

What does the Lord require? Three statements on Christian faith and economic life

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The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and the consequent abandonment of the policies and institutions of centralised economic planning in favour of market based systems, has rewritten, at least in part, the agenda which has to be addressed by Christian ethics for economic life. Other parts of the agenda remain the same, notably international disparities in income and the impact of international economic policies, but even there the discrediting of economic planning has changed the emphasis of the discussion. Market "solutions" are to the fore, and the only issue is how these solutions are to be applied, and the design of appropriate institutional and regulatory mechanisms. It is therefore particularly opportune that the last two years have seen the production of major statements on economic issues by Christian bodies representing three strands in theology and ethics. The first is the Encyclical Centesimus Annus promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1991, which expounds official Roman Catholic teaching. The second is a World Council of Churches Statement Economy as a Matter of Faith, which reflects liberal Protestant theological ethics. The third, the first to be produced in early 1990, is the Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics, where the theological basis of the signatories is Evangelical, corresponding to the doctrinal stance of the Lausanne Covenant.

It should be noted however that the formal status of the

three documents is very different. The Oxford Declaration has no more authority in Evangelical circles than that of the signatories. It is the result of a private initiative by the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, involving, among others, Chris Sugden, Ron Sider and Vinay Samuel. The participants were invited rather than representatives, though a great effort was made to include all shades of opinion within Evangelicalism. One wonders why the initiative had to be private: perhaps the Lausanne Committee feels that such discussions are too "political", or just not central to their concerns. The WCC document is the work of an advisory group on economic issues within the Council. It was produced after the 1991 Canberra Assembly, and in response to some of the concerns expressed by that Assembly. While it undoubtedly reflects the consensus within the WCC secretariat, and no doubt has been drawn up in a way which is sensitive to the views of WCC members, it has yet to be adopted as an official policy document by the WCC. Centesimus Annus is a very different document: as a Papal Encyclical it carries all the authority of the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. While no doubt many Catholic theologians and ethicists played a part in the research and drafting, it is issued in the name of Pope John Paul, and he will have had a major influence on the document, both in its general stance and in the detailed statements.

In reviewing these three documents, it is convenient to compare and contrast them under four headings: method, context, content, and application. These four areas enable us to identify the distinctiveness of each, and the points of agreement (or convergence of views).

Method

Differences of ethical method are important, not only intrinsically, but also because they reflect differing theological views about the basis for the authority of Christian ethical statements. The fundamental problem for Christian economic ethics is how to make the transition from fundamental doctrinal or ethical insights to the complex world of economic phenomena. Different solutions to that problem almost certainly reflect differences about authority in the church. The Oxford Declaration is explicit on this question: "... Scripture, the word of the living and true God, is our supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. Hence we turn to Scripture as our reliable guide". The Statement illustrates the method: Scriptural teaching concerning economic life is summarized under headings such as "Creation and Stewardship", "Work and Leisure". There is no discussion of the hermeneutical problems involved in using biblical materials in this way, and no justification of the method is attempted. The summaries are much more than a listing of texts however: each is a reasoned statement of ethical principles that are claimed to underly the text. The applications of these principles follows within each section of the Declaration. The model of application is critique of a particular aspect of economic life followed (sometimes) by policy proposal, though the latter is seldom fully worked out.

The WCC Statement has a rather different structure. It begins with individual stories of economic hardship. It continues with a major section on "Today's economic context: the failure of old systems". Throughout the document there are

