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The Theological Foundations for an Ecumenical Methodology what do the member churches say?

*Ann Wansbrough, Research and Liaison
UnitingCare NSW.ACT*

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This paper looks at the basis for the methodology in the official teachings of four of the member churches - Orthodox, Anglican, Uniting, and Catholic.

- The role of the church in the public arena
- Human rights
- Methodology for thinking about social justice issues

Introduction

Thank you for coming to this seminar. I hope that it make a useful contribution to ecumenical social justice work.

This seminar is about methodology - about how we arrive at the positions that we might advocate concerning public policy. It is not about ecclesiastic processes, but about the types of thinking that we need to use, and the reasons why those **types of thinking** are appropriate and useful.

Churches not individuals. It is essential to note that this seminar is about churches as churches - about churches as members of the NCCA. It is not about how individuals should make lifestyle decisions.

NCCA constitution. In writing my thesis I began with the NCCA constitution, which commits the churches to speaking and acting in various ways regarding justice, peace and integrity of creation. My thesis is about what the churches need to take into account if they are to fulfil those commitments responsibly. In preparing the material, as a staff member of one church agency, namely UnitingCare NSW.ACT, I have taken for granted that among the

churches we have people with the relevant expertise to carry through the methodology that I propose.

Most of you will have received by mail a copy of a "summary and extracts" of my thesis. If you have registered in the last few days, you will have received this today. This is about 28000 words long, compared to the 100000 of the original thesis. In addition, the thesis had an appendix that looked at five policy issues in detail, and another appendix that looked at about 34 case studies of work done in the various traditions - either individual documents or the work of particular agencies. Almost another 100,000 words. Respondents from member churches have received the whole thesis and appendices. The extracts fail to do adequate justice either to the traditions or the thesis, but are intended to provide some of the flavour and the key ideas.

Issues, political processes, human rights. Before looking at the way I have interpreted the member church traditions, I want to draw your attention to the brief summaries you have been given of chapters 2, 3 and 4 of the thesis - the nature of the issues, the policy making context and nature of policy, and human rights. These chapters are of fundamental importance in developing the methodology. Indeed, I consider their inclusion to be one of my main contributions to the debate about methodology.

One of the weaknesses of much writing about what the churches should say or not say or how they should say it is that the focus is entirely on the churches, with no regard for the context in which policy is actually made or the form that policy actually take. Also, references to human rights are often very vague. The analysis undertaken in these chapters has helped

shape the methodology proposed in part III of the thesis, which we will look at this afternoon.

These matters are open to debate and argument, but it is assumed that they are not matters where the churches, as churches, would substantially disagree with one another.

So, let's move to the traditions. The extracts you have received from these chapters were intended to give you something of the flavour of what each tradition is saying. I am not going to take you through the extracts, but to outline how they provide the foundations for methodology. You will find it useful to have the extracts open before you as I talk.

Orthodox

Overhead: Orthodox. The Orthodox tradition shows considerable commitment to social justice, and to speaking out on behalf of the poor. This commitment follows from their understanding of the nature of the Trinitarian God as described in God the Creator, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is reflected in their understanding of the sacraments, spirituality, mission and diakonia.

This comes through very clearly in some of the passages that I have quoted from the Orthodox documents in the extracts. Social justice is intrinsic in these aspects of the faith.

The Orthodox documents are a rich source of theology for social justice work. The quote from Ion Bria which appears on my title page makes an important point about the depth of the social justice tradition as part of the proclamation of the Gospel - I nearly called my thesis "in the presence of the powers that be". Some Orthodox documents talk about being a voice for the voiceless. I think their concept of work for justice as the exorcism of demons, exorcism of the evils of racism, poverty, violence and so on, is important, as is their concept of God's healing of the world.

The Orthodox documents give the church a role in bringing about social change. At the same time, they warn against assuming social ethics teaching or action for change, will solve the problems.

