

GLOBAL STRUCTURES OF SOCIAL INJUSTICE

Christianity, Islam and social  
justice

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Ladies and gentlemen; Christians, Muslims and others -

Let me confess from the very beginning that my contribution to this important forum for debate and reconciliation between Christians and Moslems will be mainly negative. I am neither Christian nor Moslem, but mainly a Norwegian pagan, rather attracted by Buddhism. AND my task is to explore the structures of injustice, with reference to the topic of our conference, Christianity and Islam. Of course, in the spirit of reconciliation, one cannot come up with a conclusion that Christianity is better than Islam, or Islam better than Christianity. The conclusion, "they are both good", when it comes to social justice, would be compatible with our theme. But my conclusion will be "you're both bad", plague on both your houses - with the hope that this might bring the theologians on both sides together, uniting them against such vicious approaches from the outside.

Justice has been defined, also by Martin Luther,\*\* as that which gives to everybody what is his due. I find that an excellent point of departure, and will immediately point out that it can be interpreted in two directions: negatively and positively, to give to everybody the punishment that is due to him, or his rightly deserved reward. We welcome the legal tradition that administers the law by meting out the same punishment for the same crime, regardless of where the delinquent is located on the five basic dimensions that discriminate between human beings, age, gender, race, class and nation - including in the latter also religious adherence. Equality before the law, as equality before the eyes of God and Allah; there is a clear translation of the universalism of these two major religions of the Occident in the idea of due process.

But then there is also the positive aspect of the same idea: that positions of power and privilege, or whatever good

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\*\* ...die jedem gibt, was ihm zukommt.

a society has to offer, should in principle be open to everybody regardless of age and gender, race and class and nation, including religious adherence. And this should be the case at the top of society as well as lower down. At the minimum level comes the satisfaction of basic human needs, the need to survive, and to survive with a minimum of physical well-being by being nourished and clad, having shelter, access to health and education. AND then, beyond this, to be able to shape one's life, selecting that with which one wants to identify, and having the freedom to select. Ideally, this life should be open to all, regardless of where one is located in the social space. And if there are deprivations due to the shortcomings of the systems, due to poverty, even misery, then this negative edge should also cut equally, as when during a war or natural calamity, everybody with no distinction is supposed to give up some of what they have for the common good.

So far I have been talking about the idea of social justice negatively as punishment and deprivation, and positively as reward and satisfaction. Of course, underlying this kind of thinking is not only universalism in the eyes of God/Allah, but also individualism. The unit to which social justice is to be administered, negatively or positively, or both, is the individual. It is on the basis of individual merits that justice is meted out. But there is a third element in justice, beyond equality and focus on basic human needs: the idea of the total system moving from the negative to the positive, from a focus on punishment and deprivation to reward and satisfaction. Had the Bible or the Koran been written today God and Allah might have been less concerned with punishing the bad and more busy rewarding the good people. In fact, God and Allah might have looked more like the administrators of welfare states than like presidents of supreme courts.

Let me now take these ideas and look at world reality. What we find is of course exactly the opposite: we find injustice everywhere. The middle-aged are dominating over

the young and the old; men over women, whites over non-whites, upper classes over lower classes and some nations, meaning also religious and language groups, over others. More particularly, there seems to be a correlation at work: middle-aged, upper class, white men, particularly those speaking European languages in Christian nations, but also some speaking Arabic in Islamic nations, seem not only to possess a considerably greater amount of power and privilege than those who are not in that category (not to mention than those who belong to the opposite category); they even seem to have an interest in preventing others from access to that power and that privilege. Perhaps this can be particularly clearly seen if we take the word power seriously and ask the question: what kinds of power do we have?

I think we have three, maybe four types of power. First, there is an ideological power, expressed in culture and religion, reminding people that they believe in a certain system of faith, drawing often a very sharp line between believers and non-believers.

Second, there is the power of punishment, exercised by such institutions as the police and the military, based on violence and the threat of violence, drawing a sharp line between power-wielders and their victims.

Third, there is the power of reward, institutionalised in the whole economic system, giving much to some people something to others, and very little or nothing to many. The line is drawn, to put it bluntly, between exploiters and exploited.