constant reminders that economic ethics must be "contextualized"; that is, they must be developed in the context of actual problems and cultures, and not developed as an abstract system of thought. Having described the context, a section follows with "Some fundamental convictions on economic life". These convictions are drawn from theological affirmations about human life and its significance. Some are quite general e.g. the idea that human beings are to be understood as individuals in community, while others are much more specific e.g. the Jubilee principle. There is no discussion of the authority of these "convictions" as a tool for ethical reflection. Nor is there any attempt to systematize them into a set of ethical principles: they are just a listing of points. In the next section of the Statement, these convictions are allowed to interact, in a fairly unrigorous manner, with the contemporary context to generate a set of "Goals and visions for economic life". These are, as might be expected, rather more specific than the "convictions", but they are once again presented as a shopping list of desiderata, rather than as a coherent statement about economic life, a fully developed theological ethics. From these goals and visions, a section entitled "The need for economic policies" returns to some of the contemporary issues with which the paper began, and outlines the policy questions, without, however, detailing appropriate policy responses. Doubts are expressed as to whether it is the task of the church to provide more detailed policy prescriptions. One criticism of the method of the WCC Statement is that the discussion is loosely structured, both within and between sections. The main drift of the argument is easy to follow, but the detailed development from "fundamental convictions" to "goals

and visions" to "the need for policies" is not given. Perhaps this weakness arises from the authors' conviction that economic ethics must be developed for concrete problems, and not in the abstract.

Centesimus Annus has no doubts about the source of its authority. As a Papal Encyclical it carries the full authority of the Roman Catholic Church in virtue of the authority ceded to St. Peter and his successors in the See of Rome. The 100th anniversary referred to in the title of the Encyclical is that of the Encyclical Rerum Novarum promulgated by Pope Leo in 1891. Centesimus Annus describes Rerum Novarum as seminal in the development of the Church's social teaching or "social magisterium". Detailed references in the document are largely to other Encyclicals, or statements by the Church or Popes. The argument of the Encyclical is clear and uncompromising. The starting point is essentially the Christian doctrine of the human person, though reference is made at appropriate points to the doctrines of creation. From the doctrine of humanity, various ethical principles are derived e.g. the rights of workers, the right to private property, the principle of solidarity, the principle of human freedom (and hence only limited government). These principles are then used to evaluate economic life and to propose general economic policies to put right the wrongs that have been identified. However this application is not abstract or general: rather it is set in the context of a commentary on recent economic and political events. In comparison with the other two documents it scores in presenting both an analysis of contemporary events and problems (so it is fully contextualised),

and a well argued theological ethic for economic life. The authoritative basis of the document is very evident, compared to the much more tentative exploration in the WCC Statement. For non-Roman Catholic readers there may, of course, be a question mark over the presumed authority of Papal statements, even though there may be much in the content with which one could agree. But without the resort to Papal authority, the methodological issues about the development of Christian social ethics emerge once again. These issues are likely to remain an area for debate for some time to come.

Context

The contexts in which the three documents were produced has had an effect on their content and objectives. This is most marked in the case of Centesimus Annus. The claim of the Encyclical is that the downfall of communism in Eastern Europe is a triumphant vindication of the critique of socialism developed by Pope Leo in Rerum Novarum. Indeed the Encyclical goes beyond that claim to argue, no doubt with the Polish example in mind, that it was Roman Catholic social teaching and the faithful witness of the Church to that teaching, which was instrumental in bringing about the demise of socialism; though it is acknowledged that this claim and the analysis which supports it are not authoritative in the same sense as the "social magisterium".

The Encyclical recalls that Rerum Novarum had been written as an analysis of "the worker question", the conflict between capital and labour which emerged in the late 19th century, notably the problem of low wages, poor working conditions and unemployment which came to characterize the industrial economies.

The socialist solution to these problems was class struggle, the abolition of private property and the rule of the proletariat. The contribution of Rerum Novarum was to establish that the Roman Catholic Church had a role in addressing issues of political economy, to begin to develop an appropriate ethic for economic life based in Christian doctrines, and to use this ethic to counter the prescriptions of the socialists. In Rerum Novarum, Pope Leo developed key principles from Christian doctrine. He affirmed the fundamental rights of workers at work, based on the dignity of human beings made in the image of God. These rights included the right of free association in trade unions, which were seen as an instrument for exercising countervailing power to the capitalists, to improve the conditions of the working class; the right to a just wage sufficient to sustain the worker and his family; and the right to Sunday rest for recreation and worship. To these workers rights he added the right to private property, in contradiction of the socialist claims. This right was not however absolute: property was held not only for ones own benefit, but for the benefit of ones neighbours as well. Centesimus Annus claims that it was the Church's teachings concerning these rights which were instrumental in enabling trade unions to secure improved conditions and wages for their workers at least in Western Europe, and which prompted other reforms - social security systems, pensions, health care - which were widely introduced during the 20th century in industrial economies. The critique in Rerum Novarum identified socialism's erroneous anthropology as its key defect. The atheism and rationalism of socialists denied the Christian doctrine of humankind, and denied the fundamental dignity and worth of each

