion as an add-on which, when peeled off, leaves us with a body of principles thick enough for living our lives together. In these matters I feel as strongly as my friend and teacher, theologian/philosopher, Nicholas Wolterstorff, who says in this regard:

My own religion has not been an add-on that could be peeled off and consigned to the private, leaving intact secular morality that I share with everybody else (Wolterstorff 2008:475).

It has always been my belief that Christian theology, if it is to be anything, is a *public* theology. It is public, because it is the theology of the kingdom of God which is God's public claim on the world and the lives of God's people in the world. It is public because of Jesus of Nazareth, who took on public form when he became a human person, and because his life was lived in public servanthood and public vulnerability in obedience to God. It is public because Christ was tried and crucified in public, for all to see. And it is public because he rose from the grave in the light of day and defied the power of death for all to see. Hence Christian

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theology is public, critical and prophetic in our cry to God; public, critical and prophetic in our struggle with God and in our stand against the godless powers of this world; and public, critical and prophetic in our hope in God and in our work for the well-being of the world (cf. Boesak 2005:3).

The public square in which we work is more and more a pluralistic, globalised one. We can no longer act as if the “public” is an exclusively Christian public or that the public square is adequately addressed if we act out of exclusively Christian concerns. We make a Christian contribution on the common good from within our Christian traditions and convictions, but with full cognisance of the growing pluralistic nature of South African society. In my view, pluralism in this sense is in the first place accepting diversity and embracing engagement with the other. It is more than mere tolerance; it is an active seeking of understanding across lines of difference. As such pluralism is not relativism. It requires accepting the dignity of others in their difference, the rights that come with their being human and hence a neighbour, a human being in whose humanity my own humanity is reflected and affirmed. It means not just respecting the space others claim, it means actively working for that space for them to claim. It means opening spaces for human dignity, difference and equality. It is to this public square that we bring our Christian convictions, in the hope that we might make a contribution to that plurality and to the well-being of society, alongside those from other religions.

There are those Christians who believe that Christians have no responsibility for the well-being of either our society in general, or that of its government. I am not one of them. I do not subscribe to Augustine’s idea that humanity is divided into those who are members of the *civitas dei* and those who are members of the *civitas mundi*. This Augustinian way of thinking, Wolterstorff claims, I believe correctly, “is one of the most fateful errors ever made in the history of the West”. The state is not the polity of the *civitas mundi* and the church of the *civitas dei*. The state is the polity of all of us together. Again Wolterstorff:

And since it [the state] is the polity of all of us together, surely the care, the agape, for our fellow human beings that Jesus and the Torah [and, I add, the Qur’an – AAB] enjoin on us, extend to each of us doing what we can to see to it that our government secure justice for all and promote the common good (2008:677).

For myself, as a Christian, I hold on to the belief of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life, I am driven by the conviction that there is not a single inch of life where that Lordship should not be established. So, privatisation or compartmentalisation of my faith is not possible. In terms of government, I follow John Calvin, who believed that true measurement of good government is justice to the poor: “A just and well-regulated government”, Calvin said in a sermon on Psalm 82:3, “will be distinguished for maintaining the rights of the poor and afflicted” (cf. Boesak 2005:204).

In other words, for me, the quality of our common good is measured by the response to the plight of the poor and the vulnerable. If the rights of the poor are ignored, denied or in any way trampled upon, government does not serve the common good, and becomes questionable.

A COMMON COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE

There is, I should think, no longer a debate on what has crystallised as the core of the three major religions represented in South Africa. However else we define God, be it as Creator, merciful, beneficent, Saviour ..., the one central element that is constantly emphasised is that our God is a God of *shalom* and *mishpat*, of *adal* and *insaf*, of justice, peace and righteousness.

The justice we speak of here is the justice that the Lord “loves” (Isa. 61:80) and “requires” (Micah 6:8) – a primary and rectifying justice, done especially to those who are considered the most vulnerable: the widows, orphans, strangers and the poor. It is not justice we may contemplate to give when we feel like doing so. It is the demand from Yahweh to “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa. 1:17). Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggeman calls this justice “redistributive justice” because the intention is to “redistribute social goods and social power” which are

unequally and destructively distributed in Israel’s world (and derivatively in any social context) and that the well-being of the community requires that social goods and power to some extent be given up by those who have too much, for the sake of those who have not enough (Brueggemann 1997:736-737).