Problems of social injustice are not merely technical, political or ethical. The church must influence society, but not identify with any one part of it or any one movement for change. Healing is something God does, not human beings.

We should also note, however, that the Orthodox Church has expressed support for the international human rights instruments, and for the work of the United Nations in defence of human rights of peoples around the world.

The Orthodox documents also remind us that we must remember what the church is. It is not merely a sociological entity. The church has been created by God. It is a heavenly or mystical entity. The Orthodox are wary of any description of the church as a social entity.

I looked at some specific examples of the Orthodox Church exploring and taking action on social justice issues. The material mainly seemed to relate to environmental issues. The papers seem to fall sharply into two groups - papers about theology, and papers about technical issues. Taken as a whole, the reports include description of reality, understanding the technical issues involved, questioning the ideology that supports damage to the environment, arguing theologically for a responsible attitude to creation and determining some principles (what some other traditions call middle axioms) that the church should publicly advocate as criteria and directions for government and UN policy.

There is no discussion of methodology, and some of the concerns already outlined make such discussion difficult.

The Anglican Tradition

Anglican Bruce Kaye, Secretary of the General Synod of the Anglican Church in Australia, has drawn attention to the particular nature of the Anglican church as "a church in society", "a church without walls", with two directional interaction between church and society. Kaye's emphasis on the social embeddedness of the Anglican Church stands in some contrast to the Orthodox stress on the spiritual nature of the church.

Kaye also refers to Hooker's methodology: the interaction of scripture, tradition and reason.

It is not surprising then that the Lambeth Conference has made clear, as the extracts indicate, that the role of bishops includes a role as advocate on behalf of poor and disadvantaged people.

At my first meeting with Michael Horsburgh as my supervisor for the thesis, he gave me a copy of an article he had written, which urged the Australian churches to learn from the work of William Temple and to make use of middle axioms. It was immediately apparent to me that using middle axioms would be very useful in the Uniting Church context. The question is : how to formulate such axioms.

One of the problems with the churches speaking on public policy is that churches find it easy to condemn policy, and it will always be possible to condemn policy because public policy is never perfect. But if we are seeking justice in the world, then we need to do more than condemn what is wrong. We need to be able to indicate what are the appropriate general directions -what directions of public policy we are seeking in a positive sense as appropriate for society.

That is what Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, provided in his six principles in Christianity and Social Order. He did not simply provide criteria by which current policies could be condemned - he suggested directions in which policy could go.

Another embodiment of the Anglican tradition is the Lambeth Conference, the international conference of bishops.

The Anglicans see a public role for the church, and especially for their bishops.

It seems to me that the theological material can be summarised in much the same way as I summarised the Orthodox material in my opening paragraph: (The Anglican tradition shows considerable commitment to social justice, and to speaking out in the public arena on behalf of the poor. This commitment follows from their understanding of the nature of the Trinitarian God as described in God the Creator, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It

is reflected in their understanding of the sacraments, spirituality, mission and ministry. There are also echoes of the sense of God's transformation of the world. In both there is recognition that human beings need conversion. They agree that no economic, social, or political system can be identified with the Kingdom of God.) Like the Orthodox tradition, there are some wonderful passages and some enriching concepts.

The 1988 Lambeth Conference, rather than talking about being a voice for the voiceless, talked about the fact that in situations of injustice, "the voice from the depths may have to be heard as the voice of God."

There appear to be some differences between the Anglican and Orthodox traditions.

The Anglican tradition recognises an important positive role for ethics.

They name the resources on which the church draws for its understanding of issues confronting church and society: Scripture, the Anglican moral tradition, interdisciplinary study of current issues, the Christian community, informed conscience, social norms, deductive reasoning, compassion and "a real sense of our own fallibility". (see page 14)

The reports express the view that the churches can and should engage in social action as a means of making a better society possible.

