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Humanity, Solidarity, Morality and Partnership: Gender Issues in the Concentric Tradition of the Ecumenical Movement

The context of gender issues in the ecumenical movement is surrounded by many concentric circles. It is human rights that are the common basis for all people of goodwill: nations are united in their firm belief and acceptance that humanity is one, organic, coherent and mutually interdependent. From this notion flows the need for using power to serve the aims of solidarity and building community.

Our community or koinonia is the overall dimension of our moral or ethical behaviour. Therefore, the inner life of the Holy Trinity should serve as a model for our human communities as well, where we can grow in partnership and unity.

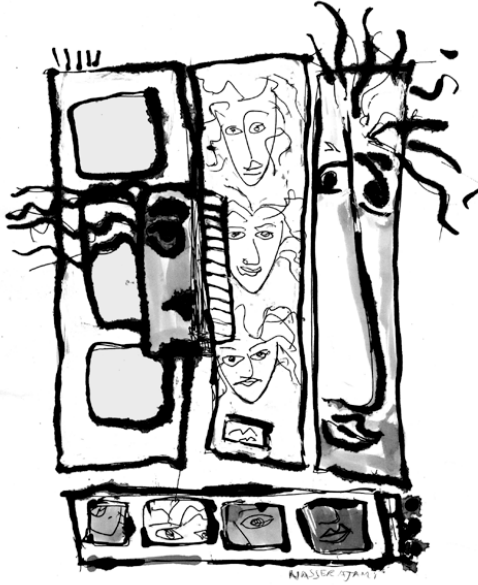
I. Human Rights (and United Nations)

The broadest context in which we need to understand the place of gender issues in the ecumenical movement is, first of all, the dimension of human rights. They in their history have three generations.

Their first generation contains the bourgeois freedoms of property. After these, in the second generation we find labour and social security. And finally, in the third phase, there are development and the rights of future generations.

The participation and influence of the ecumenical movement on the development of the human rights is evident when looking, for example, at the case of O. Frederick NOLDE, who was the first director of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA). He was the one who drafted the United Nations' (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948.

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UDHR was followed by the international covenant on civil and political rights in 1966, and the international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights, also in the same year. Their main content entails the core values of inviolability, of freedom (liberty), of equality, of participation, of responsibilities and most of all, the value of human dignity.

Also later on, the initiatives of the UN went hand in hand with those of the ecumenical movement. One remarkable example, Annie JIAGGE, later president of the World Council of Churches (WCC), was the president for more than ten years (1962–1972) of the commission on the status of women, as well as a drafter of the declaration on the elimination of discrimination against women.

The main projects of the UN on human rights issues were the following: the UN declared an international year (1975) and a whole decade for women (1975–1985) and organised world conferences on women (in Nairobi in 1985; and in Beijing in 1995).

After the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) declared a world emergency for children in 1974, and held an international year of the child in 1979, and of the family in 1994, the strategies for confronting domestic violence (1993) and the convention on the rights of the child were finally born in 1999.

The world population conference (in Bucharest in 1974) and the population and development conference (in Cairo in 1994) invoked an ecumenical answer in 1996 on the churches, population and development in Cairo and beyond.

A UN Earth Summit on environment, ecology and development (in Rio de Janeiro in 1992) was followed by another UN conference on human rights in Wien in 1993. The Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) convoked a UN special general assembly on HIV/AIDS in 2001.

These initiatives all have their parallels in the ecumenical movement. Because of their strong interconnectedness, it remained impossible to separate the development of the United Nations initiatives on human rights issues from those endeavours of the ecumenical movement.

II. Power and Solidarity

Human rights are the great dimension in which we must try to understand the important emphases of the ecumenical movement throughout her history on question of power and of solidarity.

According to theological anthropology (the thinking about human beings in light of the existence of God) or the anthropology, God is a coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*), reconciled in a perfect unity.

Parallel, the characteristics of a person are incommunicability, substantiality, intellectuality and corporeality (including sexuality), but also sociality, relationality and dialogueability. The movement of persons toward each other in love is the very mode of God's existence.

The famous WCC humanum studies (1968–1975), led by David JENKINS, concentrated on the anguish of human beings, the praise of God and the repentance of the Church. These studies researched humanisation, hominisation, the Christology of incarnation, and contextualisation (in Berlin in 1974).

Their findings continued in the endeavour for a just, participatory and sustainable society (JPSS, from 1975 until 1983) and then in the process of justice, peace and the integrity of creation (JPIC, from 1983 until 1991).

