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SOCIETAL QUESTIONS

FOR

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

C. L. Monk

As the Church has viewed society, it has occupied itself largely with the Christian ethics and values of the individual. To be sure, the concern of the church must always be for persons. Yet the individual is always the individual-in-community. No individual is self-sufficient. Each is an individual in relation to others.

When we discuss love for the neighbour, two factors are apt to be overlooked. One is the tendency to consider "loving deeply" those whom we will never meet personally. The other is the tendency not to give to institutions the human caring and serving that we give to individual persons.

It has been observed that the Christian ethic has become allied with individualism. This has increasingly resulted in the ethics of the isolated

individual. Hence there has developed the emphasis on personal faith, on sincerity of conviction and on personal good works. With this emphasis any real inclusion of the solidarity of human kind is omitted. Helping others takes the form of giving from our own, sharing with the "less fortunate". But it lacks an authentic empathy with others, an identification with the woes and the joys of those bereft of power.¹

A REPRESSIVE OR COMPASSIONATE SOCIETY?

Several questions illustrate how we direct theological reflection to the individual situation to the detriment of societal and global perspectives. Abortion is a good example. Respect for life must take into account that two-thirds of the abortions in the world are not induced but are caused by poverty.

Euthanasia, while not an issue referring exclusively to old age, must take into account that the major causes of death are now chronic diseases and accidents. With Canada's older population increasing in absolute numbers and in ratio to those who are producing goods and services, the tax burden on the younger population will probably increase. With that prospect, will more and more people accept, or even advocate, both voluntary and involuntary euthanasia?

In a young industrial society cure has high status; care does not. With that kind of value system, coupled with the gravity of health care costs, will "care" be given the status of "cure"? Will a post-industrial society change its value system so that care of the chronically ill will be seen to be as rewarding as the cure of acute conditions?

Another issue that we have not put in perspective is tissue transplants. The involvement of the community in health care planning can mean searching questions about health care priorities. Communities are wanting more say concerning the use of scarce resources, instead of leaving that to the choice of the professional and the individual patient. For example, communities are beginning to ask the ethical question concerning an expensive heart transplant in a hospital while outside its walls a thousand children become mentally and physically retarded because of malnutrition due to poverty.

The above suggests that we may be spending a great deal of psychic and physical energy to fight battles while we have no strategy for fighting the war. It suggests that there are fundamental questions that theological reflection does not normally touch because they are societal instead of individual. One such question is: Are we veering in the direction of a repressive society to the exclusion of a compassionate society? Does theology have something to say to the question, "What kind of society do Canadians want for themselves and their children?" We, in Canada, appear to have shifted from a stance of social concern in the sixties to one which is repressive and punitive. Today the behaviour of a substantial number of Canadians is as rational as that of the man who, after a frustrating day at the office or elsewhere, comes home and kicks the cat. Increasing pressures on the majority are not going to be resolved by venting anger on the minority.

1. Rolly May, *Power and Innocence* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1972)

REACTING OUT OF FEAR

People are worried about change. They are anxious about the threat to their affluence. This is "not the last generation - just the last comfortable one".² There is ugliness on the horizon. Fear is being manifested in "right wing" and avowed Fascist groups, in strident mail to our M.P.'s and in scapegoating the immigrant.

There is fear of unemployment. Some economists note an observable and significant trend upwards in unemployment since the end of World War II. Today we accept a percentage of unemployment that would have been politically unthinkable just a few years ago.

It is a cruel hoax to talk about the high costs of welfare, if we are not ready to underwrite the higher costs of jobs which generate sufficient income for people to live in decency. It is interesting that politicians in the U.S.A.; who advocated "workfare" instead of welfare, lost their enthusiasm for changing the "welfare mess" when they discovered that providing jobs which give people hope would be expensive. The question is: If we are not prepared to provide a guaranteed income, are we prepared to provide guaranteed employment with adequate wages? What about the right to work? What kind of work?

The response to the Green Paper on Immigration will probably give us a good reading on the kind of society most Canadians really want, namely how we can keep the kind of country we have for those of us who are here now. The specialists who wrote the paper do not seem predisposed to change that mood. There is no look to the future. There is no concern about changing the status quo. Value questions are dismissed as sentiment. The appeal is to those who want "more of what we have now". Immigrants are people only as they meet the "economic and labour market objectives" of Canada; if they fit the "national identity"; as long as they fit the present system and do not question our value systems; and because they will become producers and consumers.

There is a "doomsday" theme in the Green Paper. But are the "doomsday" people being consistent? Apparently the costs we cannot tolerate are more people - "Canada, like most advanced nations, counts the costs of more people in terms of congested metropolitan areas, housing shortages, pressures on arable land, damage to the environment . . ." (Green Paper on Immigration) But it seems we can tolerate the hidden costs of our economic and social arrangements. One could argue that the Green Paper on Immigration is scapegoating people because the aforementioned conditions could very well be the result of bankruptcy of government policy.

