

## 71. Mission in western culture, in specific relationship to economic life

To address the possible role of Christian mission in relation to trends in Western society, I would first like to say something about the present problems and risks that are found in the Western economy. Second, I will try to prove that there is a link between those risks and threats and the secularised faith of Western Society. If that becomes clear, it may also become possible to highlight characteristics, which from a Christian missionary perspective, is needed for the spiritual battle which in our time is unfolding in the West.

**1. Problems, Threats and Risks.** In our time we are increasingly confronted with a number of challenges that go to the very heart of our life in the threats they pose to society and our economies. I will mention three of them here.

a. There is **firstly** a boomerang effect with the erosion of morality. Already Adam Smith made clear, that the efficient working of the market-economy presupposes a willingness not only to obey the civil law, but also a public acceptance of some basic standards for good morality. Smith still supposed these elements to be present in a natural way, and in his view they even improved with civilization. Now, however, we tend to see that those moral preconditions for economic life as a restriction. Increasingly such standards hamper economic growth. Indeed, it looks as if the continuous expansion of our material consumption has also led to a widespread growth of a "user" mentality throughout our society that reaches beyond the realm in which economic goods are achieved; this is especially seen in relation to other human beings - after all 'All you love is need'. This means, however, that our economic development, via its moral repercussions, has now begun to bite in its own tail. It is threatening the foundations that made it possible. It is not only in Russia where the borderline between commerce and criminality is thin indeed.

b. **Secondly**, a continuous erosion of health and social care is also taking place in Western society which hampers the sustainability of the economy. Three factors are evident here and they have to be seen as working hand in hand. The first is seen in the tendency to view money as the primary and decisive yardstick for almost all aspects of culture and of social life where we ensure that our human needs are mutually serviced. A second is the growing market for the production and consumption of 'goods' - which could better be called 'bads' - which are addictive in character, especially for younger people. And following on from that, there is a third factor which we can see when the so-called care sector of economic life (hospitals, schools, houses for the handicapped and the elderly) has to operate under extremely heavy financial pressure. It therefore manifests a tendency to shrink when other stronger productive forces demand that our economies expand. This shrinkage occurs due to a simple fact - the 'care' sector cannot

achieve a similar yearly rise in its productivity like any industrial sector can. In the context of a general rise of wage and cost-levels, this implies that in the service sector, the "products" like human care and social services, are more expensive this year than they were last year. And so to maintain "productivity" there is a tendency to seek industrial substitutes - for example, machines, part-time workers - which can do the job better, because they are cheaper and more functional. But what economic outlook is it if a society accepts an increasing lack of human care?

c. Thirdly, the carrying capacity of the earth tends to become overburdened, especially in the most expansive regions of our globe and there indeed soil, water and fresh air are becoming increasingly scarce. Of course, one can and should try to "internalise" those external effects in the economic process, for instance by giving them **if possible** a price. But if our incomes increase at the same time, will that be really enough to prevent fatal collisions? There will simply not be enough healthy nature and good natural stocks to sustain the life of children and grandchildren of present generations.

This is just a selection of internal threats. Also the growing impoverishment of the so-called fourth world could be mentioned, together with the streams of economic migrants towards the North which this poverty generates. But even if we take only the factors a, b and c together, then the conclusion can already be drawn that the present economic development of the Western world (the development of the European Union included) is bounding ahead with a lack of reality. It has begun to be self-defeating, especially in its expansionist dimensions, and it cannot be allowed to continue in the future without fundamentally threatening human life, nature and society itself. Economic life in the West is now obviously alienating itself from its own inner real task and calling.

2. Having considered that impressive list of challenges and deadly threats, the crucial question is, of course, how we should interpret them; not only in their outcomes but also from their origins. **Here, in full agreement with Bishop Newbiggin, I am inclined** to point primarily to the still strong core beliefs of Western secular society. In them, the spirit of autonomy is still fully alive, as it has been since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the rise of the so-called Enlightenment. There is the persistence of an atomistic individualism which leads to the unrestrained operation of self-interest. But next to that there are also other aspects of the same core belief which have to be identified.

a. Behind these cumulative developments a deep trust in man's infinite capacities in terms of what humankind is and what he/she can perform. For there is no other way in which to understand the persistent assumption that economic growth in the West has to be a limitless and never ending process. Every element of possible saturation is removed ("Always toward perfection is the mighty movement - toward a complete development and a more unmixed good." Herbert Spencer

(1820-1903)). As suggested at the World Council of Churches meeting in Canberra (1991) some years ago, the model presupposed here is that of a cancer-like type of growth.

b. There is still behind these problematic developments a deep faith that in our technological, economic and scientific achievements produced the momentum from which a better society will be feasible. In any case, even now, it is almost impossible to question the ways in which technology, science and economy work together and bring about concrete examples of progress. They are everywhere seen as good because they are autonomously making the path to the future.

c. There is also behind all of these developments the persistent assumption that the value of all people is to be primarily formulated in terms of their achievements. This implies that preservation and care have less chance if they hamper the rise of productivity. And so, so called non-productive and less productive persons and groups (for instance the elderly) will receive less honour in an achievement society.

d. There is finally a dominant view of social and economic reality which is still fully geared to the notion that the universe is run by mechanical laws that require us to use also in social and economic relations mechanical levers to keep them under control. This again is a fruit of the dogma of Enlightenment philosophy. In that philosophy, market and democracy are primarily seen and valued, not as parts of organic web of society, but as "social mechanisms". They are seen to be capable of doing their own "job" in a kind of automatic way. Therefore they should be trusted *a priori* in their outcomes. This secular faith is still leading our societies to nurture a deep unwillingness to address social and economic problems in terms of human responsibilities for prevention and correction.

