

The Agape Document (2005) and the Development of an Ecumenical Doctrine of Economy

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“I was hungry and you fed me.”

(Matthew 25,35)

**“He gave the poor a fair trial,
and all went well with them.**

This is what it means to know the Lord.”

(Jeremiah 22,16)

The 2005 background document of the Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) working group of the World Council of Churches (WCC), entitled Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth (Agape), as well as A Call to Love and Action, based on the previous text and accepted in the Porto Alegre assembly in 2006, are both part of the rich tradition of economic teaching in the ecumenical movement. Here we will try and survey the development of this teaching tradition.

I. Peace, Work and International Cooperation (1895–1937)

The establishment of the *World Student Christian Federation* (WSCF) in 1895 in Vadstena, Sweden was a founding event in the ecumenical movement. In the economic field the attention of the first period was directed primarily towards *peace and international cooperation*.

A good example of this is the *World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches* (WA), which was active between 1914 and 1946. It aimed to apply Christian moral and ethical principles to international relations and politics, as well as to promote mutual understanding and dialogue between states and nations.

In the peace conferences organised by the WA, they called for moral and mental disarmament, the use of arbitration and mediation to solve conflicts, and at the same time to strengthen and develop international law and legal solutions.

Almost at the same time the Roman Catholic Church started to pay attention to similar questions: the two pioneering and exemplary Roman Catholic texts of this era are *Rerum Novarum* (RN, 1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (QA, 1931).

Economic questions and our responsibility towards them were not, of course, brought into the fore in the context the WCC movements of Faith and Order, or Mission and Evangelisation, but rather in the *Life and Work* movement.

Already the founding conference of the *Life and Work* movement in *Stockholm* in 1925 dealt with the ecumenical significance of unemployment, property, work and labour. It was, however, Joseph Houldsworth OLDHAM (1874–1969), the first general secretary of the *International Missionary Council* (IMC, established in 1921), who first wrote at length on these topics.



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II. The Idea of Responsible Society (1937–1961)

The next conference of the *Life and Work* movement in Oxford in 1937 (*Church, Community and State*) introduced, following the suggestion of OLDHAM, the concept of ethical and moral *middle axioms*.

These rules and standards are concrete applications of the values of the Reign of God in the form of feasible social objectives, and they maintain a hopeful vision, while acknowledging their substantial relativity.

The idea of the period after the Amsterdam assembly (1948) was the (*free and*) *responsible society*, whose most profound explication can be found in OLDHAM's *Work in Modern Society* (1950).

Responsible society was understood not as a kind of third way between capitalism and socialism, but as a measure of discernment for all existing social orders. The phrase *welfare state* was similarly first used by William TEMPLE in 1941.

Emerging and *rapid social changes* (RSC) were tackled by a separate study programme (Evanston, 1954 – Genève, 1966) conducted by Paul ABRECHT (1917–2005), long-time leader of the *Church and Society* department (sub-unit) between 1954 and 1983.

The high point of this study programme was the conference in Salonika, Greece in 1959, which concentrated on possibilities for Christian action in societies undergoing rapid social change.

This line of study culminated in and was concluded by the Genève conference in 1966, which focused on the role of Christian groups and individuals in the various technological and social revolutions of those decades.

During these years, the three main emphases of this pioneering and experimental study programme were the ex-

The AGAPE document is the result of work on economic globalization from the Harare conference in 1999 until the conference Porto Alegre. It was prepared by the commission for Justice, Peace, and Creation under the direction of the central committee. Its final version was received by the executive committee in September 2005, which also approved the use of the document in the economic justice plenary! The document calls for the eradication of poverty and inequality, justice in international trade, responsible lending, sustainable use of land and natural resources, a life-giving agriculture, decent jobs, emancipated work, and the protection of livelihoods.

To find out more go to: www.christianaid.org.uk

ploration of the power of technology, nationalism, and the driving forces of economic development.

Food crisis, hunger and malnutrition have been continuously present in ecumenical thinking since the 1950s at the earliest. For example, there was a conference on this question, organized by the *East Asia Christian Conference* (currently *Christian Council of Asia*) in Kuala Lumpur already in 1959. The aim, challenging the 'protein empire', is food security.

III. Investigation of Human Development (1961–1975)

The third period started with the WCC *New Delhi* assembly in 1961. The growing commitment towards change reflected, among other things, the emphases of Latin American *liberation* theology.

Over time it has become clear that, in addition to the usual measurement numbers, the economic state of any given country is reflected most of all by its equality, quality of life and environmental indicators.

The leading minds of this movement were in particular Rubem ALVES, Gustavo GUTIÉRREZ, José Míguez BONINO, Juan Luis SEGUNDO and Julio DE SANTA ANA (*Towards a Church of the Poor*, 1979).

The *limits of growth* and development were the subject of a study programme between 1969 and 1979, which researched the future of humanity and society in the world of technology and technical applications.

The *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (MIT) conference of *Church and Society* in 1979, which concluded this project, concentrated on *Faith, Science and Future*, urging convergent thinking in the fields of science and deep theology, technology and living spirituality.

