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Religion and the Market: Advocacy for Just trade

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*Woe to you who make unjust decrees and who write oppressive laws,
To turn aside the needy from justice
And to robe the poor of my people of their right,
That widows may be your spoil
And that you may make the orphans prey.*

*“To get ourselves out of poverty we are working harder and harder but this is not helping.
The odds are stacked against us.” Bakary Diarra, Cotton Farmer, Mali
(Isaiah 10:1-4)*

The aim of this presentation is to highlight the critique of the theory and practice of the market on the one hand and on the other to encourage theologians and churches to engage themselves in theologizing the market while advocating for just trade around the world. I will not dwell very much on religion, which is the domain of theologians. I will rather raise ethical and moral issues that need to be addressed by churches. The term market is used interchangeably with trade because market theories apply to trade. The market, like trade is about relationships and exchange of goods and services. The main concern today is that there is no justice in these relationships. Amos, echoing the other prophets decries those who ‘practice deceit with balances’ and buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals (Amos 8:5f). Justice for the poor remains the test of any system. How do we abolish inequities in the market and trade?

Religion, like the market is about relationships. Relationships in Christianity are based on the Ten Commandments, particularly the first and the second and could be interpreted into Agape that calls for reciprocity, mutuality, respect and solidarity in just relationships. Justice in trade relationships is a biblical principal as mentioned by Amos. The question today is how can we build An Agape economy of sharing where economic relationships flow from the freely given gifts of God and are shared without reserve? Markets are designed to neglect the poor. How can trade be designed to serve end goals- the ethical, sustainable and equitable production, exchange and consumption of goods to meet the needs of all human kind and Earth? Here we need more theological analytical work. Churches have embarked on fair trade over the years. It is an important step in recognizing trade inequalities and inequities but justice require much more. As Christians we should talk about just trade that is motivated by a sense of solidarity, which includes but goes beyond a sense of compassion.

Critique of the market

I short ‘market’ is a name given to ideology, a formal theory and a practical device. The elegant theory of the market has never really worked in practice. There is no such thing as a

free market for instance yet there is double standards where poor countries are force to follow theoretical rules that were never practiced by rich countries.

Markets are sometimes presented in quasi-religious terms. This is most evident in advertising campaigns that appeal to the religious sub-consciousness of potential buyers. Coca- Cola has promoted its products with texts like: Give me your tired ones, your thirsty ones. Those who are exhausted” and “ I was thirsty and I was refreshed.” The opening words of the Eucharist appeared on a large Pepsi- Cola billboard in Philippines: “Peace be with you”. The following is the critique of the market:

- The market distributes goods and services efficiently to only those with purchasing power. In this case the poor with less purchasing power will always loose. They are not considered an effective demand. The challenge for the churches and theologians is to work on how purchasing power could be shared by all people.
- Competition is the mantra of the market and is assumed that all people have equal opportunities, full information and ability to participate in competition. Proportionality that measures the ability of individuals, poor communities and countries and offers preferences to take care of the weaker ones is out of question or is applied temporarily with unbearable conditions. If the poor are forced to compete with the rich and left to the mercy of the market, the poor will lose every time. There should be rules governing the market that favor the poorest, giving them special help and protection. No country in the world has ever successfully developed economically through free trade alone. They have always offered protection and assistance to vulnerable traders and new industries. Poor countries should also be able to enjoy these rights.
- He market is considered “God” and as a dogma, it is devised for producing and distributing commodities but many things are not commodities and should not be distributed by the market. This is the reason we reject the inclusion of social services in the World Trade Organization. Social things essential to life such as food, health, water, housing, livelihoods, jobs, education should not be distributed by the market. Others that need not be distributed by the market are justice, security, belonging, and dignity, respect affection.

These three main points in the critique of the market need to be addressed by religions. In our case as Christians, the Gospel is clear on what is required of us. The World Council of Churches is embarking with the member churches on How to develop an Agape economy with the people where trade and finance are based in God’s Agape. The Agape economy of Justice and solidarity has the following Characteristics:

- The bounty of gracious economy of God (oikonomia tou theou) offers and sustains abundance life for all.
- God’s gracious economy requires that we manage the abundance of life in just participatory and sustainable manner.
- The economy of God is an economy of life that promotes sharing, globalized solidarity, the dignity of persons, and love and care for the integrity of creation.

- God's economy is an economy for the whole oikoumene- the whole earth community. God's justice and preferential option for the poor mark relationships in God's economy.

Actions needed now

We live in a world of outrageous inequality, with millions of people trapped in poverty. More than anything else it is the institutions, conditions, rules and practices of international trade that keep poor people poor. This situation must be transformed. And it is all of us united in action, which have the power to make it happen. "Championing the cause of the poor of the world in pursuit of trade justice is truly noble endeavor." said Bishop Desmond Tutu. There are movements around the world working on trade justice. We need to be part of these movements. Let us all join the ecumenical Campaign on People for Trade and join the Global Week on Trade 10-16, April 2005. The campaign is targeting

- National governments, rich country governments in particular, and their intellectual enslavement to the ideology of free trade.
- The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. For them to stop forcing free trade and privatization on the poor through heavy-handed "advice" and trade conditions attached to debt repayments and new loans.
- Regional and bilateral trade Agreements, such as the Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and the Cotonou Agreement. For a fundamental reassessment of these agreements.
- The World Trade Organization (WTO). For an alternative system, one that has the needs of the poorest rather than the interest of the rich, at its heart.

The idea is to build global movements fighting for just trade. Taking action with others and inspired by our spirituality will bring the transformation for another trade that is based on Agape. In order to join this campaign there are Action Guides prepared in many languages. They can be downloaded from the World Council of Churches Website and the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance www.e-alliance.ch. The Global Week of Action can be downloaded from www.april2005.org there are also worship guides will inspire churches to participate in a special worship on trade on the Sunday of 10th April 2005. So while we encourage more work of theologians to focus on just trade, theologizing on Agape trade, we also encourage them to be part of this global movement on just trade.

Poor farmers are asking, "What sort of efficiency is it that leaves thousands of farmers unproductive, families hungry and parents unable to send their children to school?"

This question must be responded to by justice and not by more trade.