The environmentalists and the Zero Population Growth people predicate disaster if we overtax the carrying capacity of the Earth. What is usually overlooked in this approach is that at zero population growth we could indulge in an even higher standard of living. It is technology and affluence that increase pollution, not population growth per se. Who owns the technology and is

2. Ronald Higgins, "Not the Last Generation — Just the Last Comfortable One", *The Montreal Star*, March 15, 1975.

technology going to be non-expansionary in a society committed to the growth ethic? Is it people who create congestion in our cities and housing shortages or is it business and industrial strategy?

PEOPLE: SUBJECTS OR OBJECTS?

A question for reflection is, "Why do we have a propensity to freeze the number of people in the equation but not economic growth (GNP) or technology?" What kind of Canada do we want and at what level do we expect to live?

Apparently there is no place for putting people first. That is sentiment. "The opinion occasionally voiced that Canada, a resource and space-rich country, has an obligation to assist in the solution of global population problems through immigration may be admirable as an expression of sympathy . . . nor will this view stand analysis as a practicable policy objective." (Green Paper on Immigration) Is sharing emotional and therefore non-acceptable? What does this say about a country founded on values inherent in the Judaeo-Christian tradition?

Some reference must be made to the latent, and sometimes not so latent, racism alluded to in the Green Paper. What kind of society do we want to have? Will the church address a word of reconciliation to this problem?

Not unrelated to population and immigration policy is the matter of the aging population. Our society has a way of dealing with unemployment by retiring older people earlier and keeping younger people in the educational stream longer. Only industrial nations have large aging populations. This aging population may now be our fastest growing minority and their well-being could be a major social issue of our time. Many gerontologists feel that if life expectancy continues to be increased, the effects will overturn our present economic and welfare institutions.³ Again we are confronted by what kind of society we want to have.

Furthermore we are told "the new aged of the 1980's will have been accustomed to a higher standard of living; their necessities would have been amenities to their predecessors."⁴ We can assume, too, that they will have higher expectations re participating in and contributing to society. Will we have a theological approach to activism for older people in place of our inclination, theologically and otherwise, to deal with them as passive members of society?

OUR COMMON HERITAGE

We proclaim that the world is one under God. Everything depends on everything. Yet we have often not interpreted that in terms of "our common heritage".

Canada's behaviour at the U.N. Conference on the Law of the Sea is a good example. Canada's performance has been described as "depressing", "in the lead

3. Bernice L. Neugarten, "Social Implications of a Prolonged Life-Span", *The Gerontologist*, 12 (Winter 1972), p.439.

4. Elaine M. and Stanley J. Brody, "Decade of Decision for the Elderly", *Social Work*, NASW (Vol. 19, No. 5; September 1974), p.547.

role of vested interests”, “in the big grab”. While fisheries and oil are important, the real stakes are an estimated 20 trillion dollars worth of nodules on the seabed. These nodules contain such strategic metals as nickel, manganese, copper, and cobalt. Canada with more than 20,000 miles of coastline has a major advantage. In advancing its cause, it has acquired the image of “flaming nationalism”.

Apparently at one time Canada was open to some kind of “dividend” for developing countries, especially the poor landlocked countries. But there was no constituency to support the idea. Now it is felt that the “common heritage” school is a lost cause. Justice will not be done. David MacDonald, a Progressive Conservative M.P. has been almost the only spokesman for the cause. He took a very unpopular position when he deviated from his party’s stand in support of the War Measures Act during the F.L.Q. crisis in Quebec. He maintains that support of the “common heritage” concept is a more lonely role.

The major issues, as we see it in GATT-Fly, our Inter-Church Project for an alternative Canadian trade policy more favourable to the developing nations, are 1) the struggle over the control of the world’s resources and 2) the division of labour, that is, the perpetuation of the master-slave relationship. That is why we believe that the churches must be vitally concerned about the forthcoming Seventh Special Assembly of the U.N. this September where the theme will be power and control of resources and the purpose will be to ratify the Program of Action on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order.

SHARING POWER AND RESOURCES

Christians must reflect on sharing their power; sharing their wealth is not enough. Otherwise they become partners in a kind of complicity that pits them against their fellow men in an upper-class versus lower-class struggle, thereby denying the oneness of the human family under God. The next decades could witness a startling ruthlessness, out of “grim necessity”. Note the discussion of the “practicalities” of Western seizure of Middle East oil fields when the energy crisis broke.