And finally, fourthly, there is the power over power, meta-power; politics as the place where decisions are made as to the proper mix of ideological power, punishment power and reward power. The line is drawn between decision-makers and their subjects, although the "subjects" very often are treated more like objects, like things.

When these four hierarchies of power are correlated, then the situation becomes particularly bad. In other words, when on top there are true believers who are also power-wielders, exploiters and decision-makers, and at the bottom, one finds the non believers who are "their" victims, exploited, "their" subjects, then we get already some picture of structures we know only too well in this century; colonialism and imperialism, whether they are administered by capitalist or socialist powers, or others. These structures are our world realities. This is not the place to go into any detail, nor do I think it is necessary - we all know the story only too well. Suffice it only to say that if I combine this perspective with the perspective developed above, putting the middle-aged upper-class white males of certain languages and faiths into the positions as believers, power-wielders, exploiters and decision-makers, then the picture becomes very, very wicked indeed. And yet that picture is a better map of world reality today than the image we would like to have as our guide to empirical reality, not only as our justice, worldwide. There may still be differences in power and privilege - but not these massive correlations.

It is easily seen what would be the basic keys to a more socially just world. In the field of ideological power: tolerance. In the field of punishment power: non-violence, or at least human rights. In the field of reward power: cooperatives, self-management. And in the field of power over power or politics: democracy, participation of those concerned. Four words - tolerance, non-violence, cooperation, democracy - no bad guides to social decency, to structures under which justice can prevail both in the sense of equality, satisfaction of basic human needs and of making the whole system more positive. When I look around in the world and use the political spectrum that we usually make use of as a guide, I find these virtues perhaps best realised under the

heading of social democracy, because of the social and democratic character given to reward power and meta-power, and with the opening, at least, to tolerance and non-violence.

But, where do Christianity and Islam stand on these issues? In order to explore this, I think one has to look at what these two major religions have in common and I would like to reduce that to five points:

- a faith in a personal god
- singularism, that this faith is the only valid faith
- universalism, that this faith is valid for the whole world, or whole universe for that matter
- that every human individual is equipped with an immortal soul capable of communicating with the personal god through prayer
- that this soul is headed for eternal life, in everlasting punishment (hell) or everlasting reward (paradise), depending on the merits or demerits of this single life on this earth.

The major difference is that Christianity has a Christology, as faith. One sees immediately the source of worldwide justice embedded in religions of this kind: if everybody is equal in the eyes of God/Allah, how can mundane structures, whether run by emperors, kings or presidents, in a dictatorial or democratic fashion dare introduce inequalities, injustices? There shall be no Greeks, no Jews, if we are all one in Jesus Christ!

But that is precisely the problem: even if Christianity and Islam - as religions with worldwide aspirations - should recognise no valid dividing line between age-groups, gender, race, classes and nations, in general, they do recognise one dividing line as rather basic: between the believers and non-believers in their own system. This line is drawn very sharply through occidental history, possibly more sharply

than anywhere else in the world. In fact, if we include the third major occidental religion, Judaism (which differs from the others in being much smaller, and also having given up universalism), then occidental history can be understood in terms of six major facets: Jews murdering Christians (with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as the major case); Christians murdering Moslems; Moslems murdering Jews; Jews murdering Moslems; Moslems murdering Christians and Christians murdering Jews - with holocaust as the key example. This is not tolerance, it is blatant intolerance. And it is not justice in any sense since what is meted out is not in accordance with individual merits, but purely because of group belongingness - as an expression of the intolerance of believers against non-believers.

In fact, one might even go further. I think it is in the nature of religions that combines singularism with universalism, that they become dangerous to their neighbours, and if the neighbour is of the same kind, they become dangerous to each other, as just indicated. The horrendous acts of violence engaged in may be justified for those who believe in the wrath of God/Allah, against sinners, pagans who refuse to see the light and convert, etc. And from intolerance and violence, to exploitation and despotism is but a short step. The non-believers are not seen as part of real human society, but marginalised by the fact that they are non-believers, and even more so by their refusal to be admitted in good company. And thus one finds that so many violent institutions, like inquisition and slavery - the latter both in Islam and Christianity - are run precisely by the high priests of these religions, whether they are ordained or not.