We prefer to delegate what we have to do to our "mechanisms".

It is not by accident, that in discussing the issues of the above list words like trust, faith, (un)willingness, will be regularly used. Modernity as a central belief has slowly but surely taken up residence in our own attitudes, hearts and minds. Maybe it should be said that many civilized Western Christians are also deeply caught up by this secularised faith, adoring self-made idols without even being aware of the fact.

But to the extent to which this is true, then to the same extent more is at hand than just a lack of ethics in relation to the prevailing views of economic life, however important a lack of ethics may be. It is my belief that we also have to see and restate the problem in terms of the deep disobedience of Western economic thought and practice to honour the commandments of the living God.

Remarkably in the New Testament, for instance, the way in which Jesus speaks about stewardship, *oikonomia*, is as a kind of inner normativity of and for the household. Not only the land has to be taken care of by the *oikonomos* (householder), but also the people who are working the land, so that, for instance, they receive their food on time. The fruits of the land are serving the needs of the people. Here, in my opinion, something is said about the calling and vocation of economic life as such, valid for all regions and all centuries throughout this good creation. There will be painful consequences if the rules of good *oikonomike* (housekeeping) are not followed - for instance by persons and societies which take the desire "to be rich" as their ultimate horizon (1 Timothy 6). If such a desire prevails then this creation just cannot uphold its continued existence - this is what sustainability is all about.

3. Seen against this background, we now can articulate more sharply our present situation and predicament. The earth and most of its inhabitants are longing deeply for another direction in economic life. They want something other than the limitless material expansion of Western society, an expansion guided by the commands of an anonymous market ("out there") or planning mechanisms ("big brother"). Here we see that the path of a good economy will conflict with the way of bad economy - in fact in the context of our modern economic problems it is this conflict where these two paths are continually clashing with each other. We are called to exercise a careful administration of all that has been entrusted to us - *oikonomia* - and of course we can neglect this task, but sustainability requires that it has to be acknowledged as an unavoidable part of the responsibility of every economic agent and of all social institutions. For an economic reality without this responsibility is a reality which will inevitably perish. It will never be able to save itself by its self-made mechanisms or institutions. This simple fact leads at least to two implications for the mission of Christianity in the world.

The first is the necessity of what we could call a kind of pre-evangelisation. In our society more preventive care is undoubtedly needed for the preservation of the environment, for meeting the needs of the poor, and for sustaining a healthy social wellbeing throughout our economy. But all this is now mainly failing, not least because of the strong over-riding belief (Aberglaube!) that maximum economic growth, as much in production as consumption, is the best means of serving all those interests. This belief is simply misleading, and it becomes less and less true as time goes on. This kind of reasoning is only possible on the basis of a silent and hidden presupposition that the fulfilment of every need or interest, like those mentioned above, is "of course" primarily a question of the availability of enough (or more) money. And the only way to acquire enough (or more) money is by more growth. Only then will more money become available. This belief has to be made clearly exposed as a myth and that indeed is a kind of pre-evangelisation. The truth of the question is to often evaded in cowardly fashion.

But the real question concerns whether there are, or may be, at least some norms or interests which are valid and should be respected *before* we begin to produce or consume. That is, so to say, a kind of multi-dimensional way of looking again at economic realities, seeing economics in terms of our many-sided responsibilities. But that way of viewing economics has almost been entirely lost in our secularised culture.

Western people do not like the commandment of pre-care; they stress post-care, a state of affairs that can only be managed **on the basis of our own economic achievements**. But now, for the sake of earth and heaven, preventive care has to return. And Christians especially should become aware that they should not uncritically go along with the standards of a deeply acquisitive society and its views of mechanical autonomy.

The **second** possible implication is the spiritual struggle about the future for which our society is now preparing itself. We need to see this future in terms of the need to articulate a new confession of faith.

The first assembly of the World Council of Churches, 1948, contrasted man's disorder with the Design of God - the same word *oikonomion* in Ephesians 1:10 is used to indicate the mystery of God's style of "globalization" - his plan to bring everything on earth back under the Lordship of Christ as the real King. The style of His shepherd rule is the promise that the weak are upheld and the wounded healed, and that is so different from the present style of globalization in which the pursuit of maximum growth in wealth and power and profit prevail. The wrong kind of globalization is extremely dominant. This implies that in the coming years we, personally and as societies, will indeed have to choose which kind of globalization we want to orient our life and future. It is not just a question of being loyal to our faith, but also to prevent our world going over the edge of sustainability and committing suicide. We need therefore a style of confession about economic life, which has clear parallels with the Barmen declaration made by the confessing German church under Nazi rule. Such a confession has to be centred on the question which, or whose, Lordship we want to respect, and must condemn and stand against any effort to transform any human institution - be it the state, but now also the market - into a final authority over our lives.

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