It is not a philosophical theory of justice, Wolterstorff argues elsewhere, but the justice Israel is to practise because it is “Yahweh’s own abiding cause ... the undoing of injustice and the brining of justice” (Wolterstorff 2008:81).

It is the establishment or restoration of fair, equitable and harmonious relationships *in society*, argues Obery M. Hendricks:

The major implication is that any member of the community has the same rights as any other, that everyone has the same inalienable right to abundance and wholeness and freedom from oppression (Hendricks 2006:43).

It is a justice based on social relationships, not on individual personal piety, or individual conformity with liturgy and ritual, but on social interactions. For this reason, states Obery,

for any social or political endeavour to rightly claim to be consistent with the biblical tradition, it must have at its centre justice for all people regardless of class, gender, colour or national origin (Hendricks 2006:44).

The same is true of the writings of the New Testament, especially the Gospels (see Wolterstorff 2008:109-131). Jesus testifies to himself as the Servant of the Lord, upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rests of whom Isaiah 42 and 62 speak, the One who “will bring justice to the nations ... He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth” (Isa. 42:1-4).

There is yet another aspect to this. In the Hebrew Bible, God is first and foremost known as the God of slaves, and of the liberation of those slaves. Israel first came to know Yahweh as a God of justice and freedom and as such God is proclaimed in Israel’s first celebrations of God’s greatness. The “Song of the Sea” is the first song to the new God that broke the silence of the desert (Kaufmann 1968; cf. Boesak 1977:17ff. and references in notes on

pages 154-155). Furthermore, that act of liberation was deliberately disconnected from any suggestion of earthly power and benevolence from the power structures of Egypt. Charles Amjad-Ali makes the point: Moses was chosen for the task of leading the people out of Egypt not while he was in a position of power in Pharaoh's household, but when he was

on the run, deprived of his status as the son of the daughter of Pharaoh, and no longer able to exercise any of the power and privilege that came with that status (Amjad-Ali 2006:146).

Jesus came from Nazareth, from "Galilee of the Gentiles". He was born to a single mother, grew up, in the wonderful phrase of Andries van Aarde, "fatherless in Galilee", the son of a nobody. He lay in a manger amongst the animals, the dung and the dirt; was first worshipped by shepherds, representatives of the lowest classes in society. Throughout his life and ministry he associated with "sinners", prostitutes and those on the margins of society. He lived for and among the poor and it is to them that he brought the good news of God's commitment that they should have life in abundance.

At the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'an, Islamic scholar Reza Aslan tells us, theology and doctrine were not the first things on the mind of the Prophet. His message dealt almost exclusively with the demise of the tribal ethic in Mecca.

In the strongest terms, Muhammed decried the mistreatment and exploitation of the weak and unprotected. He called for an end to false contracts and the practice of usury that had made slaves of the poor. He spoke of the rights of the underprivileged and the oppressed, and made the astonishing claim that it was the duty of the rich and powerful to take care of them ... Muhammed was not yet establishing a new religion; he was calling for sweeping social reform. He was not yet preaching monotheism; he was demanding social justice (cf. Wallis 2008:89-90).

Thus, the monotheistic religions worship a God whose central characteristic is justice, whose compassion enfolds, protects and defends the widow, the orphan, the stranger and those who have no helper.

From this foundational truth flows the commitment of all three of these religions to the establishment of a just, compassionate society, in which the poor are not mere objects of pity or charity; they are our own flesh and blood. Therefore, in his sermon on Deuteronomy 15:4, the reformer John Calvin argues that there is no such thing as *the* poor:

There is a reason for the Lord to say; (open your hand) to *your* poor, and to *your* needy, in *your* land. It is the Lord who presents them to us.

POVERTY: GLOBAL AND LOCAL REALITIES

In speaking of religion and poverty, I propose that we first briefly look at the global situation, before focusing as briefly on South Africa and then discussing the implications for us as they arise from these contexts. The overarching reality of our life today is caught up in the word

“globalisation”. In our own work in the Globalisation Project,³ we have come to distinguish between the historical process of globalisation – the world becoming increasingly accessible through the revolutionary technological wonders of our day; one just as easily accessible market of ideas and goods – and globalism, by which we understand the ideologically questionable process driven by the self-interest of powerful nations, corporations, individuals, and power constellations from which the rich nations and the powerful elites in poorer nations benefit hugely while the poor within rich nations and poor nations generally are detrimentally impacted upon (cf. Boesak *et al.* 2010:4).