This later one was a world convocation and conciliar process of mutual commitment and covenant, aiming to translate the values of the Reign of God into achievable social goals and so-called middle axioms.

The middle axioms are the concepts of Joseph H. OLDHAM, to intermediate between the ultimate basis of Christian action in community (the law of love), and the unguided intuition of the individual conscience.

The basic assumption of these conciliar processes was that God is at the same time our Creator, our Liberator and our Sustainer. The creation is purposeful; it is contingent, yet distinct.

Creation is in its very essence good, it is made out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) and it reflects a divine commitment (*providenta et creatio continua*). The realm of nature is, at the same time, a theatre of grace.

Human mastery, human solidarity and human stewardship have to be fulfilled under God's Lordship in accountability for the holistic reintegration of God's creation (as it was emphasized in a conference in Seoul in 1990).

The Church and Society conference on Christians in the technical and social revolutions of our time was held in Genève in 1966. Janet LACEY (1903–1988) was the president of this conference, dealing with the impacts of secularization, aiming towards a permanent and just revolution.

A misuse of power calls for accounting the ecumenical consequences of oppression and domination, and education for liberation from all totalitarian systems and systematic evils.

The ecumenical movement, especially the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), played a significant role in equipping entire generations to respond to Nazism, but they basically failed to do so in connection with Communism.

Liberty and freedom are also theological values, because Jesus Christ Himself frees and unites us¹. Especially Latin American liberation theology emphasized salvation and redemption for the fullness of life in Church base communities (CBC) and in a basic preferential option for the poor, which is now a common belief of all Christians.

Power finds its place in a free and responsible society based on the structure of responsible life, lived concretely for the neighbour, in community and solidarity. In this respect, the nearer we come to reality, the nearer we come to God.

III. Ethics and Morality of Life

This leads us to ethics and morality, which are the touchstones of ecumenicity. In many instances it is true that doctrine divides, but service unites. Morality and ethics have an eschatological and an ecclesiological significance as well (as it was rightly emphasized in a conference in Bossey in 1951 and in a Faith and Order Document titled *Ecclesiology and Ethics*).

It is so, since the Church partly grows and finds her unity in and through moral struggle against moral heresies. The involvement in the *koinonia*-generating struggles of humanity is also a moral responsibility for all of us. Unity is a quite precious gift, which therefore requires our costly response.

Nowadays, science, and its application, technology, are both increasingly globalised, so the connection between faith, science and the future of *bio-ethics* gradually gained more and more importance. This was the topic of a conference in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1979.

Consultations were held on health care and the *medical* missions in the two-thirds world in Tübingen in 1964; and on the role of the Church in healing, also in Tübingen, in 1968.

These important meetings led to the formation of the Christian Medical Commission (CMC) in 1968. One of their most important decisions was when they rejected abortion as a means of population control in Zürich in the year 1973.

In the first European regional consultation of this Christian Medical Commission (CMC) in Budapest (Hungary) in 1978, their topic was health, healing and their connection to human wholeness.

Birth control, family planning and responsible parenthood are also closely connected to life and death questions, as well as the ethical and social issues in genetic engineering and the ownership of life forms, which were dealt with in a conference in the Netherlands in 1981.

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (*AIDS*) is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (*HIV*). This pandemic was first diagnosed in the United States of America (USA) in 1981. The groundbreaking—but very expensive—highly active anti-retroviral therapy (HAART) was invented in 1996.

¹ This was the slogan and official motto of the World Council of Churches (WCC) General Assembly (GA) in Nairobi in 1975

The Church in this respect really must be a healing community, with pastoral care, social ministry and education for prevention. A World Council of Churches (WCC) platform in 1995 examined women's health and the challenge of HIV/AIDS.

It was followed by two important WCC studies (in 1996 and in 1997) facing the questions posed by AIDS, on the challenge and impact of HIV/AIDS and the churches' response. Since the pandemic affects those already marginalized, an unconditional acceptance of people living with AIDS is needed by all members of a community.

The ecumenical coalition on third world tourism (ECTWT) urged an end to child *prostitution* in Asian tourism in their meeting in Chiang Mai in 1990. The result was that the movement to end child prostitution, child pornography and trafficking in children for sexual purposes was formed, meeting in Stockholm in 1996, and then in Yokohama in 2001.

A pastoral and educational brochure in 1991 addressed the issue of *sexual harassment* (the term was coined in the United States of America in 1975), when Christian solidarity is broken.

Similarly, the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) Europe Region called for respecting human dignity and integrity in their sexual harassment guidelines, published in Budapest (Hungary) in 2005.