person. Instead, the person only exists in relation to the class of which he is a member. Hence his choices are irrelevant and can be subordinated to the interests of his class as a class. Private property is an irrelevance, and in the hands of the bourgeoisie a barrier to economic development and improvement for the workers. To improve the conditions of the workers, class struggle and the violent dispossession of the capitalists is essential. By contrast, Roman Catholic teaching seeks to promote social and economic change through non-violent protest, based on fundamental doctrines of human dignity and wealth, seeking to persuade and challenge those with responsibility for economic and social ills, but not seeking to destroy or dispossess them.

The WCC Statement has a very different context. It is well known that over the years the WCC analysis of economic life has been sympathetic to socialist analysis and socialist solutions. The discrediting of socialist analysis, and the demise of socialist planned systems, must therefore be something of an embarrassment to the authors of the Statement. The strategy of the document is therefore to engage in a searching critique of market systems, while acknowledging that solutions to economic problems will in future involve adaptation of markets rather than their replacement by planning. The Statement makes no reference to class struggle or other Marxist categories: the nearest it gets is a discussion of "empowerment ministries", organising the poor and oppressed to exercise countervailing power against their oppressors. The Statement is much more explicitly theological and biblical than previous WCC documents: this is a welcome development in WCC thinking on these issues, and holds

out the promise of more explicitly Christian analyses in future.

The context of the Oxford Declaration is that of considerable disagreement and debate within the Evangelical churches on issues of economics and politics. Evangelical writers on economic life have taken a variety of positions that run the entire gamut from right-wing advocates of markets and economic freedom to left-wing analyses which draw at least some inspiration from socialist theory and practice. This diversity is, of course, something of an embarrassment given that all those involved claim the authority of Scripture for the positions that they hold and advocate. The objective of the study process and of the Conference which produced the Declaration was therefore to see whether any degree of consensus could be achieved between sharply divergent views. The publication of the Declaration in this journal was interspersed with comments, reflections and assessments by various participants in the Oxford Conference. These reflections suggest that some of the participants were initially sceptical about what could be achieved, and were surprised and greatly encouraged by the extent to which views converged. Convergence can be achieved in different ways: one is to go for a "lowest common denominator" type of statement, which is either so minimal in content, or so restricted in its range, that "agreement" camouflages much greater disagreements on matters that are not included in the document. That does not, however, appear to be the case with the Oxford Declaration at least in respect of its basic Scriptural convictions concerning economic life. Where it is much less specific is in the analysis of particular economic issues, and in the remedies that should be sought. It is at that level that differences are likely to be

most acute. However that should not necessarily be seen as unhealthy. While Christians must surely agree that unemployment, for example, is a social evil, there seems to be every reason why they might disagree on appropriate remedies. It is as well to recall that economic analysis is by no means unanimous on either the causes of unemployment or on the effects of different policies. To seek to identify a "Christian" economic policy for unemployment is probably an unrewarding activity.

Content

In comparing the content of the three documents we may conveniently focus separately on what they have to say about Christian convictions concerning economic life, what they identify as the major economic policy issues to be addressed, and how they perceive the role of the state and of the Churches in the pursuit of economic justice.