This process is driven by global, what has become known as “neo-liberal” capitalism, a system of immense power from which it has become increasingly difficult for nations to dissociate themselves. Globalism is the uncritical and deliberate acceptance of the neo-liberal ideology of profit at all costs, limitless growth and development, and powerful manipulation of finance and trade within a so-called “free market”, without any regard for the consequences it will have for people and the planet. More effectively than armies, globalism has won the ideological battle and has emerged as the dominant ideology with its concomitant systems in the 21st century. Without doubt its biggest impact upon the world and its peoples is socio-economic, and on the poor and vulnerable that impact has been no less than catastrophic. That impact has been no less catastrophic on the Earth.

Globally, inequalities have risen alarmingly. The average North American consumes five times more than a Mexican, ten times more than a Chinese, 30 times more than an Indian. There are 1.3 billion people – 22% of the world’s population – living below the poverty line; 841 million are malnourished; 880 million are without access to medical care. One billion lack adequate shelter; 1.3 billion have no access to safe drinking water; 2.6 billion go without sanitation. Among the children of the world, 113 million – two-thirds of them girls – do not attend school; 150 million are malnourished; 30 000 die each day from preventable diseases (cf. Sacks 2006:29).

In 18 countries, all of them in Africa, life expectancy is less than 50 years. In Sierra Leone it is a mere 37 years. Infant mortality rates are higher than one in ten in 35 countries, mostly in Africa but including Bangladesh, Bolivia, Haiti, Laos, Nepal, Pakistan and Yemen (Sacks 2006:29).

It gets worse: By the end of the millennium, the top fifth of the world’s population had 86% of the world’s GDP while the bottom fifth had just 1%. The inequalities almost become an absurdity. The assets of the world’s three richest billionaires were more than the combined wealth of the 600 million inhabitants of the least-developed countries (Sacks 2006:29).⁴ And we now know that at least a billion persons across the globe go to bed hungry at night.

³ I refer here to Joint Globalisation Project of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology (BNC), the German Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (EED), Evangelisches Missionswerk (EMW), the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) and the Evangelisch-reformierte Kirche (ERK), 2008-2010.

⁴ Sacks is here quoting David Held and Anthony McGrew (eds) (2000). *The Global Transformations Reader*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

South Africa, having so fervently and uncritically embraced the ideology of neo-liberal capitalism, presents us with a picture that is equally disturbing.

In 2008, economist Sampie Terreblanche tells us, the richest 20% – that is, the new nonracial elite – received 74% of the total income in the country, while the poorest (53%) among the population had access to only 8%. The new wealthy black elite make up 11% of the total black population but receive 26% of the total income; or put differently, 54% of the income the rest of the African population (89%) have access to (Terreblanche 2009a; cf. Terreblanche 2002).

According to other major studies, control of the economy and economic resources are in the hands of 10% of the population; the poorest of the poor receive only 40% of educational resources (HRSC 1995; May 1998; African Monitor 2009). The economic and human development status of South Africa has seriously declined over the last years, from 85th place in 1990 to 129th out of 182 countries in 2007 (Terreblanche 2009a). This means it is now at the same level as in the 1960s.

Over 9 million people are still living in informal settlements, and the Ministry of Human settlements is now having to spend hundreds of millions of rands in order to repair RDP houses built since 1994 but now falling apart because of the poor quality of material and workmanship. An estimated 563 501 children are not attending school and 38% of our children suffer from stunted growth, at least 23% from malnutrition (cf. Boesak 2005:53-54). Here I cannot even begin to speak of the undeniable link between HIV/Aids and poverty (with the vast majority of those infected living in sub-Saharan Africa), access to treatment (with scientists estimating that despite the evident success of ARVs preventing the virus from causing Aids, only 12% of those living with the disease receive the drugs, as was reported in *The Mail and Guardian* on 5 March 2010); susceptibility to tuberculosis – which has overwhelmed health care in South Africa with an expected 5 million new cases expected by 2012; the plight of Aids orphans, and the phenomenon of child-headed households. I also do not have the time to speak of human trafficking, including that of children, or of prostitution and sexual exploitation, especially of poor women and girl children, but also boys, all of whom are easy targets precisely because they are poor.