Ours is no longer a world in which whole nations or regions can be safely written off. Previously powerless nations now have power to threaten the industrially-based and therefore intricate and vulnerable fabric of Northern life. What will be our theological reflection on violence when the violence we condemn is a reaction to our violence?

The Psalmist said, “The earth is the Lord’s; and the fullness thereof”. Subsumed under that is the premise of public ownership of our natural resources for the benefit of all people and for future generations, not for the few and the powerful exploitive corporations.

The British North America Act designated that natural resources would be the cornerstone of provincial finance to underwrite services for people. Yet our natural resources have often not been used for this purpose. In his report on Natural Resources Policy in Manitoba, Eric Kierans maintains that the BNA Act

clearly gives ownership of natural resources to the provinces, not to the federal government or private industry. What must now be determined is the manner in which one can gain the highest returns from that wealth, both now and in the future, in accordance with the priorities which the people have set.

Another gift of God's creation is the good earth. Yet, because we condone land speculation for a few, we eliminate more and more people from a little piece of the good earth, from reasonably-priced housing, and even from farming. The apparent acceptance by our civil servants of urban inevitability means that we are prepared to put more and more of our good land under asphalt and cement. In one of the four net-exporting countries left, all of us, it appears, are to be turned into consumers. However, Christian stewardship calls for the human family to conserve God's creation rather than to consume it.

It seems incongruous that the Canadian Lutheran Church which has had such a large investment in rural life has not questioned more seriously the eroding influences on rural, and especially farm life. Last December I was a guest at the National Farmers' Union banquet when the subject was GATT-Fly and the Rome Food Conference. The issue of where the agricultural producer fits in was part of the discussion. One farmer said in my presence that he had changed his mind about the church. He had almost given up "because as a farmer he had spent his life chasing the church which always kept running away from him".

Voices at the Rome Food Conference said we have to think small again. Agribusiness and large farms do not guarantee increased production. But such a trend certainly increases the risk of manipulated scarcity.

If the whole person is the business of the church, then I submit that inland terminals, rail line abandonment, the family farm versus agribusiness, the public ownership of land for future generations are theological issues. Our conventional planning and deciding may be obsolescent. Our decision-making must project the meaning of neighbour into the future.

No political or economic system can claim to be consistent with Christian tenets. Yet our church people carry a lot of cultural baggage which creates a dichotomy for them. Every system must be under judgement and one task of the church is to monitor what is going on in order that it and its institutions do what they are supposed to be doing, namely to enhance the well-being of people.

We continue to perpetuate the myth of an economy of scarcity and therefore that we must produce more and more. But we are in truth a consumer society. It is a society where waste is eminently profitable. This society which makes the majority affluent is the same society which makes the minority poor. This is a kind of tyranny in which Christians also prosper and hence places them among the oppressors.

Do we need a theology of affluence? Has the time come to raise some critical questions about capitalism as ideology? Has the time come to talk about greed? If we opt for greed, which seems to be the direction we have chosen, then in the interests of justice we must make certain that all people participate in that greed. To what extent are we responsible for demystifying the conventional wisdom by

which we have been conditioned to see our world, e.g.; the myth that competition is a major factor in our economic system? Do we have socialism for the strong (rich) and private enterprise for the weak (poor)?

Is our system geared to produce as much as possible for export at the highest possible price which, in turn, depends upon importing goods at the lowest possible price? Until we deal with that fundamental question, which again is one of power, the poor people in this world cannot hope for any major gains. The same process is applicable to the "Third World" in Canada.

DECISION-MAKING

A societal question of vital significance is the secrecy of Canadian public decision-making. Coupled with this is the propensity to define the issue as technical and therefore the domain exclusively of the experts and specialists. Thus, behind the scenes, we have non-accountable, anonymous employees framing strategy. It is important to assess how much of the decision-making in this country is presently outside the sphere of elected representatives of the people. It is true people have a vote. But do they really have a vote in the economic affairs of this country?

The aforementioned process alienates the Canadian people from the process of defining what they want for their country and what they want to share with developing nations. The aforementioned employees are taught the managerial style which makes their decision-making devoid of values and of sensitivity to the objects of their exercise, namely people. Indeed, it creates a paternalism about the view of the citizen.

The time allowed for citizen response to the Green Paper on Immigration gives us some clues about government attitude. The specialists took 504 days to prepare and publish the Green Paper. The people of Canada were being granted 170 days for their response. There is no way the government can say more clearly what they think of the views of citizens than to allow citizens less than two days for every five days allowed for the government's own specialists.

What does it say about the dignity of the individual when he does not have the right to know? If he is excluded from the consultation process, has he the right to be cynical about the political process? If the system is not open, then there is reason to state, regardless of personal integrity, that "all politicians are liars".