On Christian principles for economic life there is a considerable degree of convergence despite the diversity of theological positions represented. First, the theological themes of creation and stewardship are present in all three, both as a basis for economic life as part of the human calling, and as a warning not to destroy the created order which belongs to God and for which we are responsible stewards. Second, all three documents place a major emphasis on the theology of the nature of humankind. Work is part of the vocation of each person, the purpose of work being primarily, but not exclusively, to provide for human needs. There is therefore a basic right to work, conditions at work should respect human dignity, and remuneration for work should be sufficient to support the worker and his

dependents. The organisation of work should be seen as expressing community between those who work in a particular place: in the words of the Encyclical, business should be a community of persons rather than a community of capital goods. Moreover, the right to work is balanced by a right to rest and recreation, linked especially in Centesimus Annus to the right to set aside Sunday for Christian worship. Third, all three statements give prominence to the "preferential option for the poor", which is described as a major Biblical theme. One aspect is purely economic: those who cannot provide for themselves through productive work are to be given sustenance and support by the community in which they live. Another aspect is that the weak and disadvantaged need particular protection to see that they are not oppressed, that their rights are protected and they are given every encouragement to be involved in community life. Further, the consequence of sinful human nature for economic life is a common theme: every area of economic life - our stewardship of the creation, the nature of our work, the position of the weak and disadvantaged - is seen to be distorted by sin, with destruction of the environment, alienation at work, and oppression of the poor being the outcomes.

Despite the wide area of agreement, there are also some notable differences of emphasis. For example, the WCC Statement makes much of the point that responsible stewardship requires that those who wield economic power need to be made accountable, not just to God, but also to their community. The Statement also gives greater emphasis to *koinonia* as a principle for all human, including economic, life; and it alone makes use of the Biblical

concept of the Jubilee. The Oxford Statement spells out the doctrine of stewardship as a positive mandate to use human creativity and initiative to create wealth, but warns that technology should be subordinated to human ends and not be allowed to develop autonomously without careful consideration of its human and other consequences. Centesimus Annus has a number of distinctive emphases. There is, for example, much discussion of the family as basic to human flourishing (linked to the familiar Roman Catholic positions on birth control and abortion). Private property is upheld and defended, following the arguments of Rerum Novarum, though subject to the constraint that material goods and resources are to be used for the good of all, and not selfishly. A further distinct emphasis is on the role of human knowledge and acquired skills, and on the division (or cooperation) of labour in the productive process.

Turning next to issues, there is considerable agreement between the documents as to the major areas of economic life that need to be addressed. Although market economies are judged to be relatively more effective in ensuring that resources are well used, there is considerable concern expressed about the ideology and culture of markets. Thus there are warnings against treating the market as an idol which can solve all society's problems and against the culture of selfishness and consumerism that it can promote. Alienation at work is perceived to be a problem arising from the treatment of labour as just an input to production, failing to respect human dignity and sense of vocation. Unemployment is condemned as a grave social evil. The continued existence of poverty alongside considerable affluence both within countries and between countries (North and South) is highlighted

as a key issue for the Churches. There is some difference of emphasis in the definition of poverty: Centesimus Annus gives greater weight to absolute poverty (meeting the basic needs of the family unit), whereas the Oxford Declaration and the WCC Statement define it in more relative terms as a standard of life which effectively precludes participation in the full life of the community. All the documents underline the problems of Third World debt, and give a high priority to the search for solutions: other international issues - trade and aid are also given prominence. Finally, all three stress the impending world environmental crisis, and urge that action be taken before the damage to the ecosystem becomes irremediable. Apart from these common concerns, there are some differences of focus. Centesimus Annus shows much more interest in social institutions and their structures - the family, the business firm, and intermediate associations such as T.U.s and voluntary organisations - in the context of economic life. The WCC Statement gives prominence to the arms race, and the international trade in arms. It also stresses, along with the Oxford Declaration, that those who exercise economic power (e.g. in transnational corporations) must be made accountable for their actions to other than their shareholders. The Oxford Declaration includes inflation, drug trafficking, discrimination and relative neglect of the informal sector in developing countries as other major policy issues.

Listing these items, it is evident that the agenda to be addressed is full of very complex issues. None of the documents is able to progress beyond the level of identifying the ethical

problems, and perhaps a few hints as to where a solution should be sought. Holding back from detailed analysis and the pursuit of solutions may, of course, be an appropriate strategy for the Churches. This position is urged in particular by the WCC Statement, which eschews the identification of specific policy recommendations on the grounds that each society should be allowed to seek solutions that are appropriate to its own culture and traditions.