AN INVERSION OF PRIORITIES

The statistics go on and they are utterly grim. But as we all know, poverty is more than statistics. It means unemployment, or the vulnerability of gratuitous employment; lack of access, education and skills, poor health, deprivation of knowledge and communication, and an inability to exercise one's basic political and human rights despite the rightfully hailed South African Constitution. In all sorts of ways, the poor become the victims of slavery of all kinds.

Poverty means the absence of dignity, confidence, and self-respect. It means the absence of security and the safety of parenthood and family life. The poor remain excluded, and their exclusion ranges from basic needs to justice in the courts. For them, there is no difference between apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

Behind these realities, the 1997 UNDP Report on Human Development reminds us, “[l]ies the grim reality of desperate lives without choices” (quoted in Boesak 2005:54). This is, I think, the final humiliation of the poor: to be without choices, options or opinions, which in effect make of poverty a state of effective slavery in a democracy that came into being by the blood, sweat and tears of the poor.

Criminal, too, is the wastage of resources and the overturning of priorities. This is seen not only in the constant cover-up of corruption and the rising costs of official incompetence, but also in the continuing scandal of our weapons industry and the unnamable shame of our arms deal that will not, and should not be allowed to go away. To take but one example, Armscor’s Rooivalk attack helicopter project has soaked up some R1.17 billion in research and development money and has failed to create more than a few hundred jobs – the industry promised “thousands” of new jobs. Arms production is inefficient and expensive. It distorts the structure of the national economy in the long run and has only limited export potential, the experts tell us (Boesak 2005:61). Over the last fifteen years, our armament industry, represented by Armscor and Denel, has reported loss after disastrous loss; every audit reveals bad decision-making, poor management, and corruption. Subsidising this perversely cherished child of apartheid is costing us millions, at the expense mostly of the poor.

The hideously expensive Gripen fighter jets, the frigates and submarines for which South Africans had to pay billions of rands will, for the next three years at least, stay on the ground or in the docks because there is no money to put them to use (Du Toit 2010). When church groups and peace activists called the arms deal “economic nonsense”, holding that a straightforward investment of the R60 billion would have made much more sense (cf. Boesak 2005:61), government’s reaction was apoplectic. However, since then, year by year, it has become clearer: the economics are not working.

Economics aside, for people of faith there is another issue at stake here. South Africa, with our new democratic government supposedly representing the interests of the poor masses who had voted, and keep on voting it into power, fighting the frightening legacy of apartheid and having upon itself the development of our nation, cannot afford an arms industry, heavily subsidised at that, or squander money on so-called defence when there is no discernable military threat to the country. The greatest threat to South Africa’s security is not a military one but poverty. The acquisition of arms that diverts public resources away from socio-economic investment is nothing less than a betrayal of the struggle against apartheid and a betrayal of the poor.

Related to this, although a point that will take us too far from our designated topic today, a person of faith should raise the question: How can South Africa set an example of, and take credit for, a “transitional miracle”, speak of “reconciliation” as a model for others, boast of our “rainbow nation” while our weapons (which we have sold to dismally undemocratic countries such as Saudi-Arabia, Indonesia under Suharto, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and China), fuel wars in other poor countries, bolster ruthless dictatorships, and blow other peoples’ chances of reconciliation to smithereens? How can a country with no less than four Nobel Peace laureates make peace impossible in the same continent we hope to lead?

As for the argument that arms sales bring in foreign exchange – how can we help to kill the poor elsewhere with the intention of feeding our poor, and then we feed only the already well-fed? Can we see the hopeless contradiction, the total impossibility of being both the apostle of peace and a merchant of death?

DISDAIN FOR THE POOR

However, the inversion of priorities to the detriment of the poor reveals something else as well. In the early days following the Zuma administration coming to power, much attention was drawn to conspicuous spending by government officials on lavish trips and parties and all sorts of entertainment. I mention this, not because the opposition has made such huge political capital out of it, or because of the public outcry only, but because – and this is the point I wish to make – it displays such an open disdain for the plight of the poor whom our politicians claim to represent and fight for. It couples with the unashamed display of wealth by the privileged elite in this country, the crass materialism of the so-called “bling generation”, and the casual carelessness with which promises to the poor are given and treated. This is only the public symptom of the deep-seated scorn our political elites feel for the poor. This is the real embodiment of the inexcusable inequalities the statistics reflect. It is the politicised, concretised opposite of the compassion God has for the poor and the vulnerable which is a theme that runs through the whole of the Qur’an and the Christian and Hebrew Scriptures. According to the Holy Qur’an (6:115)

The Word of thy Lord doth find its fulfillment in truth and in justice, none can change his words (6:115). ... Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and he forbids all shameful deeds and injustice ... (16:90).

