

Human Rights, the State and the Global Mennonite Community

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*Dear sirs, seek God; fear God; serve God with all your might; do justice to widows, orphans, strangers, the sad, and the oppressed; wash your hands of blood; rule your lands with wisdom and peace.*¹

This sentence from Menno Simons reminds us that the idea of insisting that secular leaders govern justly is not a foreign concept for Mennonites. Since its beginning the Anabaptist movement has had a close relationship with people in contexts of suffering and oppression who raise demands for justice and equality. That was already the case in the Twelve Articles of the German Peasant's War in 1525.² As Berma Klein Goldewijk affirms, "the need to link the execution of power among human beings to norms relating to human dignity is as old as society itself."³

Some years ago, during my time of serving as church planter and chair of the Mennonite Brethren church in Colombia I had the opportunity of visiting the United States Department of State in Washington DC. Coming from a middle class family in Bogotá and having just a Bachelors degree in Theology from a Protestant Seminary, what could I say in twenty minutes to a member of the United States government

about our violent situation in Colombia? I have had the experience of being part of the Colombian army. On the other hand I also had some of my family members involved in revolutionary armies. While some of my relatives were displaced by the armed conflict others were living in North America as successful entrepreneurs. Such a complex situation was mixed with my theological training at that time. My theology did not allow me to speak about Human Rights (HR) due to the apparent fact of the issue's secular and non-Christian base. In the local congregation in which I grew up I learned that Christians must think more about duties or responsibilities and less about HR.

There I was in that meeting in Washington. The US representative was listening to my comments about how churches in Colombia are affected in a negative way by the money that the US government was sending to Colombia to combat the illegal armies. I said to him that if the same amount of money were expended for overcoming inequity and poverty – Colombia is the most inegalitarian country in Latin America – the armed conflict that we have been living with for a half-century would end. In my country, I said, many of our pastors are being threatened because of their position on our war. Then the official asked: “Could you please tell me which human rights are being violated in the context of your churches?” I did not know how to respond. At the time I did not know about first, second, or third generation HR. I did not know about Civil and Political Rights, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, or Solidarity Rights. I just knew that many pastors at that time were not able to maintain a position of neutrality between the government and the illegal armies, and that this situation put their lives in danger. The pace of my life as pastor and conference leader along with my theological training did not give me the opportunity to establish my own clear position on HR in my context as a Colombian Anabaptist. Lamentably this reality has not been only mine in the Global South.

In the profile of Anabaptist churches in the Global South by Conrad Kanagy, Tilahun Beyene and Richard Showalter it is clear that “the percentage of members that believe Christians should do all they can to promote social justice ranges from 84% to 99%.”⁴ However, it seems that “the global church doesn't know what it thinks about political engagement... [On this issue] there is not unanimity.”⁵ For example, in the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) Global Assembly in 1984 in Strasbourg the International Mennonite Peace Committee pointed out: “the task of the church is to create expectations for peace and justice as she witnesses to the Lord of the kingdom of God. If the church is silent how shall the nations know if they are unfaithful to God's mandate?”⁶ However, the “how to” of such witnesses in relationship to HR violations has not been defined in a clear way.

Human Rights Issues Faced by MWC

Let's go deeper in a more detailed overview of HR issues faced by MWC in relation to the state during recent years.

First. MWC as a global communion has not yet adopted unified criteria concerning HR. In our multicultural family of faith some churches in the West highlight what some scholars name as “negative rights” (the rights that have a tendency to emphasize the individual person); while other churches in the East underline the so-called “positive rights” (education, culture, the rights that are more communal). On the other hand not all members of our Anabaptist churches have the same position about supporting or not supporting HR causes. Following some theologians we can identify at least three ways in which Mennonites respond to HR in our global communion:

- Subordination: HR is important but Anabaptist values constitute the ultimate terms of reference.
- Rejection as competitive: HR is a secularized new religion that seeks to replace our Christian values with a humanistic moral code.
- Acceptance as complementary: There is some overlapping between HR and Anabaptist values, so we need to identify our shared goals and to work together based on what we have in common.

