

Social Ethics: Agenda for the Future

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Theology has no exclusive claim to discerning the social problems facing the world. This discernment process belongs to all people and to the whole Church. This paper thus focuses primarily on methodological questions: how should Christian social ethics approach social questions and problems and how should the Church structure and carry out its social mission. To illustrate these two main areas of investigation, the content question of economic issues is used.

I Theological Approaches

Three presuppositions are accepted: no dichotomy between nature and super-nature or between kingdom and world; an historically conscious methodology with a more inductive approach; emphasis on action or praxis. The following aspects of Christian social ethics are discussed:

Mediation. Roman Catholic theology has traditionally accepted the reality of mediation; so do contemporary theologians. The concept of distributive justice is proposed as a mediating principle which is both fitting and effective.

Mediation and specificity. The acceptance of mediation recognizes the relative autonomy of the human, human reason, scientific data and their interpretation. Christian ethical judgements often depend heavily on such scientific data and interpretation. Consequently, in practice it will often be impossible to speak about the only possible Christian approach.

Eschatology. The fullness of the eschaton serves as a negative critique of all existing social and political structures and calls for a change of these structures. However, limitation and sin will always mark the human condition, and the fullness of the eschaton lies beyond our grasp. The struggle for social change will be hard and long. This eschatological vision must become positively incarnate in specific approaches and strategies, but such strategies must always be open to criticism and can never be absolutized.

Personal and/or structural change. Any adequate social ethic must recognize the need for both types of change. Structural change today and in the future, especially in the light of its world-wide ramifications, will often not be possible without some truly personal change or conversion.

Harmony and conflict. Catholic moral theology with its natural law tradition has consistently emphasized harmony and the fitting together of all parts for the good of the whole, as illustrated in the traditional teaching on the state. Some more importance must be given to conflict, which can never be an ultimate but can at times be an acceptable strategy for social change.

Detached and participant perspectives. There are advantages and disadvantages to both perspectives which must be recognized.

Social ethics as a reflexive, systematic discipline. Social ethics is a second order discourse which is essential for critical action, but other realities can and do have a greater immediate impact on actions.

II Role of the Church

Importance of the social mission of the Church. The social dimension is a constitutive dimension of the Church. Put in its simplest terms, this means that without a social mission there is no Church. Such an understanding must become more prominent in the life of the Church.

Limits on the social mission of the Church. Social mission is only a part of the mission of the Church. Many other groups and individuals are also working for social change. Individual church members also work for social change in and through organizations which involve all and not just church people.

Pluralism. Pluralism exists on the level of methodology and on the level of what should be done in practice. The pluralism of political and economic options has consistently been recognized in the Catholic tradition, but today such pluralism is seen to exist even on questions of personal morality.

Ecclesiological consequences. The Church can more easily agree about a negative critique of society and about the more general principle and approaches to take. On specific issues there will often be a legitimate diversity within the Church. Here there is a place for smaller groups within the Church to band together and work for particular purposes. Smaller groups can and should do things that the larger community of the Church should not do. However, at times the whole Church should speak and act.

↳ how should we relate to Fed, Kt, in modern world
perspective
B what should we do

a' political theology

B' moral theology

Curran: small impact of Cath Kt community

Hatz: political theology

Curran: = generic → mediation to concrete

↳ result: less certitude

↳ how do we use social sc.

importance of soc. sc.

sc. only one aspect
human is broader
science conflict
how judge

↳ ecumenology

pluralist, many individualist groups
not moral del

↳ ^{vs} political apocalyptic

Curran positive continuity

less contrast

what did the provocative memory of Kt
in 2000 yrs

↳ Curran ^{vs} gradual evolution death

don't want it

wants acknowledge and conflict

↳ dialectic critical negativity