Whereas the Orthodox tradition warns of the dangers of activism, Lambeth warns of the danger of focusing on the church's own life. Whereas the Orthodox warn of the dangers of substituting human action for God's action, Lambeth warns of the dangers of ignoring the Spirit prompting the church to action. Lambeth also seems more willing to name the processes involved in determining what to advocate, such as the need to lay down principles that can guide communities and peoples, not only individuals.

But these differences occur within the common ground of both recognising that God's mission is about both renewing individuals and renewing society.

Lambeth describes the dynamic interaction between tradition and current context, acknowledging that the questions we bring to scripture depend on the situation in which we are studying scripture. It also recognises some of the complexities involved in moving from concepts of faith, and commitment to justice, to appropriate decisions and action in the contemporary world. They acknowledge, for example, that in the real world, Christians, and others, are often faced with competing moral claims. Public policy is not a simple choice between right and wrong, but a matter of holding together a number of values and responsibilities and needs of different groups. Hence the importance of ethics, ie a disciplined way of dealing with those competing demands.

The Lambeth documents affirm the importance of internationally recognised human rights. They refer to them as a baseline for assessing groups, communities and the state.

The proposed methodology would seem to be consistent with that of agencies such as Brotherhood of St Laurence and Anglicare.

The Catholic Social Teaching

Chapter 7 of my thesis looks at the Catholic Social Teaching, that is, those documents dating from Rerum Novarum (1891) onwards in which the Catholic Church has sought to guide its members and clergy regarding economic, social and political matters.

This body of teaching includes documents with different emphases from one another. For example, one focuses on the nature of redemption through Christ, another on the nature of mission and evangelism. Each of the documents, and all of them together, offer a rich vein of theological material that needs to be taken into account in understanding the social justice work of the church.

It is my impression that the Catholic Church would agree with the Orthodox and Anglican churches about the grounding of social justice work of the church in the most central doctrinal and theological concepts of Christianity - our understanding of God, Creation, Jesus

Christ, the Holy Spirit, the meaning of salvation and mission.

Perhaps one of the most influential concepts from Catholic Social Teaching is "God's preferential option for the poor" - the priority that the poor have in God's mission. Similar concepts are found in other traditions, being a voice for the voiceless (Orthodox), hearing the voice from the depths as the voice of God (Anglican), or the sense of solidarity that Uniting Church agencies refer to. This point, whatever form it takes, is crucial to the methodology I propose.

CST recognises a role for the church in the public arena, but recognises also that in the end this is about transformation that God brings about in the world. All three traditions recognise that peoples, nations and governments are accountable to God, and that the Gospel can be addressed to these and not only to individuals. Several of the Catholic documents are not merely a means of teaching church members, but are intended to have a significant impact on business, society and government.

There are several concepts that help us understand this role better

- The structures of sin - sin is institutionalised and systemic
- Public policy is primarily about values and morality, and only secondarily about technical issues
- The church is "an expert in humanity".
- The Kingdom of God makes a difference to this world, although no particular social, economic or political system can be identified with the Kingdom
- The church's mission is "for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation".
- The Holy Spirit is at work in the world
- Social justice action is "a sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God in the World" - a part of evangelisation (this ties in with the quote from Ion Bria, in the Orthodox tradition).

- Confession "of the role the church has played in allowing evil to flourish in the world, especially by its failure to challenge effectively the abuse of human rights" (TMA)
- They distinguish between the church being involved in politics, ie the public policy arena, which it should be, and the church making a commitment to a particular political program or campaign, which is the role of the laity.

The Catholic Church clearly does intervene in public policy. In the UN, it is a member state.

Catholic Social Teaching recognises that local churches (which may mean a local faith community, or the church at national level, or any manifestation of the church in between), need to interpret the Christian tradition and CST in ways appropriate to their own context.

While some of the documents date from before there were internationally recognised human rights, Catholic Social Teaching is generally supportive of those rights. Some documents describe the rights of human beings in terms similar to the international covenants. Others refer to the role of the Catholic Church in the development of the international instruments. Some affirm the work of the UN in this area.