Second, a written protocol or guideline for “advocacy” in MWC has not yet been produced. By advocacy I mean ‘official’ MWC statements about a political situation in a country – for instance a human rights violation. It could also be a request to support a cause that helps victims of violence or political conflicts (displaced people, people in jail, etc.) in some places. MWC practice has been to make few statements and to do so primarily – if not only – when MWC leadership believes a relatively common perspective is or would be widely held by MWC members.

Third, a decision to make a statement and usually the statement itself has been made not by staff alone but in one of the collective decision-making entities of MWC (Officers group, Executive Committee, General Council). This process has depended on the significance of the situation at hand and the urgency in taking a position. As examples we can mention the following experiences:

- January 1997. The Peace Council of the Mennonite World Conference adopted a resolution about violence against

church buildings in four countries. Among other things, this resolution invited all churches to respond in love to those who committed these acts.

- July 2000. The Executive Committee made a statement on Colombia, primarily as an expression of support for the churches in the internal armed conflict in this country.
- August 2003. The statement about the social situation in Zimbabwe at the time of the MWC Assembly was processed by the General Council, then published under the names of the out-going and incoming MWC presidents and the General Secretary.
- 2004 – 2005. During the period of advocacy for the Vietnam Church, which had some of its leaders arrested by the government, most of the processing took place in the Officers group, with the General Secretary then signing the letters and making the visits to political authorities.

Currently some MWC members face several types of HR violations. There is conflict on land issues that affects the Church in Panama. There are Anabaptist churches displaced by the violence caused by armed conflicts in Congo and Colombia. Religious freedom is threatened in at least four countries in Asia and Africa. Issues of financial injustice and unemployment in many and diverse contexts in Africa and Latin America push migration to the extent that some churches see their existence as not viable. These, among others, are some of the reasons why the MWC Peace Commission has recently started the process of discussion on a draft of Guidelines about how our global family should respond to situations of suffering and injustice, and to requests for advocacy and support on behalf of those who are victims of oppression and persecution.

The process of discussion about how to respond to HR violations will not be easy and fast. Those who are opposed to even talking about these issues need to remember that, according to Glen Stassen and David Gushee, “work by churches and human rights groups to press for human rights has helped convert the dictatorships of Latin America to democracies or democracies-in-process... Spreading peace is done by networks of persons willing to work together to gain public attention for protection against human rights violations.”⁷

How can or should the global Anabaptist church support specific churches facing state-related human rights difficulties? I think the process of discussing these matters in the MWC Peace Commission

must be framed by the goal of developing a response that is *centered on God, church based, and compassionate*.

A Centered-on-God Response

As a church we want to follow the words of the Apostle Paul that served also as a base for Menno Simons' ministry: "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ."⁸ Our actions as a church are done as Christ's body; they are done in the spirit of following and imitation of his character and life. The church depends on the Holy Spirit and not on secular achievements.

Any kind of support we offer to those in suffering must be motivated by God's love and Jesus' focus on the vulnerable in society, the "victims" of systemic injustice and violence.⁹ As John Witte and Frank Alexander affirm, "the Bible is fundamentally concerned about the poor, the widow, the orphan, the sojourner, and the needy in our midst."¹⁰

Our undoing of injustice, or better, our pursuit of justice begins in God's heart. It is the fruit of our communion and relationship with him. Once we love God above all things the love for our neighbour comes in a natural way. It is impossible to love God and to ignore what he loves at the same time. "I, the LORD, love justice!" says Isaiah 61:8. Justice cannot be built without God, and it is not possible to proclaim God without doing justice.¹¹ The experience of God is inseparable from a commitment to justice. "God is over and over characterized as *just*, as *doing justice*, and as *loving justice*,"¹² states Nicholas Wolterstorff.

It is love for justice that motivated Jesus to protest injustice and hypocrisy and to call for social change.¹³ It is love for justice that served as a base for passages that demanded justice from rulers in the Old Testament: "As we see in Psalm 72, the good king delivers the needy, defends the cause of the poor, and saves the weak and needy from oppression and violence,"¹⁴ says Wolterstorff. It is love for justice that made Jesus's life of action more than simply advocacy on behalf of an oppressed humanity. It is love that motivated Jesus to give up all of his advantages to secure the final advantage of those he came to serve.¹⁵ As Dietrich Bonhoeffer affirmed through his life and thought, Christology and ethics are inseparable.¹⁶