But who is to act? The WCC Statement does not address this question directly, but it is evident that it accepts that the solution of economic problems is a responsibility of government. Within one country, government should be fully accountable to its citizens for the policies which it promotes. Internationally, the WCC proposes greater powers for international bodies like the UN, but such bodies should be less dominated by rich and powerful nations and more responsive to the needs of poorer countries. It is evident that the WCC Statement presupposes, and therefore presumably approves of, powerful, interventionist governments. The Oxford Declaration includes a whole section devoted to "Freedom, government and Economics", probably because this has been a major area of disagreement within Evangelicalism. The Declaration explores a Christian concept of human rights based on the doctrine of persons made in the image of God, affirms democratic government which respects those rights, and warns against concentrations of economic power that are not fully accountable. Centesimus Annus underlines the responsibilities of government in a number of areas: provision of the juridical framework for economic activity, ensuring appropriate conditions at work and adequate wages, action to combat unemployment,

welfare provision at an adequate level, and measures to support family life. However, given that the document is rejoicing in the downfall of communist totalitarian regimes, there is no enthusiasm for powerful, interventionist governments. It is acknowledged that intervention in markets will sometimes be necessary, but this should be kept to a minimum. The principle of subsidiarity is affirmed: that is, action should be decentralised as far as possible. No level of government should take responsibility for a matter which can be effectively dealt with by a lower level of government, or indeed by some other institution ("intermediate association"), including the family or the Churches. A similar point is made by the Oxford Declaration with its reference to "mediating structures" that are neither public nor private (in the individualistic sense). On the basis of the admittedly incomplete discussions in the three documents, it seems that while all are agreed that government should be democratically accountable, there is a definite difference of view as to how much intervention in economic life is appropriate. The WCC Statement is probably the most, and Centesimus Annus the least, approving of intervention.

The Role of the Churches

The WCC Statement has a lengthy concluding section detailing how it believes the Churches should respond to economic issues. Obviously it urges that Churches should have a "commitment to dealing with economic issues from a faith perspective", and the Statement is seen as a contribution to that process. Furthermore, it urges that Christians and Churches should undertake a searching examination of their own lifestyles,

priorities and structures, and of their involvement, directly or indirectly, in economic life, in the light of the Christian vision of economic justice. Unless the Church can reform itself in the light of Christian teaching, then it has no right to address the secular authorities. Beyond that, the Church should engage in "transformational ministries". These involve taking a prophetic stance in identifying economic injustice, offering alternative visions for economic life, engaging in advocacy on particular issues, and engaging in "empowerment" ministries, organising the poor and the oppressed to exercise countervailing power to the forces which are oppressing them. These ministries are not lightly advocated: indeed they are described as "formidable undertakings" for the Churches.

Centesimus Annus, by contrast, says very little about the mechanisms by which the Roman Catholic Church seeks to influence economic policy. It notes that Rerum Novarum established that the Church had a role in addressing society's problems. It claims that Rerum Novarum was instrumental in reforms to improve the conditions of workers in the industrial economies in the 20th century, and that the role of the Church was decisive in the overthrow of communism in Eastern Europe. It clearly assumes that what the Encyclical has to say will be taken seriously not only within the Roman Catholic Church, but by a wider audience. This confidence probably reflects the knowledge that the Roman Catholic Church does have an influential presence in many areas of political and economic life. Part of this presence is officially recognised representation, part is through discreet but well organised pressure groups, and part is the fact that

Roman Catholics hold key positions in secular institutions, and are prepared to allow the teaching of the Church to influence their policy decisions. This influential presence should not be viewed as a "conspiracy", as some ultra-Protestant groups assert. Rather it reflects a success in promoting the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which other Christian groups would like to emulate. One interesting question is how the Roman Catholic Church would respond to the WCC concept of "empowerment" ministries. Reading the definition of such ministries in the WCC Statement, one is immediately struck by the parallel with the role of the Roman Catholic Church in promoting the cause of the Solidarity trade union in Poland. Why then is the Vatican so suspicious of the empowerment ministries of the base communities in Latin America, especially those in Brazil, given the statement in Centesimus Annus, "Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor is made concrete in the promotion of justice"?