Methodology. While some Catholic documents talk about some aspects of method, they do not seem to articulate a coherent methodology in the sense that I had in mind. They talk about some useful concepts, such as discerning the sign of the times, and see-judge-act, and applying criteria.

I found it more useful to look at the documents themselves, and to ask what sort of materials do they include, and what methodology does this imply.

The documents usually include a description of reality. As CST has developed, there are a number of concepts and principles that have become the lenses through which reality is examined - God's preferential option for the poor, justice for all, commitment to human rights, and so on.

The documents include analysis and critique. They show what can only be called ideological suspicion - some documents very sharply criticise arguments put forward in favour of a status quo that favours the rich and powerful. Indeed, ideological critique is implied in the very concept of the "structures of sin." The documents propose an alternative approach - one that takes the catholic principles more seriously, one that supports human rights. The documents often pass judgement on the current situation. Some of them also talk about the need for dialogue with other disciplines.

The documents reflect theologically - they propose theology that will illuminate the situation under discussion. They offer doctrine, but they also reflect on praxis. They push church and society to a deeper understanding of the concepts, values and issues involved.

CST recognises that part of the role of the magisterium in the local situation is to take the social teaching of the church and develop from it fundamental principles and criteria for judgement and action in the local situation.

Catholic social teaching is about praxis - it is theology that is intended to be embodied in action. Action may be passing judgement, it may be working for change.

The Uniting Church

The Uniting Church understands itself as being embedded in the catholic, reformed and evangelical tradition. We do not see ourselves as having a new theology, but as being a faithful expression of mainstream historic traditions.

The Uniting Church is at home with the doctrines by which the Orthodox, Anglican and Catholic Churches describe the reasons for their commitment to social justice action - God as Creator, Christ as head over all creation, salvation as including the renewal of the world, the Holy Spirit as working in the world for transformation and renewal, the Eucharist as embracing the whole world and offering it to God for renewal, and so on.

Like other churches we do not want to confuse the Kingdom of God with political programs and parties. But we agree with the Catholic social teaching that there is a difference between politics, in which the church should be involved, and political programs and parties, which is the place for individual members to exercise their discipleship.

We understand working for justice and peace as an aspect of the proclamation of the Gospel. Like the Lambeth Conference, we understand that this can involve taking risks - that sometimes the worst thing the church can do is be silent.

We recognise also the importance of bringing the Bible and theology into dialogue with reality, especially the reality of the poor and people whose human rights are violated. The Uniting Church recognises that theology is contextual and dialogical. We recognise that as we become a church with women, Indigenous people, people of non-Anglo background and people with disabilities in the ministry and the councils of the church, we will have to make some changes in the way we speak about God, and the world. This is perhaps most clearly symbolised not in a printed document, but in the painting we commissioned - Margaret Ackland's painting of the Last Supper that includes women and children.

Significant Uniting Church statements recognise the importance of human rights.

On the question of methodology, at this point it is sufficient to say that I consider my proposal consistent with major documents of the Uniting Church.

The Ecumenical Tradition

We do not have time to go into this in detail. Suffice to say that there have been two significant methods used in the work of the WCC (and the WSCF) - the method of middle axioms and the method of contextualisation. The first has varied from use of very general concepts such as "the responsible society", or "the just, sustainable and participatory society", to much more specific middle axioms in the detailed work of various WCC agencies.

This method lost favour in the 60s because it appeared to be elitist and

academic. Delegates from nations where people struggled for survival found that the method of middle axioms did not express their urgency and their anger. Statements of Assemblies and conferences became more contextual, more expressive of the concerns of people who suffered.

WCC agencies have continued to use the more disciplined approach of middle axioms. My interpretation of the evidence is that they have incorporated into that method some elements of contextualisation - taking seriously the situation of people who suffer.

My thesis suggests that underlying many of their documents reflect the various elements of my proposed methodology.

The WCC has been actively involved in the development of the human rights instruments and in advocating human rights.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to the responses from our other speakers.

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