Following the wise and forward-looking decisions of the *Second Vatican Council* (1962–1965), the Roman Catholic Church finally joined the ecumenical movement in a fully committed way.

The encyclical of Pope PAUL VI, *Populorum Progressio* (PP), in 1967 categorically condemned economic empire building, stating that “*development is the new name for peace*”. Consequently, the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church organised a joint conference in Beirut in 1968, addressing the question of global cooperation for genuine development.

According to the findings and statements of this meeting, development has, most of all, to be anthropocentric and involve both cultural and religious areas. These stances were re-evaluated three decades later for example in the report on *Churches, Population and Development: Cairo and Beyond* (1996).

Furthermore, development must always take into account the conflicts of interest between poor and rich: material goods should indeed flow from the rich to the poor, and not vice versa. Development must break through the structures of injustice.

To further this process, a study programme between 1976 and 1988 concluded that *interchurch aid* and the

ecumenical sharing of resources (ESR) must be directed towards the whole human being and the fullness of life, or life in abundance. This stance was expanded in the programme’s 1980 study guide, *Empty Hands*.

These holistic methods must also strive for structural change, and be mutual in one way or another. Rules to guide the practice of these ideas were suggested by the *Guidelines for Sharing* and *Common Discipline of Ecumenical Sharing*, formulated in the Escorial conference in 1987, discussing koinonia and the sharing of life in a world community.

The *Swanwick* conference in 1966 dealt with questions of interchurch aid, refugees and service for the world. The *Larnaca Declaration* in 1986 called for a universal service (*diakonia*), embracing the prophetic dimensions of resistance and the pastoral aspects of reconciliation.

An early example of this service was a common endeavour by the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church, the Genève-based *Sodepax* (*Joint Committee on Society, Development and Peace*, 1968–1980; later *Joint Consultative Group for Social Thought and Action*, 1982–1989; and its quarterly, *Church Alert*, 1973–1980).

The ecumenical experiment of *Sodepax* concentrated on social communication and media, joint education for and research on development, mass mobilization for peace efforts, environment protection, theological reflection and interreligious dialogue.

Over time it has become clear that in addition to the usual measurement numbers, the economic state of any given country is reflected most of all by its equality, quality of life and environmental indicators. Thus development is to be directed towards the establishment of sustainable communities.



IV. Sustainability and Solidarity with the Poor (1975–1991)

The phrase *sustainable society* was first used in the Bucuresti conference in 1974 on science and technology for human development, looking towards the ambiguous future and Christian hope. As a follow-up, a new study programme was established on the future of humanity and society in the world of science-based technology.

The Zürich conference of *Church and Society* in 1979 made an attempt to take into account some of the modern and contemporary challenges of political economy, ethics, morality and theology.

While doing so, the meeting urged the elaboration of a new system of understanding concerning political economy, among other things, by discerning and marking the limits of inequality in society.

One idea was that of a *just, participatory and sustainable society* (JPSS; Nairobi, 1975 – Vancouver, 1983), which also led to an important study programme on energy for our neighbours, an idea that requires the breaking of intellectual and physical barriers.

This ideal was complemented by the *justice, peace and the integrity of creation* programme (JPIC, Vancouver, 1983 – Canberra, 1991), which took the form of a conciliar process leading to the making of a covenant in Seoul in 1990. These three values could be said to be three dimensions of the same reality.

The WCC profoundly researched the relationship between Christian theology and human rights in 1979, but it was only in 1985 that it first called on creditor countries and banks to cancel debts accumulated gradually in the 1970s.

Later in 1988 the Harare assembly even produced a separate document to tackle this crucially important question, entitled *The Debt Issue: A Jubilee Call to End the Stranglehold of Debt in Impoverished Peoples*.

The first generation of study on human rights and human dignity focused on politics and citizenship, whilst the second focused on social security, economics and culture. Emphasis then

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moved to national self-determination and culminated in the consideration of the rights of future generations.

A separate study programme was set up to explore the world of *transnational corporations* (TNC, 1977–1982). They had already been highlighted and criticised by an earlier official Roman Catholic Document, written by Pope Paul VI in 1971: *Apostolic Letter to Cardinal Maurice ROY*.

The enormous financial power and strong influence of these TNCs is comparable to that of states; and as their leaders are not appointed in democratic elections, they are in fact responsible to no one.

Since enrichment and impoverishment is a zero-sum situation, well thought out investments can promote corporate social responsibility (CSR) even in interreligious cooperation: a good example for this is the *Interfaith Centre on Corporate Responsibility* (ICCR).

As the report of the Vancouver assembly phrased it in 1983, resistance against the *politics of death* and dependency has indeed become a vital question. We must take risks for the sake of faithful resistance and create the basis of hope that will lead to an ecumenism of solidarity with the poor and oppressed.