A Church-Based Response

According to Hans Küng, our western cultures emphasize a type of society in which individuals and groups constantly claim their

own rights over against others, without acknowledging any kind of obligations for themselves. In many of our countries it is impossible to build a house, lay out a street, or write a law or other kind of order without someone claiming the right to oppose it.¹⁷ One of the critiques of HR that we hear expressed in Mennonite circles has to do with the individualism that HR seems to support. The idea of looking out for the rights of others, instead of just for my own, is not something that comes naturally to most of us in the western world. Respecting HR requires a level of self-denial that is not common in our societies. Only religion can provide the moral foundation that HR requires.¹⁸ Religions can teach us how to live in a way that includes self-denial, reducing our natural tendency toward egocentrism; they can teach solidarity, non-violence, equality, justice, and other values. It is the religious tradition that formulated guidelines for social relationships, and the ideal of treating others as you want them to treat you. As one example of the support that religions give to HR we can mention here the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic of the Parliament of the World's Religions.¹⁹ The statement affirms:

- that a better global order cannot be created or enforced by laws, prescriptions, and conventions alone;
- that the realization of peace, justice, and the protection of Earth depends on the insight and readiness of men and women to act justly;
- that action in favour of rights and freedoms presumes a consciousness of responsibility and duty, and that therefore both the minds and hearts of women and men must be addressed;
- that rights without morality cannot long endure, and that there will be no better global order without a global ethic.²⁰

Although it is right to say that churches are in need of HR themselves (in places in which congregations are persecuted – for protection of belongings and places, for freedom of expression, etc.) according to the leaders of numerous religious traditions, it is necessary to link HR to a moral and religious foundation. More specifically, HR needs the church among other things because of the following:

- Christianity was one of the ethical bases for HR. HR is a “distillation” of religious principles and humanistic philosophy. Some people may ask whether it would be

possible to have a non-religious justification for HR. Many theologians suggest that only a theistic foundation and framework can justify HR.

- Christian teachings include a call for looking out for the rights of others more than demanding rights for one's self; caring for others is a calling than can be proclaimed with a strong voice in the church. Faith can call people to be aware of the HR of others and not just for themselves. Because in religious settings rights and duties belong to one another, communities of faith can motivate people to respect HR.
- Christian institutions have vindicated rights with their prophetic voice. This is the case, for example, in the experience of conflict mediation of the Mennonite Church in Colombia where there is an important component of calling for the protection of the victims of the armed conflict and of their rights.²¹ Christian institutions can take the vocabulary of HR to other communities and societies as well as encouraging their implementation at the local level.

The idea of a church-centered response to situations of HR violations is consistent with the Anabaptist conviction that, in the words of John Howard Yoder, “the primary social structure through which the gospel works to change other structures is that of the Christian community.”²² It is the church – not just local but also global – that is called to be an alternative community that by its own existence denounces injustice. She does so by living out a new kingdom of justice and bringing hope when she shows that a new and different society is possible in dependency on God. “The alternative consciousness to be nurtured, on the one hand, serves to *criticize* in dismantling the dominant consciousness... On the other hand, that alternative consciousness to be nurtured serves to *energize* persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move,”²³ explains Walter Brueggemann.

HR activists with Anabaptist convictions who are looking for justice at the margins of the church are living with a contradiction of terms. In spite of the long history of HR violations done by Christians and the experience of injustices that live on inside churches, Anabaptists keep affirming the centrality of the church in God's strategic plan of social transformation. As Stanley Hauerwas says, “this church knows that its most credible form of witness (and the most ‘effective’ thing it can do for the world) is the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith.”²⁴

As a global community of faith MWC is called to be a sample of God's intention for humanity. Earl Zimmerman shows how "those involved in social action often experience a foretaste of their goals in their own community of struggle."²⁵ Only if in our global communion economic and racial differences are overcome will we have anything to say to the societies that surround us.²⁶ As long as nationalisms, ethnocentrism, indifference or independency instead of interdependency are daily realities among our churches, we will not be effective in our advocacy or support for those who suffer.

