

THE RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AS A COMPONENT OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF PEACE

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In 2007, the United Nations General Assembly recognized that “Social development and social justice are indispensable for the achievement and maintenance of peace and security within and among nations, and that, in turn, social justice and social justice cannot be achieved if there is no peace and security or if all human rights and fundamental freedoms are not respected. Especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, social justice is a basic component to achieve peace, because our region suffers from wide inequalities, which have been going on for centuries. As Dolores de la Mata and Lucila Berniell, from the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF), point out: “This inequality has persisted despite the great efforts that the region has made in social matters in recent decades. This speaks of very deep roots and an inertia in the inequalities that are transmitted from generation to generation. With low social mobility, the challenge of reducing inequality seems unattainable. This is because when the possibilities of progress depend too much on family origin, the main driver of inequalities is the “cradle lottery” instead of the factors that can be affected by the individual effort of people.”ⁱ

The recognition that social justice is essential for peace has been considered a foundation of the international community since the adoption of the Constitution of the International Labor Organization (ILO) of 1919, the Preamble of which states: “Considering universal and permanent peace can only be based on social justice”ⁱⁱ. Likewise, in the Declaration of Philadelphia of 1944, it is reaffirmed that “Permanent peace can only be based on social justice, which affirms that all human beings, without distinction of race, creed or sex, have the right to pursue their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity... and with equal opportunities.”ⁱⁱⁱ. Beyond such recognition, the social justice is deeply rooted in the teachings of the world's major religions. The very expression “social justice” was coined in 1843, by R. P. Luigi Taparelli, who influenced Pope Leo XIII, author of the encyclical *Rerum novarum*, one of the key documents of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church. Although standards of social justice are outlined in international human rights agreements, many of them were prefigured in religious teachings on human dignity. Religions have played an important role in enunciating social justice, but also in responding to social injustice, passively accepting human suffering or actively opposing it. Religions themselves may consciously or unconsciously contribute to social injustice, through their support or failure to challenge unjust policies and practices, both within their own structures and within the systems of which they are a part. In Latin America and the Caribbean, many religious leaders have been characterized by delegitimizing and resisting social injustices, speaking openly and strongly against them, and contributing to a culture of peace and non-violent conflict resolution.

Tzedakah is the concept of social justice in Judaism that, although it is translated as "charity", derives from the word *tzedek* which translates as "justice." Giving *tzedakah* is a *mitzva*, a religious commandment for every Jew, which must be fulfilled while caring for the dignity of the needy. When Jews give tzedakah, they do not act with benevolence, but with justice. The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, who was chief rabbi of the Commonwealth, explained that “The

Derech Hashem, the “way of the Lord,” is defined in two words, the *tzedakah* and the *mishpat*. They are two forms of justice, but very different in their logic. The *mishpat* means retributive justice. It refers to the rule of law. A society governed by law is a place of *mishpat*. But *mishpat* alone cannot create a good society. To this we must add the *tzedakah*, distributive justice. One can imagine a society that meticulously observes the rule of law but contains so much inequality that wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, and many are left without the most basic requirements of a dignified life. There must be justice not only in how the law is applied, but also in how the means of existence, wealth as God's blessing, are distributed. This is the *tzedakah*^{iv}. For this reason, Jews recognize that “The situation of non-redemption in the world is reflected in the persistence of the persecution, the poverty, the human degradation and the misery. Even though the justice and the peace ultimately belong to God, our joint efforts, united with those of other communities of faith, will contribute to establishing the Kingdom of God for which we await and long. As individuals and together, we must work to bring justice and peace to our world. In this endeavor, we are guided by the vision of the prophets of Israel.”^v.