Concerning *abortion* or feticide, the question is whether we should develop more compassion with the mother, or with the foetus or embryo. Sadly enough, in our age many societies lay much more emphasis on the (usually non-life-and-death) concerns of the mother, than of their victimised unborn offspring.

If we go deep into the question, it becomes clear that abortion has all the characteristics to be on the agenda of liberation movements and theologies. First, a hegemonic power (the adults and their adult society) declares some specimens of the species of *Homo sapiens sapiens* (those under the age of zero) as non-humans or sub-humans.

Then, the dominant power systematically oppresses them and declares their elimination as non-homicidal. This group of specimens is then marginalized, silenced and denied of all their (basic or non-basic) rights.

A test case for the pro-choice wing of the feminist movement is the gender-based selective abortion practice now spreading in Asia, where significantly more female foetus die than male.

As an ecumenical response, remaining consequent to our basic principles, we should declare that human life and physical integrity should be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception until natural death. The protection of human life in all its forms is the Archimedean point of all responsibly moral behaviour.

IV. Women's Movements

These are the dimensions where we find the place of the gender concern, and in this, the emerging women's movement. The first women's movement was concerned with improving the position of women in society, with the emancipation of women, with their economic independence and issues of job and work.

The second women's movement (which is mainly identical with what is known as *feminism*), beginning in the 1960s, concentrated upon the replacement of the patriarchal order, on the dichotomy of woman (nature) and man (intellect), on psychological independence, and on various female guiding principles.

The precursors of *feminist theology* are Elizabeth Cady STANTON, compiling the so-called women's Bible, and Matilda Joslyn GAGE, writing on the relationship of women, Church and state.

The key figures of the feminist movement, however, became Mary DALY, Rosemary Radford RUETHER and Judith PLASKOW, of course among others. Feminist theology is a method of doing theology, entailing a creative re-visioning of what it is to be the Church.

It creates networks of shared experience, knowledge and community, by recovering female images of the Divine. There has been a significant shift from cooperation to social and economic justice and the liberation struggle.

A full access and participation is needed in leadership, ordination, inclusive language, the re-reading of Bible and Tradition, and equal opportunities in all fields of life (including Church life).

One of the more recent branches of theology is the *womanist theology*, which is exercised and done for example by the women's commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT).

Another important forum in this area is the circle of concerned African women theologians (CCAWT), established in Accra in 1989. They focused on transforming power (in their meeting in Nairobi in 1996) and on challenging religion, culture and social practices concerning sex, stigmatisation and HIV/AIDS (in Addis Ababa in 2002).

The World Student Christian Federation (WSCF, 1895) and the World Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA, 1894) have been fertile training grounds for women leaders, such as Ruth ROUSE, or Suzanne DE DIÉTRICH, the mother of the Biblical renewal.

After the establishment of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948, the main interest was primarily focused on the life and work of women inside the Church. A questionnaire was prepared for this General Assembly by Twila McCREA CAVERT, and the answers on the service and status of women in the Church were published by Kathleen BLISS in 1952.

Sarah CHAKKO became the chair of the respective commission (later department, and, finally, sub-unit) dealing with women in the Church between 1950 and 1951, and after that she served as one of the presidents of WCC between 1951 and 1954.

In the previous position as chair of the commission, she was followed by Rena Karefa SMART (1966–1967), Brigalia Hlophe BAM (1967–1980), Bärbel VON WARTENBERG (1980–1988) and Anna Karin HAMMAR (1988–1998).

In the later position, as chair of WCC, she was also followed by others: famous female World Council of Churches (WCC) presidents were Annie JIAGGE and Cynthia Clark WEDEL between 1975 and 1983; and Marga BÜHRIG, Nita BARROW and Lois Miriam WILSON between 1983 and 1991.

For many¹, the *Virgin Mary*, the Theotokos (God-bearer, and Mother of God) serves as a powerful role model in the faith struggles of everyday life. As we can also see in *Magnificat*, the song of Mary, she is the new woman herself, filled and full with grace and faith.

¹ For example for Dorothy DAY (1897–1980), among many other women and men.

She is the suffering servant of God, an example of humility, prayer and faith. She is a model in the matter of faith, charity and perfect union with Jesus Christ. But at the same time she expresses the prophetic spirituality of liberation, a new order of justice and peace, a new creation, too.

She is a chief representative of the powerless people and a powerful model for all human behaviour. She sets in motion a whole spiritual revolution, as a pointer to a total change of heart and mind.

