

Book Reviews

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Review of Ulrich Duchrow **Global Economy: a Confessional Issue for the Churches?** Geneva, WCC 1987 and Charles Elliott **Comfortable Compassion? Poverty, Power and the Church** London, Hodder and Stoughton 1987 in *Ecumenical Review* 40:2 April pp. 292-294.

The publication of these two books - which we consider of great importance in the ecumenical debate on social issues - invites reflection on how to deal with the fundamental problems relating to poverty in today's world society. The countries from which these books come have very different political and cultural histories, and very different ecclesiastical traditions. Do these differences prevent the development of a common European perspective on and attitude to the problems of world poverty? And even more important: do Duchrow and Elliott give new views which will enable us to rethink the ecumenical debate?

We will begin with the thinking of Ulrich Duchrow. His thesis is: the present economic world order is full of the smell of death. People die from hunger and starvation. This fact has nothing to do with God or with nature, but simply with the disorder of society. Churches and Christians are "watchmen" in the place of *Christus praesens*. The place "Where we are to look for the *Christus praesens* today is the global economic system since this place is central for injustice, wars and destruction of the creation" (p.26).

Duchrow says that a theologian has to ask whether we should not choose life instead of death. He reminds us of Deuteronomy 30:19-20: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendents may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him." Duchrow continues: "Some theologians, including myself, are seeking, in the light of the New Testament doctrine of the body of Christ, to understand, analyze and influence the international economic processes and mechanisms which experience shows are already catastrophic in their effects and are

becoming increasingly so with each passing day, costing every year the lives of roughly thirty million human beings" (p.47).

We want to commend Duchrow for putting the right question before us. As a theologian he has the right and responsibility to remind us of this fundamental choice. It is significant that he considers the question of human needs as of special importance for theological reflection; for example, he says that much of the talk of "free market is pure ideology, in the sense that this term rationalizes and disguises the interests of the more powerful participants in this life and death struggle" (p. 156).

His main conclusion and question is the following: "If the first priority of the global economic system is no longer the satisfaction of the basic needs of *all* human beings, as the World Council of Churches, the Catholic bishops of the USA, and the alternative economists properly insist it should be, and if this global economic system takes for granted the death of millions of poor people as the price to be paid to ensure a 'better' life for the few, then the salient point would seem to be this: does the church champion *the life of all human beings and of the whole earth*, or does it side with the global economic system which at least tolerates and even automatically causes the mass death of so many and the destruction of the earth by the mechanisms so structured?" (pp. 178-9).

No economist with a Christian background can deny the relevance of this question, and Duchrow's proposal to remove the curtain between the confessional speaking of the church and the world economic system must be taken very seriously. Here "neutrality" is sin, even heresy.

We restrict ourselves to two remarks on Duchrow's economic views. (1) Despite his comment above on free market, he states that it needs to be delivered from its "absolutism" in order to become a "*free* market": it "needs to be replaced within a broader context and become once more an instrument in the service of humanity" (p. 158). This leaves the question of what has to be rejected and what [293] has to be set "free": Here further clarification is needed. (2) Duchrow needs to indicate what he thinks

a market can and cannot do. For example: a market cannot, by itself, give a value to what does not have a price, such as nature or culture. A market cannot, by itself, give employment a higher value than the use of capital. Neither can a market give any priority to basic needs over luxury goods - everything depends upon one's buying power. Because of these simple facts, it is sheer ideology or idolatry for a culture to trust such an instrument to achieve happiness for all. For it will inevitably act like a tyrant, destroying what has no price, throwing out labour if capital gives higher financial rewards, deepening the poverty of those who have no buying power, and increasing the debts of the powerless.

There is a need for an economic system which starts from exactly those "interests", interests which have no defender in the market: the interests of the poor, of the unemployed, of the financially exploited and of the world of plants and animals. That is also at the heart of the justice, peace and integrity of creation (its preservation) sought in the WCC JPIC¹ "conciliar process". A calculation made by the scientific council of the Dutch government has determined that, for the economy of our country, such a different orientation is possible. The presupposition - socially and politically - is a willingness to accept² concrete limitations in our "Western" level of income and consumption per capita.