Catholicism's teachings on social justice are based on Jewish and Christian scriptures that recognize the inherent dignity of every human person. A characteristic of Catholic social teaching is its concern for the poorest members of society, and because of this, it encourages Catholics to follow Jesus' example of exercising the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. The Catholic Church asks its members to be “stewards”, responsible for the goods they have received from God, and therefore, to share the blessings they have received from God, to manage the resources of the earth for the good of all. The Second Vatican Council recalled that “Although there are just inequalities among men, however, the equal dignity of the person demands that a more humane and just social situation be achieved. The fact of the excessive economic and social inequalities that occur between the members and peoples of the same human family is scandalous. They are contrary to social justice, equity, the dignity of the human person and social and international peace. Human institutions, private or public, strive to put themselves at the service of the dignity and purpose of man. “Fight vigorously against any social or political slavery and respect, under any political regime, the fundamental rights of man.”^{vi}.

The Social Gospel is a movement of Christian Protestantism that emerged at the end of the 19th century, which continues to inspire historic Protestant denominations in the application of Christian ethics to issues related to social justice. Theologically, the Social Gospel tries to put into practice the verse “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10), which makes up part of the Our Father prayer. One of the theologians who defined the movement was the Rev. Walter Rauschenbusch, who spoke out against what he considered the selfishness of capitalism and promoted the creation of unions and a cooperative economy. Furthermore, referring to the Gospel's failure to shed light on institutionalized sin, Rauschenbusch wrote: “Faith in the will and power of God has not been invoked to redeem the permanent institutions of human society from their inherited guilt of the oppression and the extortion”^{vii}. The Rev. Martin Luther King, influenced by Rauschenbusch's thinking, fused Christian teachings and social consciousness in his book “The Power of Love,” which is a testimony to his lifelong commitment to preaching the Social Gospel. In one of the sermons collected in said work, King preached: “Philanthropy is a good thing, but it should not lead the philanthropist to the extreme of ignoring the circumstances of economic injustice that make philanthropy possible.”^{viii}.

Evangelical Christians emphasized in the Cape Town Confession of Faith that: “The Bible tells us that the Lord shows his love for everything he has made, that he defends the cause of the oppressed, loves the stranger, feeds the hungry and supports to the orphan and the widow. The Bible also shows that God desires to do these things through human beings committed to these actions. “God holds especially responsible those who are designated as leaders of politics or

justice in society, but commands all of God's people...to reflect the love and justice of God in practical love and justice on behalf of those in need"^{ix}. On the other hand, a sector of evangelical Christians also promotes a complementarity between the explicit proclamation quote from the Gospel and the dimension of social responsibility, which they call the "integral mission", because it has the purpose of transforming human life in all its dimensions, according to God's purpose, and of empowering men and women to enjoy the full life that God has made possible through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit. The Rev. Rene Padilla has pointed out that: "The mission of the church is multifaceted because it depends on the *misio Dei*: the mission of God that encompasses the entirety of creation and human life, which have their source in him and which depend of it for its full realization".^x

The Quran contains numerous references about *adl*, social justice in Islam, which is understood as fulfilling the rights of the poor and vulnerable. One of the five pillars of the Muslim religion is the *zakát*, which translates as "zakah", although it is commonly referred to as "alms". It is a fixed proportion of personal wealth, based on Islamic law, that must be compulsorily taxed to help the poor and needy. The *Zakat* helps promote a more balanced relationship between rich and poor, and demonstrates how the equity, the mutual respect, and the consideration for others are intrinsic notions in the moral teachings of Islam. In addition to the obligation of the *zakat*, Muslims are encouraged to give *sadaqah*, "voluntary charity," for charitable purposes. The Amman Interfaith Message of King Abdullah II of Jordan promoted full acceptance and goodwill among Muslims, Christians, and Jews, considering that one of the central ideas that are common to them is love and justice towards other human beings. King Abdullah II of Jordan has based this statement on the following verse from the Quran: "Indeed, the believers are brothers. So make peace among your brothers and fear God, that perhaps you may obtain mercy for one another (Al-Hujurat 49:10)."