V. Partnership and Unity

The women's movement calls for the cooperation of women and men in all spheres of life, concluding in partnership and unity. The longest-ever initiative in ecumenical history was conducted on the unity of the Church and the unity of humankind, between 1971 and 1991. It was a Faith and Order (F&O) study on the eschatological promise of the coming Reign of God.

The basic assumption was that the Church is a sacrament, a mystery and a prophetic sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of humankind. In their method of intercontextualisation, the contexts reciprocally provide the interpretative framework for each other.

They researched unity in today's world (1978), the unity of the Church and the renewal of human community (Lima, 1982), Jesus Christ as the life of the world (Vancouver, 1983), and God's purpose to restore all things into unity in Christ.

The glory of God is humanity fully alive, as IRENÆUS teaches us. The aim of all of us is *theosis* or divinisation, our human existence made similar to God's in Jesus Christ. Against the politics of death, therefore, we should build the culture of life and unity, reconciliation and healing.

Women and men, too, should be totally free to live out the charismas and gifts which God has given them and to respond to their calling to share fully in the life and witness of the Church.

Women's and men's equal and profound participation, therefore, is not simply a matter of social justice, but also of profound theological integrity, pioneered by the ecumenical movement as well.

Suggested Reading

ARIARAJAH S. Wesley, *Did I Betray the Gospel? The Letters of Paul and the Place of Women*. Genève, 1996.

The Ecumenical Dialogue on Moral Issues: Potential Sources of Common Witness or of Divisions. A Study Document of the Joint Working Group of WCC and RCC. The Ecumenical Review 1996/2. 143–154.

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ODUYOYE Mercy Amba, *Who Will Roll the Stone Away? The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women*. Genève, 1990.

PARVEY Constance F., *The Community of Women and Men in the Church*. Genève, 1981.

- Respecting Human Dignity and Integrity. Sexual Harassment Guidelines of WSCF Europe.* Budapest, 2005.
- ROZS-NAGY Szilvia, *Interconnected Relations in Ecofeminism.* In NAGYPÁL Szabolcs – ŠAJDA Peter, *A Pentatonic Landscape. Central Europe, Ecology, Ecumenism.* Budapest, 2002. 41–50.
- WARTENBERG-POTTER Bärbel von, *Wir werden unsere Harfen nicht an die Weiden hängen: Engagement und Spiritualität.* Stuttgart, 1986.
- WEBB Pauline, *She Flies Beyond: Memories and Hopes of Women in the Ecumenical Movement.* Genève, 1993.

NAGYPÁL Szabolcs: Humanity, Solidarity, Morality and Partnership: Gender Issues in the Concentric Tradition of the Ecumenical Movement

Participation, theological vision and insight, hope and faith all use an inclusive language, which depicts women and men as both equally normative, of equal worth, and having complementary and essential contributions to make to the community. We should blend female and male spiritual insights, because wholeness and unity is a precious gift which requires our costly response. All should be free to live out the gifts which God has given and to share fully in the life and witness of the Church. In a free and responsible society based on the structure of responsible life, we live concretely for the neighbour. The movement of persons towards each other in love and dialogue is the very mode of God's existence; the involvement in the koinonia-generating struggles of humanity, therefore, is a moral responsibility. Human life and physical integrity should be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception until natural death. That is how we are accountable for the holistic reintegration of God's creation.

NAGYPÁL Szabolcs: L'Humanité, la Solidarité, la Moralité et le Partenariat: Les Thèmes de Sexe dans la Tradition Concentrique du Mouvement Œcuménique

Participation, vision et compréhension théologique, espoir et foi tous utilisent un langage inclusif, qui représente les femmes et les hommes comme étant égaux sur le plan normatif, à valeur égale, et ayant des contributions complémentaires et essentielles à faire dans la communauté. Nous devons mêler les compréhensions spirituelles femelle et male, parce que la globalité et l'unité sont un don qui requiert une réponse coûteuse. Tous devraient être libre de vivre les dons que Dieu a offert et partager pleinement dans la vie et le témoignage de l'Eglise. Dans une société libre et responsable basée sur une structure de vie responsable, nous vivons concrètement pour l'autre. Le mouvement des personnes les uns vers les autres dans l'amour et le dialogue est le mode d'existence de Dieu, l'engagement dans les luttes de l'humanité, et ainsi une responsabilité morale. La vie humaine et l'intégrité physique devraient être respectées et protégées absolument, de la conception à la mort naturelle. C'est de cette manière que nous sommes redevable de la réintégration holistique de la création de Dieu.