It is through our way of living as a just, multicultural family of faith that the unjust powers are exposed. In the words of Walter Wink, "exposing the delusional system is the central ascetical task in our discernment of the Powers. For the Powers are never more powerful than when they can act from concealment."²⁷ Individualism, nationalism, and consumerism are some of the false gods that offer to individuals a reason for living today but at the same time, provide the perfect excuses for those who oppress and violate the HR of other societies. Only a multicultural global family of faith in which members love each other in a way that overcomes nationalism and looks out for the well being of others will bring a new standard of life that exposes the delusional values of our world, and in doing so the church gives hope to those in suffering.

"Often the missing ingredient in human rights is the role that hope plays,"²⁸ affirm Witte and Alexander. Can you imagine the impact that a global community can have when they live and act as one family united by their faith? Can you imagine the hope that global, multicultural support gives to those in suffering? The power of hope given by the fact of having a community ready to stand with you is something Mennonites know very well because of our own experiences of persecution throughout much of our history.

A Compassionate Response

Jesus, according to Witte and Alexander, "introduced a methodology of obedience, an obedience that could not bypass suffering, the ultimate identification with, and embrace of, a suffering humanity."²⁹ If this is right, a follower of Jesus may criticize the abuse of HR as a Christian response to those who suffer. However, such a person will not be able to do less than HR activists do. If we are following Jesus, advocacy is the minimum that we can do on behalf of those that suffer. What we are called to do is to walk alongside those that suffer, to stand with them, and to try to stop the cycle of violence as Jesus did. We may avoid the language of HR, but we cannot avoid the language of Christ. In the words of C. Norman Kraus:

Jesus' *shalom-making* was a ministry of the "wounded healer" who healed through transformation. Instead of leading a violent revolution as the insurgents of his day advocated or working at political reform of the oppressing structures, he identified with the poor and attempted to interrupt the cycle of violence. At the same time he by no means condoned the inequities of the system fuelled by the selfish anxiety of the politically and economically powerful. This nonviolent peace-building from the bottom up is the essential message of Jesus.³⁰

HR is a way of responding to the cries of victims. It is not just a theory but calls for the experience of feeling the foreign pain as our own pain. It has to do with hearing the calling of the other as God did in Exodus 3:8.³¹ Jesus called us to live in this way, to be sensitive to the needs of others and to identify ourselves even with their feelings. This is what compassion is.³²

Compassion in the Old Testament רַחֵם (rā-hēm) involves the idea of having a strong affection toward someone, based on a relationship, which can manifest itself in actions of kindness and concern for one in difficulty. This word has the same Hebrew root that רֶחֶם (rē-hēm) which is the word for *womb*, uterus.³³ In some way the relation of these words helps us to understand that God's compassion is comparable to the reaction – the feelings and the actions – that a mother experiences in feeling the suffering of her children.

A follower of Christ cannot be indifferent to those who cry out in pain. A follower of Christ will react with the same passion that a mother would in order to defend her children. Sadly some Christians expend too much time today arguing against HR language while millions of people suffer the oppression of governments that do not respect HR, much less understand languages other than their own. Acts of a global and compassionate multicultural family can make a real difference, as has been the case in our Mennonite experience.

On the other hand, a compassionate response in the way of God extends even to those that oppose us and uses means that are consistent with the final goal. Yoder affirms: "In such ways there is a link between our obedience and the accomplishments of God's purposes. We see it when we find life by way of the cross, power by means of weakness, wisdom by means of foolishness. We see it when we find wealth by throwing our bread on the waters, when we find brothers and sisters and houses and lands by giving them up, when we save our life by losing it."³⁴ A follower of Christ would never use violent means in order to achieve justice. We cannot require that a state use violence against human beings in order to stop injustice or HR violations. Using secular powers to stop violence through the use of violent means would betray Jesus' methodology. This simply was not his way.

“The key commandment to love God and love neighbor, a commandment articulated in the Old Testament and reinforced in the New Testament, produces the responsibility for the Christian to be active in the world providing value-added human rights,”³⁵ say Witte and Alexander. However, such activism cannot generate a different response than compassion towards both, the victim and the oppressor. A commitment to HR is a good tool in working towards justice. It is the kind of language that can be heard today. However, let’s remember that even though justice is very important, it is not our final goal. Our final goal is reconciliation. It is to make up a new people, a new global family through the ministry of reconciliation. People from different cultures, backgrounds, and social classes; people that could have been oppressed or that could have oppressed others are called now to be one body and members each of another. This is what MWC is about.

