Christianity and the International Ecumenical Movement

Ecumenical social thought, with growing attention to signs of planetary degradation, is the focus of the treatment here. This is a new development. In particular, the condition of “nature” and “creation,” and the place and activity of human beings as part of them, occupies a place in ecumenical thought and practice they did not for the first three-quarters of the 20th century.

The activity of the World Council of Churches is instructive. Among the churches, it gave significant leadership, some of it in close cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church. The language of “sustainable society” itself seems to have been initiated by a group of demographers, physical scientists, economists and theologians at a WCC world conference on science and technology in Bucharest, Romania, in 1974. By 1975 the WCC had proposed a program on the “Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society” at its general assembly in Nairobi, Kenya. Yet the decisive attention to human development and nature’s endangered sustainability as integral one to another came at the next general assembly, in 1983 in Vancouver, Canada. Delegates voted for the engagement of WCC member churches “in a conciliar process of mutual commitment to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation” (JPIC). “Conciliar process” signaled the desire for a widespread, decentralized process in which resisting social and ecological degradation was regarded as a matter integral to Christian faith itself. The moral and confessional tasks were seen as one. Both the Lutheran World Federation, in 1977, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, in 1982, had declared resistance to the social policy of apartheid a fundamental matter of faith itself, so the link of “social
righteousness to the integrity of the faith as such” had already been made by significant confessional bodies. (The WCC’s Program to Combat Racism, begun in 1968, shared this ethos.) Now much the same was being done ecumenically around the eco-crisis and a new theological factor identified as “the integrity of creation.” That is, from the point of view of Christian faith, all creation has standing in and before God. Human beings are not the center of all value and the reason for the existence of the rest of nature. Justice and peace cannot be pursued, then, by human beings as an ecologically segregated species. Realizing justice and peace requires attention to creation as living and as imposing requirements of its own. Moreover, even from a strictly practical point of view, a just and peaceful order is only sustainable if it respects the integrity of creation.

This new chapter in ecumenical social thought came to a certain climax in the World Convocation on JPIC convened in Seoul, Korea, in 1990. Four “covenants” were adopted, promoting: (1) a just economic order, including debt release of heavily burdened Two-Thirds World countries (interest owed to the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, international banks and nation-states); (2) security for all in non-violent cultures; (3) cultures that live in accord with creation’s integrity; and (4) an end to racism and discrimination. Ten ecumenical “affirmations” were also adopted, affirming that “all exercise of power is accountable to God, God’s option for the poor, the equal value of all races and people, male and female as created in the image of God, truth as the foundation of a free community, the peace of Jesus Christ, the creation as beloved of God, the earth’s is the Lord’s, the dignity and commitment of the younger generation, and human rights as given by God.” These affirmations in turn became the core themes for a series of case studies conducted around the world in a subsequent WCC program under the rubric of the
“Theology of Life.” The effort was to see how, concretely, churches and other organizations in a given locale were addressing compelling issues in ways that built up the whole Community of Life. Differently said, the endeavor was to discern how justice and peace might be pursued in a manner that respected the integrity of creation as a whole.

Ecumenical social thought at the outset of the 21st c., then, has expanded its circle of ongoing concern to the whole “household of life.” While every issue has been and continues to be the site of moral contestation, the inclusion of non-human nature in ecumenical moral frameworks has been done without erasing or neglecting the justice and peace issues of previous decades.

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Further Reading