The prophet Micah says,

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God? (6:8).

When Jesus speaks of the hungry and whether we have fed them; of the thirsty and whether we have given them something to drink; of the naked and whether we have clothed them; of the stranger and whether we have welcomed them; of the sick and whether we have taken care of them; of those in prison and whether we have visited them, he says,

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me ... (Matt. 25:40).

For us, as people of faith, it begins not with the allocations in the Finance Minister’s budget speech, with the debate on whether the decisions taken at Polokwane are translated into policy or not, or even with who wins the current battle for the hearts and minds of the poor. It begins with the disdain for the poor, the contempt for the humanbeingness of the poor, the denial of the rights of the poor not to be hungry, excluded, cast aside; it begins with the right not to be poor.

People of faith rise up in indignation because the disdain of the poor denies creatureliness, and hence the fact that the poor are created in the image of God. We are human in the likeness of God, which means not a physical likeness, but our unique, dynamic relation to God and hence to one another and the whole of creation. The uniqueness of the other confirms the communality of both us and them, and turns both of us and them toward the divine. The denigration of human worth and value is an assault upon the image and worthiness of God.

As Christians, we also affirm that the poor are people whose humanity is confirmed and made sacred by the incarnation of God through Jesus Christ. Disdain for the poor denies the liberating, humanising, reconciling work of Christ who has taken on human form, thereby affirming human worth in the sight of God. This Jesus, the church believes and confesses, has through his life and ministry, his death and resurrection, reconciled people to God, to one another and to the world. He has, the Bible says, “broken down the walls of partition and enmity [amongst human beings] and so become our peace” (Ephes. 2:14).

People of faith protest against the disdain of the poor because it is in fact a denial of the rights of the poor. In our quotation from Calvin’s sermon on Deuteronomy 15 we noticed how he emphasised that a good government will be distinguished by its response to the *rights* of the poor and the afflicted. What is at stake here is the rights of the poor. Calvin’s call is not for charity that would leave systemic injustices untouched. The concern is for conduct towards the poor that is measured by political and economic policies that guarantee justice and are driven by compassion.

The justice we are speaking of is inextricably linked to the rights of the poor. Justice has to do with rights. And here I would plead that we do not become confused or distracted by debates contrasting rights and obligations. We cannot lay obligations upon people whose rights we have systematically denied, whose humanity we have despoiled, who we have systemically disempowered and wounded. A social situation is *just* when the *rights* of people in that situation are honoured, says Nicholas Wolterstorff:

When we fail in our obligations, we are guilty. When we fail to enjoy our rights we are morally wounded. So obligations have to do with guilt, and rights have to do with woundedness. I have come to think that these are two irreducible sides of moral life (1999:107ff.).

These rights, Wolterstorff concludes, not only tell us that they are grounded in the justice and love of God, they also mean that we are not beggars in life.

For people of faith, it begins with the recognition of the disdain for the poor and vulnerable, and what it truly means. It is the recognition of the real crisis we are facing. The crisis is not a Zuma-crisis, an Alliance-crisis, or an identity crisis. It is, to what Jürgen Moltmann refers as a “God crisis”:

Our social and political frigidity towards the disadvantaged, the poor and the humiliated is an expression of our frigidity towards God. The cynicism of modern political and economic manipulators is an expression of our contempt for God. We have lost God, and God has left us, so we are bothered neither by the suffering of others which we have caused, not by the debts we are leaving behind for coming generations (1999:16).

THE LESSONS THAT SHAME AND TEACH US

More and more, South Africans are beginning to realise that poverty is not just a problem, it is a time bomb. Over the last five years, we have repeatedly seen what are called “protests against poor service delivery”. Increasingly, too, these have become more and more violent because the belief is growing that this is the only language government can understand and will respond to. The anger of people on the ground can no longer be denied or ignored, and the leadership articulating and directing this anger is increasingly being estranged from politically elected leadership.