May God lead us in our pursuit of reconciliation. May God lead us to stand with those who suffer. May God lead us to bear witness to him through a compassionate multicultural global family of faith that responds as Jesus did to those unable to answer the question: which human rights are being violated in the social and political context of your churches?

Notes

- ¹ Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. J. C. Wenger, trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), 529.
- ² John Driver, *La Fe en la Periferia de la Historia: Una Historia del Pueblo Cristiano Desde la Perspectiva de los Movimientos de Restauración y Reforma Radical*, Colección historia abierta (Cd. Guatemala, Guatemala: Ediciones SEMILLA, 1997), 162-63.
- ³ Berma Klein Goldewijk and Bastiaan de Gaay Fortman, *Where Needs Meet Rights: Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in a New Perspective* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 3.
- ⁴ Conrad L. Kanagy, Tilahun Beyene, and Richard Showalter, *Winds of the Spirit: A Profile of Anabaptist Churches in the Global South* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Herald Press, 2012), 189.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.
- ⁶ Urbane Peachey, *The Role of the Church in Society: An International Perspective* (Carol Stream, Illinois: IMPC Mennonite World Conference, 1988), 114.
- ⁷ Glen Harold Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 171-72.
- ⁸ 1 Cor. 3:11. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989).
- ⁹ C. Norman Kraus, *The Jesus Factor in Justice and Peacemaking*, Theological Postings Series (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia Pub. House, 2011), 113.
- ¹⁰ John Witte and Frank S. Alexander, *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 320.
- ¹¹ Rafael Gutiérrez Cuervo, *Cristología y Moral: El Seguimiento de Jesucristo como Compromiso con la Justicia* (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Facultad de Teología, 2004), 93-94.

- ¹² Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Seeking Justice in Hope," in Miroslav Volf and William H. Katerberg, *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition Amid Modernity and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2004), 85.
- ¹³ Kraus, *The Jesus Factor in Justice and Peacemaking*, 117.
- ¹⁴ Wolterstorff, "Seeking Justice in Hope," in Volf and Katerberg, *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition Amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, 89.
- ¹⁵ Witte and Alexander, *Christianity and Human Rights*, 324.
- ¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Lluís Duch, *Ética, Estructuras y Procesos Religión* (Madrid: Trotta, 2000), 23.
- ¹⁷ Hans Küng, *Una Ética Mundial para la Economía y la Política*, Estructuras y Procesos (Valladolid: Trotta, 1999), 112.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 114-16.
- ¹⁹ "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic," *Parliament of the World's Religions*, Sept. 4, 1993, http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/_includes/FCKcontent/File/TowardsAGlobalEthic.pdf.
- ²⁰ Hans Küng and Angela Rinn-Maurer, *La Ética Mundial Entendida desde el Cristianismo: Posiciones, Experiencias, Impulsos*, Estructuras y Procesos (Madrid: Trotta, 2008), 36-37.
- ²¹ Esperanza Hernández Delgado, *Intervenir Antes que Anochezca: Mediaciones, Intermediaciones y Diplomacias Noviolentas de Base Social en el Conflicto Armado Colombiano* (Bucaramanga: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga, 2012), 432.
- ²² John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 154.
- ²³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.
- ²⁴ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 47.
- ²⁵ Earl Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics of Jesus: The Origin and Significance of John Howard Yoder's Social Ethics*, The C. Henry Smith Series (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia Pub. House, 2007), 197.
- ²⁶ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 150-51.
- ²⁷ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, The Powers (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 88.
- ²⁸ Witte and Alexander, *Christianity and Human Rights*, 331.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 322.
- ³⁰ Kraus, *The Jesus Factor in Justice and Peacemaking*, 114.
- ³¹ Javier Giraldo, *Derechos Humanos y Cristianismo: Transfondo de un Conflicto*, 2nd ed., Religión y Derechos Humanos (Bogotá: El Búho, 2008), 229-30.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 234.
- ³³ J. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).
- ³⁴ John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism*, Christian Peace Shelf Series (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971), 159.
- ³⁵ Witte and Alexander, *Christianity and Human Rights*, 328.