V. Agape and Alternative Globalisation (1991–)

The *Agape* document (2005) is part of the general approach of *Church and World* (also the title of a 1990 Faith and Order paper); one of its important predecessors is a WCC study document from 1992 on *Christian Faith and World Economy*.

The call itself is a bit too general, but the background document is a much more significant text; it would have been better and braver to publish the *Actions* plan (*Agape* 6.4), containing many specific recommendations, as a distinct assembly call on its own.

A detailed analysis of the *Agape* document would go beyond the limits of our paper, and the processes involved in its creation are explained in the text itself (*Agape* 6.2–6.3). Still, there are five important points concerning the document that need to be emphasised here.

As is visible in the document, our common thinking has become wider and more embracing as far as the theology of creation, laity, interreligious dialogue, ethics and morality, ecumenism and unity are concerned.

1. Theology of Creation and Life

According to the findings of the *theology of life* study programme (1994–1998), among other things, it is not only humans who have moral value, but the grace of God works also in the whole of *creation*, in the wholeness of nature.

Similarly, the whole world has come to be understood as an image of God and a gift of God (*Agape* 2.3), not only humans or other living beings. The world testifies to the love and providence of God towards all created beings and things, living and non-living alike (*Agape* 6.4.7).

Economic justice always belongs to questions of faith, since it touches the very core of God's will for creation (*Agape* 2.2). Thus our responsibility towards creation is at the very least the responsibility of the good master.

2. The Role of Laity and Civil Society

The *Agape* document was shaped and influenced by the reality and experience of civil society (*Agape* 6.4.1). An earlier conference (Loccum, 1995: *Witnesses of Faith Communities in Changing Societies*) also related to these themes.

The contribution of professionals arriving from the laity (the Oxford conference in 1937 already stressed, required



and demanded the involvement of the laity) remains indispensable in education, formation and training, among other things.

3. Results of Interreligious Dialogue

We must involve the wisdom, spirituality and resources accumulated in other religious traditions and through *interreligious dialogue* itself into our processes of thinking and decision-making (*Agape* 1.3, 5.3, 6.2, 6.4.1).

This already happened for example in the struggles for the cancellation of debt around the *Jubilee Year* 2000. Indeed, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses all around the globe (*Agape* 5.1).

4. State and Process of Confession

More and more people talk about the end of great narratives and ideologies in (post)modern (consumer) society. Their place is, however, taken by *idolatrous* (*Agape* 2.2) tendencies aiming at total control of the neoliberal economy.

Even as far back as the Nairobi assembly in 1975, on the topic *Jesus Christ Frees and Unites*, the great (but sometimes totalitarian) tendency to accumulate economic power in neoliberal international life was identified and criticised.

The (new) religion of capitalist society is the *adoration of money* as much now as it was in 1928 when the second missionary conference in Jerusalem concluded with a criticism of global capitalism.

Later at the Uppsala assembly (1968) Willem Adolf VISSER-T HOOFT (1900–1985), the founding and first general secretary of WCC, highlighted the moral and ethical significance of the idolatry of money, stating explicitly

that those who deny their responsibility towards a person in need anywhere in the world are guilty of heresy. The relation of the churches to capitalism leads them to a state of confession or to what the *agape* document calls a process of confession (*Agape* 6.2).

5. Theology of Unity and Community

It is possible for the economy to indeed serve life, connect what is torn apart, and unite what is divided (*Agape* 1.3). The common attitude created by this call unites the *Agape* process and the ecumenical movement that promotes it.

The Holy Spirit inspired this common attitude; she is the power behind their experiment of practical love and sharing. Under her guidance the ecumenical movement and the *Agape* process work for the unity and integrity of the Christian Church, humanity and creation.

Suggested Reading

World Council of Churches (WCC), *Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth (AGAPE): A Call to Love and Action*. Genève, 2005.

<http://www.wcc-assembly.info/fileadmin/files/wccassembly/documents/english/pb-06-agape.pdf>

World Council of Churches (WCC), *Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth (AGAPE): A Background Document*. Genève, 2005.

<http://www.wcc-assembly.info/fileadmin/files/wccassembly/documents/english/agape-new.pdf>

LOSSKY Nicholas – BONINO José Míguez – POBEE John – STRANSKY Tom F. – WAINWRIGHT Geoffrey – WEBB Pauline, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*. Genève, 2002.

(capitalism; Church and state; Church and world; civil society; creation; debt crisis; dependence; development; diakonia; economics; ecumenical sharing of resources (ESR, 1976–1988); environment and ecology; ethics; food crisis and hunger; globalization; human rights; interchurch aid; international order; investment; just, participatory and sustainable society (JPSS, 1975–1983); justice, peace and the integrity of creation (JPIC, 1983–1991); justice; labour; liberation theology; life and death; limits to growth; middle axioms; nation; nature; oppression; order; participation; political theology; poor; population; poverty; power; responsible society; science and theology; secularization; society; Sodepax (1968–1980, 1982–1989); solidarity; state; sustainability; transnational corporations (TNC); totalitarianism; unemployment; welfare state; work; World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches (WA, 1914–1946))