In Buddhism, commitment to social justice is demonstrated through words and actions and is usually driven by a sense of humanism. Buddha realized the deeper meaning of human existence. He focused on the primacy of human interests and felt that no superhuman or divine entity, apart from his own actions, would be able to change the destiny of man. Buddhist philosophy can therefore be characterized as humanism. Humanism is not merely a theory but is predominantly practical in its outlook. Basically, it deals with the ways that would be helpful in eliminating human suffering. Buddha fully understood the vivid reality of the mere theoretical solution of suffering. It is for this reason that his doctrine of the "Four Noble Truths" can not only clearly explain human suffering, but also the path to its elimination in the form of the "Noble Eightfold Path." Through the recognition of theory and practice, Buddha discovered the path to the humanization of man and the regeneration of man as a strictly human being. All this projects Buddha as an ardent defender of social justice. On the other hand, in Hinduism, Mahatma Gandhi is recognized for recovering the values of social justice from the Hindu scriptures and striving to eliminate the sociocultural aberration of the "untouchables". Gandhi suggested another option in terms of social commitment: "Be yourself the change you want to see in the world." This perspective does not advocate activism, but rather transformation. When people are inspired, first individually and later collectively, by a vision of social progress, social justice can be achieved.

The worldviews of indigenous people and Afro-Latin Americans and Afro-Caribbeans have important references to solidarity. Indigenous spirituality considers that "The universe is a whole, it is an integrality, each of the elements that make it up has a reason for being, they are interrelated and complementary. From this complementarity arises the principle of balance and harmony, as well as the value of community coexistence (understanding community, as the space and time in which all the elements of the universe interact and not only coexistence between humans). The worldview teaches us that being people means practicing the values of

cooperation, solidarity, and empathy. Everything that contributes to the practice of peaceful and respectful coexistence”^{xi}. For Afro-Brazilian religions, “everything is in everything”, religiosity merges with culture and politics. The life, the work, the religion, the love and the affection are ways of worshiping God. Hence the demand for communion so that the group survives both spiritually and materially. The three most appreciated attitudes are sharing, solidarity and respect.

Religions for Peace is united in a moral consensus that all people are endowed with fundamental dignity. Respectful of our different religious interpretations, our movement is convinced that true human dignity is rooted in the Sacred. This dignity is “inviolable.” It is not given by religions, cultures, states, societies, communities or individuals. It cannot be taken away by them. But the recognition of this dignity must be “restored” each time it is violated. It must be respected and actively protected. Many faith communities emphasize the close relationship between the “image of God” and human dignity. When the “image of God” is restored, the dignity of the person reappears. “The equality between men is essentially derived from their personal dignity and the rights that flow from it”^{xii}, and therefore, the “image of God” has had a strong influence on the establishment of social justice. Beyond being a moral and religious imperative, social justice paves the way for the sustained reduction of inequalities, which is an indispensable condition for building peace.

ⁱ De La Mata, D. and Berniell, L (2022). Inequality and low social mobility in Latin America and the Caribbean. [Online]. (URL <https://www.caf.com/es/knowledge/visiones/2022/12/desigualdad-y-baja-movilidad-social-en-americalatina-y-el-caribe>)

ⁱⁱ *Constitution of the International Labor Organization*.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Declaration concerning the aims and objectives of the International Labor Organization (Declaration of Philadelphia)*.

^{iv} Sacks, J. (2007). Covenant and Conversation 5767: Re’eh - Tzedakah: the Untranslatable Virtue. [Online]. (URL http://www.ou.org/ou/print_this/27230).

^v *Dabru Emet: Jewish Declaration on Christians and Christianity*.

^{vi} *Gaudium et spes*, 29.

^{vii} Rauschenbusch, W. (1917). *Social Gospel Theology*. New York: Abingdon Press. p. 131

^{viii} King, M.L. (1999). *The Force of Love*. Madrid: Christian Cultural Action. p. 34

^{ix} *Cape Town Confession of Faith*, 7C.

^x Padilla, R. and Yamamori, T. (Eds.). (2000). *God's project and human needs*. Buenos Aires: Kairós Editorial. p. 33

^{xi} *Module on Spirituality, Knowledge and History of the Indigenous Peoples of Abya Yala - Manual for participants*. (2008). La Paz: Indigenous Fund. p. 71-75

^{xii} *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1935*.