We now consider the thought of Charles Elliott. Basically his approach and conclusions are similar to Duchrow's. He says, for example: "The poverty of 800 million, rising to one-billion by the end of the century, is ... *the outcome of a process*" (p.15); "... poverty is created and sustained by structures and structural relationships in society as a whole" (p.63); "the Western churches have failed to come to terms with the structural analysis of poverty at many levels - intellectual, ethical, political and existential" (p. 69); "asymmetrical power is a fundamental, perhaps *the* fundamental, principle that maintains processes of impoverishment" (p.119). Elliott begins his argument with the churches'

¹ JPIC stands for "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation" which was the name of programmes that derived from the 1983 Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches. The aim was to engage churches in a mutual commitment which then became a characteristic of all WCC programmes. <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/dictionary-article-11.html>

² original reads "except"

struggle against world poverty today. He explains how the development activities of the churches tended to be conceived and organized separately from, and in many cases in opposition to, the traditional missionary structures of the church. He strongly criticizes the churches in England: "If the British churches have largely failed to detect the justice issues at the heart of institutionalised racism, it is not surprising that they have failed to see the justice dimension of the various structural problems ..." (p.73). But of course it is not only these churches: "The churches, supremely in Germany and America, but also in Canada, Australia, Sweden and Denmark ... had scented big money in development. So too, incidentally, had the World Council of Churches whose development agencies now became the money spinner for the whole of the ecumenical movement. The sources of this money were dominated by government" (p.36). His conclusion is radical: "A well-financed Church is not a critical Church" (p.37), and "the Western churches had become the agents by which Western materialism, Western modernism, was to be transferred to the developing world" (p.47).

This means that it is not possible to continue on this road. Let the churches stop thinking that projects can effect fundamental change in unjust social structures; on the contrary, they tend to *consolidate* unjust structures. (Here it could be interesting to listen to the experience of the church-related bodies in the Netherlands regarding projects and contacts with basic communities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.) Thus Elliott calls upon the churches to look for another way to solve the poverty problem, which is *the* pre-eminent economic problem.

In comparing Elliott and Duchrow we note that although their conclusions are similar they differ in tone and background. Elliott uses very strong language; the title of his book is already an example of that, along with such statements as: "The churches have become trapped in a set of attitudes and institutions that sell short both the Christian Gospel and the poor of the world" (p.67). Elliott is asking for a radical reinterpretation of our situation, to include a dimension of the struggle against the "principalities and powers" which are the *spiritual essence* of the present economic system. A conversion of the church itself is needed, a conversion of the needs of the poor and the powerless. Elliott mentions a few examples of such conversions, which have become "centres of

resistance": the Witness for Peace in Nicaragua and the Christian Institute in South Africa.

Elliott's book has a certain "evangelical" flavour; we are not quite clear as to his concept of the church. More importantly we have [294] two reservations about Elliott's work: (1) he goes too far in his generalizations and he pays no - or almost no - attention to more recent developments in the field of development co-operation. Not all, but many agencies are driven - under pressure of their overseas partners - into a sharper, more critical attitude to their own rich societies - not only to their own governments, but also to their own church institutions. Elliott's sketch is too rough. (2) No real alternative is even hinted at. Duchrow sees a path which could be followed, and we would be interested to know whether Elliott could join him. It is a pity that in his reflections on the churches and the WCC, the WCC sub-unit Commission on the Churches' Participation in Development is treated as quite insignificant. We feel that more could be said on its activities.

Both books bring us back to the findings of the WCC consultation at Zurich (1978) on political economy, ethics and theology. One of the conclusions of that consultation was "there is need for a new paradigm that would correspond to the operational requirements of a just, participatory and sustainable society and inspire a new understanding of the dimensions of poverty in the world and the demands of the Gospel."(Already in 1978 the consultation had come to the conclusion that the old paradigms have no solution for the problem of poverty - nor did they have any for the problem of the environment. The report on the Zurich consultation has been published in *Anticipation*, WCC, June 1979, No. 26.)

It is time to resume this dialogue. Duchrow's and Elliott's books can provide excellent input. Time has come for new leadership on the part of the World Council of Churches; it is clear that this dialogue can be a fruitful part of the JPIC "conciliar process". This should include an examination of the question: why have the churches so far not succeeded in bringing their recommendations on the problem of poverty into public decision-making processes? It should also include the question: is Elliott's critical

attitude regarding the British churches relevant for the churches in other European countries? A basic issue is: after the idea of the New International Economic and Political Order has been rejected, must the Christian community suggest a new strategy? And should we focus on a policy which emphasizes basic human needs? Here Duchrow has posed some urgent and strategic questions: "It is by no means clear who is chiefly responsible for the death of more than forty million people from starvation each year while a tiny minority of the world's inhabitants in the industrial countries and in the elites of the so-called 'developing countries' live in real or relative luxury. Who are the agents responsible for this obscene annual human sacrifice? How are they to be called to account?" (p. 141).

There are many urgent questions! What are we waiting for?

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