At this point, however, let me hasten to add that I in no way think that this is everything that can be said about Christianity and Islam. On the contrary, to my mind these two religions both come in a hard and a soft version. There

is the hard Christianity of the Great Inquisitor himself, Tomas Torquemada, a key figure in the Dominican order, and the soft Christianity of Francisco d'Assisi, an even more key figure among the Franciscans. There is no problem finding in the Bible and the Koran quotations that can back up the most intolerant, not only hard but harsh positions<sup>4</sup>, and quotations behind the softest, most tolerant, non-violent, cooperative and democratic behaviour. Soft Christianity and Islam would by definition be less interested in the line between believers and non-believers, and more in practice. Whether the other person is a non-believer is less significant. What is significant is the extent to which he practises non-violence, non-exploitation, participation and lives a life in social justice and tolerance.

In other words, the tolerance of the soft would not be the bland indifference of the person to whom anything goes. That is not tolerance, that is merely moral capitulation. But the intolerance of the hard that focus much more on whether the other person is a believer, usually meaning submitting to Christianity/Islam the way it is interpreted by the hardliner himself, than on social practice is not acceptable either. This is not indifference, but it is judgement focussed on the wrong spot. And that focus comes very easily to religions with singularist and universalist claims. Singularism makes the hardliners very sensitive to deviants, and very eager to correct them, perhaps even punish them. And universalism makes the hardliners very sensitive to non-believers, and equally eager to bring them into the fold through evangelising activities. Thus, the hardliners may easily become a hard core of the world structures of injustice, using these social and world structures to punish non-believers and reward the believers.

Maybe the history of Christianity and of Islam can be seen as a dialectic oscillation between the hard and soft poles. The hardliners exaggerate. In the wake of their reign of



terror and torture, softer voices are heeded, milder versions come to the surface. But as a consequence neither singularism nor universalism become predominant. These will be periods of many sects, threatening a universal church. The concern will be with deeper Christianity/Islam, not more extended Christianity/Islam. But then hardliners come to the fore again with their obvious arguments, backed up by quotations pointing to the need for singularism and universalism. And then we are back again, full cycle, hard/soft, centralization/decentralization, etc.

Moreover, I think there are some indications that Christianity and Islam may be countercyclical: when one of them is expansionist, in the hard phase, the other is more contracting, in the soft mode. Maybe what is happening today is that Christianity is entering a softer phase as evidenced by this very forum for discussion between Christians and Moslems, a forum we would hardly have had, or might even have been able to conceive of a couple of decades or years ago. And maybe Islam is heading for a harder phase, as symbolised by the Shia Moslems in Iran in general and their leader Imam Khomeini, in particular. I find in khomeinism clearly fascist characteristics, and mean then by "fascism" precisely what has been indicated above: a tendency to fight against categories of people, not only individuals, with violence exercised at the highest level (for instance against the Baha'i). Moreover, like most fascist movements, they would tend to draw on the lumpenproletariat in this effort to settle accounts with people higher up in society, always willing to render horrendous services to those in command.

So, in conclusion: the picture is an ambivalent one. There are certainly problems in the theory of justice, and enormous problems, everyday, in the practice of injustice. It's enough to think of the plight of South Africans since 1652, under centuries of Christian, white (mainly of Dutch and British extraction) occupation. Or, the plight of Palestinian Moslems

being evicted from their homelands by Zionist Judaism. In only too many of such cases do we find religious legitimation, and particularly by the Occidental religions, and more particularly by Christianity, and even most particularly by hardline Christianity. ] In this we can all unite: in pointing out that these intolerant, violent, exploitative and despotic people do not represent Christianity and Islam in the true sense, but are aberrations, however much they can be justified by references to the great books themselves. I would not urge that one should purge Christianity and Islam of such harsh elements; that would be against my own sense of tolerance. But we have no reasons to tolerate those who are intolerant in their practice; we have all reasons to stand up against them. And in doing so, Christians might perhaps bring forth a better Christianity and Moslems a better Islam. And then it remains only for me to add that I think both of them, on closer scrutiny, would then turn out to be not too different from the type of Buddhism I have found to be a rather good guide in life, with a social practice not too different from a social democracy inspired by the green wave of today.