If Canadians are to go along with the difficult decisions that have to be made, then all aspects of public discussion must be conducted in total openness. Citizens not only want their opinions to be taken seriously, they want to be able to see at every stage that they are taken seriously. Otherwise, people have reason to think that the consultation process is not serious. Citizens have a right to know who collects and summarizes or synthesizes their ideas. They should be able to see various versions of draft reports and to know who wrote them.

Again we get back to the question whether people are objects and not subjects, therefore less than human. There is the question of the wisdom of the ordinary

person. Is he or she stupid? Or, in the interests of personal dignity, should it be assumed that those whose poverty or needs have been created by the present system know as much about how it should be changed as do those who are prospering in it?

The Real Poverty Report, published in 1971 in response to the *Report of the Special Senate Committee on Poverty*, pointed to the press as our greatest social problem and a major obstacle to advancing social justice in Canada. Similarly, it can be demonstrated that our press is a major obstacle to social justice for the developing nations.

One suspects that church people derive more of their theology from the newspapers than they do from the proclamation of the Gospel on Sunday morning. Hence analysis is not based on theological reflection but on unexamined common beliefs. In the interests of truth, what is the responsibility of the church to unmask reality? What is the church's responsibility to relate the truth, no matter how unpalatable?

Perhaps we have misplaced the emphasis. We have encouraged Christian individuals to enter politics. Yet it may be the media which, in the final analysis, is determining policy. David MacDonald, M.P., said to a GATT-Fly meeting earlier this year that "without the media being brought along, we are waging a losing battle".

THE WORK ETHIC

If we are to change from a consumer to a conserver society, or to a serving society instead of an acquisitive society, then we must discard the insidious work ethic that defines work as contributing to the Gross National Product. There could be plenty of jobs if Canada would define efforts to meet social needs as work and not merely as voluntary tasks or make-work projects. The traditional solution has been to expand the economy to exploit finite resources for goods to satisfy artificially accelerated consumerism.

One step in redefining the work ethic might be to pay volunteers. As one example, suddenly older people who during their lifetime had status because of paid employment now have no status when they are engaging in unpaid work. Yet there are a tremendous number of jobs that older people could be doing. Also, by what logic do we expect a homemaker (housewife) to do voluntary work for gratis as a means for self-fulfilment while another homemaker for similar self-fulfilment receives remuneration for work in a service agency?

Again we are talking about what kind of society we want to have. That suggests new priorities concerning what work is worthwhile and what work should be given status through remuneration.

While we wail about lack of personal social services and about too much government intervention, we starve the voluntary sector. Voluntary donations are declining and if the trend continues, voluntary agencies, as we know them, will

become extinct. Donations from business have not kept pace with rising profits any more than the contributions of individuals have kept pace with their accelerated incomes.

At a conference on new concepts of work, it was observed that one of the tragedies in our society is that when we have unemployment, our public social services are being starved. Social services in the health, education and social welfare field have been increasingly depersonalized. Thousands of lonely people and aged people in this country cannot even get the simplest kind of personal social service which often they need - somebody to just come over and visit them on a morning. Why? Because the goods-producing assembly line values and standards and methods of operation have been applied to the delivery of social services. The time has come to start a crusade, to get more people into the social services along with all the rest of the so-called "formally trained" staff, and provide in this country what we really need - personal social services.

JUSTICE

This has been a shopping list for theological reflection. Needless to say, the list leaves out a number of important societal questions, e.g., Native Land claims. But there is one more item without which any list would be incomplete. It is the matter of social justice. "A society is unjust to the extent that the structure of its laws and institutions do not contribute to a just distribution of resources or provide a just opportunity for the full development of all its citizens." This statement is applicable to Canadian society and to the world community.

The loving person must first of all be just. Justice is giving a person what is due because he or she is a human being. Justice is a prerequisite to love. We have often diluted the Gospel in our emphasis on charity. In other words, we have encouraged our people to become better philanthropists. Hardly ever do we talk about taxes, social change or other positive actions for the common good, i.e., social justice. We have seldom asked the basic question concerning social justice, namely, "What kind of society do we want to have?"

Permit me to conclude with a personal experience. Several months ago an acquaintance who is a Benedictine monk asked me, "When did you become a social justice person?" No one had asked me that question before and I had never really thought about it. But as I have reflected on it since, it seems to me that if Christians are to become involved in the human dilemma of today, a basic theological task for them is to deal with the question, "Am I a social justice person?" A basic theological task of the church is to help its people grapple with that question.

5. *New Concepts of Work*, Proceedings of a Conference sponsored by the Canadian Council on Social Development, March 26-27, 1973.

6. Lutheran Church in America, *The Church in Social Welfare*, p.51.