This is not too difficult to understand. In reality, people are not “protesting against poor service delivery”. They are protesting against inequality, poverty, and powerlessness. Increasingly their anger will become political. The violence will increasingly become less an expression of social frustration than an expression of political intent. Our levels of inequality are not sustainable, our shallow understanding of reconciliation is catching up with us, our failure to address the legacy of apartheid in terms of justice and human dignity can no longer be hidden, our wrong choices in economic decision-making to please the wealthy and powerful are turning against us, and, above all, our disdain for the poor is setting fire to our future.

“Just as (English liberal) segregation has been replaced by (Afrikaner) apartheid, apartheid has been replaced by nonracial elitism”, says economist Sampie Terreblanche (2009a). He fears an “atmosphere conducive to a second struggle”. I think we might be facing much more. I fear the coming of a postponed revolution. How far must one travel along this road to get from the privileged and entitled “us” to the non-deserving “them”? Not far at all.

Religious communities are not innocent in this. We have not nearly been as clear, as articulate, as united in our prophetic stance during the past fifteen years as we used to be during the struggle. In the most difficult and fundamental debates that the nation struggled with – the truth and reconciliation process, the question of wealth and poverty and economic choices, the continuing struggle for a non-racial, non-sexist, inclusive democracy – we have been either conspicuously silent or hardly audible or understandable. We have seen the spiritual unravelling of our society and the disintegration of our communities before our very eyes and we have said very little, and done even less. This has to change.

Our responsibility as people of faith remains great in all these matters. After the unbridled optimism of the Enlightenment and modernity about the autonomy of humankind, we are now sadder, older, wiser. Religion has, contrary to all sorts of learned predictions and wishful thinking, not disappeared from the scene. Secularism has after all not won the battle. Religion has remained, and sometimes in horrific forms established itself once again quite centrally in the life of humankind.

However, in the lessons that shame and teach us, we continue to learn that there are things we, in rediscovering the great Source of our being and future, continue to have to offer the world. But we must begin to rediscover them for ourselves first, in teaching and practising them in our own lives and our communities, and live by example so that we can share them with the world.

There are deep-seated values in the great religious traditions that have always been the bedrock of what makes a society humane and a people compassionate. The belief in the ultimate value, worth and dignity of human beings, because they are created in the image of God; the belief that people and civilisations survive and prosper not by strength, might, or power, but how they respond to the weak and the vulnerable; not by wealth, but by compassionate justice for the poor; that the fight against poverty is a call of the God who stands by their side in their struggle for justice and equity. So in faith and obedience, that is where we stand.

That the diversity of peoples and cultures, in faith and in creation reflects the glory of God and that we are called to honour, cherish, uphold and defend the dignity that is in that diversity. That it is better to share than to hoard; that our equality comes from our being equal before God in our sinfulness and in our immense capacity for doing what is right. That hope is redemptive: it inspires us to look for the sources of action that lie within ourselves and beyond ourselves, in so doing saving us from the paralysis of helpless powerlessness. Hope is the knowledge that we can choose, that we can learn from our mistakes and act differently next time. The belief that history is not a “trash bag of random coincidences blown open by the wind, but a long, slow journey to redemption” (Joseph Heller), leaning upon God and on the shoulder of the other in whose suffering, restoration, and dignified life my own humanity is reflected and without whom, as with the rest of creation, my life is not humane nor fulfilled. These are some of the things we should once again make our own.

Faith tells us that God is not unmindful of our aspirations, that dreams of humanity, justice, a fulfilled and dignified life, and a shared and sharing community are dreams in the very heart of God; that God, as Jonathan Sacks (2006:207) reminded us, gives us the wisdom and power and the means to save us from ourselves, and that we are not wrong to dream, wish, and work for a better world. The LORD of the Hebrew Bible commands and warns us:

Execute justice in the morning and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed, or else my wrath shall go forth like fire and burn, with no one to quench it ... did not your father ... do justice and righteousness ...; he judged the cause of the poor and needy ... is this not to know me? (Jer. 22).

And, is the testimony of the Holy Qur'an:

Oh ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor; for Allah can best protect you both. Follow not the lusts (of your heart), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well acquainted with what ye do (4:135).

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me”, were the words of the first public sermon of Jesus of Nazareth,

... because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour ... Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:16-19; 21).

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