The Oxford Declaration has no programme for action by the Churches. It merely states: "We will therefore endeavour to seek every opportunity to work for the implementation of the principles outlined in this Declaration". This probably reflects the fact that the Declaration was essentially a private initiative without formal recognition by any of the Evangelical denominations. In principle, at least, the WCC Statement can be disseminated via the member churches (though one doubts whether this mechanism is particularly effective). That option is not available to the Oxford Declaration, and it is far from obvious where the process can go next. Who is going to read it, study it and promote it? Roman Catholics have to take note of

Encyclicals: there is no parallel obligation on Evangelicals to take the Oxford Declaration seriously.

Summing up

What can we learn from these three documents? First, they illustrate very clearly the continuing divergence of Roman Catholic, liberal Protestant and Evangelical traditions on the source and authority of Christian social ethics. A caricature is that they represent respectively the authority of the traditions of the Church, the primacy of reason, and the authority of Scripture. That is a simplification in that tradition, reason and Scripture are present in all three documents: but the caricature does effectively characterise the nature of the documents. One consequence is that Centesimus Annus and the Oxford Declaration are more rigorously developed and argued than the WCC Statement. A clear and authoritative basis for social ethics permits a more systematic exposition. Second, the three documents demonstrate a considerable degree of agreement on what might be termed Christian principles for economic life. One distinction is that the Encyclical pays more attention to social and economic institutions than the other two, and is therefore more balanced in its approach. Third, there is also considerable agreement on the economic and political issues that have to be addressed by the Churches, in the aftermath of the collapse of communist planned economies. Fourth, there is agreement that governments have to be involved in economic policy, and that they should be democratically accountable for their decisions. There seems to be less agreement on how much intervention in economic life is appropriate. Where international economic issues are

concerned there is a willingness to give more power to international agencies to regulate and to redress injustices. Fifth, there is agreement that economic and political life is a legitimate (and indeed necessary) sphere of involvement for the churches, though only the WCC Statement spells out how this involvement might be implemented.

It also has to be said that there is a great disparity in the quality of these documents. Centesimus Annus stands out as being better researched, better argued and better written than the other two. The contemporary situation is acutely observed and analysed. There is the appeal to a tradition of social ethics that has been vindicated by the fall of communism, and there is an implicit assumption that when the Roman Catholic Church speaks, things will actually happen (as it is claimed they have in the past). One wonders whether liberal Protestants or Evangelicals will ever be able to deal with these issues with such apparent authority and sophistication. But that raises the question whether one would wish them to be able to do so.

Those who respond in the affirmative might use the analogy of agreed doctrinal or confessional statements. If, for example, Evangelicals can draw up agreed statements of faith such as the Lausanne Covenant, is it not appropriate to seek similar agreements on economic issues and how they might be dealt with, even if it may take many more years of study and discussion to arrive at a common mind. The obvious riposte is that doctrinal statements are based on primary truths about God, revealed in Scripture, whereas Christian approaches to political and economic questions have always been considered secondary and derivative.

For that response to be countered, it has to be shown that the distinction is not Scriptural. The other question is the use to which agreed statements might be put. Agreement on doctrinal issues clearly affects intercommunion between Churches, and commitments to work together in evangelism and mission. It seems implausible that an agreement on Christian views of economic issues would be similarly used! It might therefore be more appropriate to view the Oxford Declaration as a summing up of where Evangelicals have reached in their analysis of Christian ethics for economic life. But, in that case, why so much emphasis on an agreed statement, which one suspects may be interpreted quite differently by different participants in the process? It might have been more helpful, at least to those of us Evangelicals who are seeking to contribute to the discussion, to identify areas of agreement and disagreement, as a basis for further work. Given its provenance, that is the most likely use to which the Declaration will be put.

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