



A Christian social answer to globalisation

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Abstract

This article discusses whether Christian social thinking is obsolete in the age of globalisation or whether it continues to provide answers to the challenges of the modern world. Some people believe that the heydays of a Christian social alternative to capitalism or to state socialism are over following its successes in the middle of the twentieth century. Social protection and the emancipation of the working class have been achieved, and the distribution of wealth and income has reached a fair level throughout Europe. This article rejects this view and argues that Christian social thinking and its translation into political positions do not belong exclusively to a specific socio-economic phase of history or to a specific socio-economic system. The article also provides Christian social remedies for five aspects of globalisation: financialisation, the distribution of the fruits of globalisation, automation, control mechanisms and environmental protection.

Keywords

Christian Democracy, Christian social thinking, Globalisation

Introduction

Globalisation can be understood as the phenomenon of the interdependence of nations and continents through economic, financial and trade relations, and increasingly, also in the domains of culture, lifestyle and even moral convictions. Some people perceive it as an inevitable natural disaster which has to be accepted. Others embrace it as something beneficial for the economy and for the well-being of people across the world. The extreme left and the far right bitterly reject it. Still others want to reform it in a utopian way.

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This article discusses the relevance of Christian social thinking as a source of political inspiration in the age of globalisation. Christian social thinking is not a rigid doctrine or a political programme. Instead, it is a way of thinking about political and social questions that draws inspiration from Christian values. This means that its scope is not limited to politicians and parties that explicitly refer to themselves as ‘Christian Democratic’. Some members of the Conservative Party in the UK, for example, cherish Christian values even though they do not use this term to identify themselves. Critics believe that the heydays of Christian social thinking as an alternative to capitalism or to state socialism are over following its success in the twentieth century: social protection and the emancipation of the working class have been achieved, and the distribution of wealth and income has reached a fair level. The current article rejects this view and argues that Christian social thinking does not belong exclusively either to a specific socio-economic phase of our history or to one specific socio-economic system. On the contrary, its values provide inspiration for tackling the twenty-first century’s problems.

Christian social thinking and globalisation

Those who argue that Christian social thinking is obsolete in the age of globalisation ignore the ways in which Christians have addressed the challenges they have faced over the past 60 years. The Catholic Church is the world’s biggest and earliest multinational. At the beginning of the 1960s, it assembled and systematised its stance on the challenges globalisation brings. The World Council of Churches¹ started to address globalisation as early as 1960, with a series of conferences and publications about global poverty, inequality, and the structural tendencies which had resulted in injustices and unequal opportunities for the rich and the poor (Kunter and Schilling 2014). These efforts led to an influential document about international solidarity and its implications, notably in the transfer of financial resources (OECD 2018). It was at this time that the norm emerged whereby richer countries would transfer 1% of their gross national product for the development of poorer countries (Visser ‘t Hooft 1955). Simultaneously, the Vatican promoted a similar message through a series of encyclicals. It emphasised the need for a more just and solidary world, with a strong shift in attention to the North–South divide; for a broader peace process based on justice and equality; and for a strong multilateral system (Vatican 1963). Thus, Christian social thinking is far from obsolete, as evidenced by its actions over the past 60 years.

Globalisation has advantages and disadvantages, both of which should be considered. The Catholic Church looks favourably on the interconnectedness of nations and peoples. Globalisation represents an opportunity to combat global poverty, foster peace and promote human rights. The papal encyclical ‘Centesimus Annus’ called on Catholics to become involved with the poverty, injustice and imbalance generated by industrialisation. It even went as far as to recognise that globalisation, together with a free market, could be beneficial for the well-being of the world population as a whole, though this acceptance is not unconditional (Vatican 1991). Furthermore, Christian thinking recognises the values, traditions and social fabric embodied in the nation and the nation state while equally rejecting absolute nationalism. It respects local identity and cohesion. For

example, Klaus von Dohnanyi, a German politician whose family belonged to the founding generation of the World Council of Churches and who represented the German Lutheran Church at this organisation, is convinced that citizens who belong to a strong local network (*Heimat*) are in general more willing to accept the reality of globalisation than those who stand footloose in society (Middelhoff et al. 2001).

This contrasts with certain other perspectives on globalisation which believe that local and national cultures, cultural plurality and the self-expression of nations will and should disappear in the process of strengthening the socio-cultural dimension of globalisation. But Catholic thinking, whilst accepting the realities of the economic and, to some extent, political dimensions of this process, advocates a strong identity for local cultures, communities, nations and continents in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.

At the same time, Christian thinking is a strong proponent of strengthening the multi-lateral system. However, it distances itself from the utopian dream of the formation of a world government or global federalism. The Catholic Church has endorsed this line of thinking in papal encyclicals—from ‘*Pacem in Terris*’ (1962) to ‘*Laudato Si*’ (2015)—and through allocations and papal visits to the UN. For example, in ‘*Caritas in Veritate*’ (2009), Pope Benedict VI even pleaded for a new global financial architecture with a strong central authority. This idea was later discussed and elaborated on in forums such as the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace. These discussions were conducted in dialogue with top experts, including former International Monetary Fund Managing Director Michael Camdessus, Bank of England Governor Mark Carney, Goldman Sachs International Vice-Chairman Lord Brian Griffith and the International Christian Union of Business Executives (Vatican 2011). However, while Christian social thinking supported economic globalisation, it did so with caveats. There was from the outset also a concern that the dominant processes of economic globalisation were characterised by a further strengthening of the position of the rich as compared to the poor, the persistence of poverty, the increase of inequality and the existence of tax havens. Above all it warned of the unsustainability of the current system. It is in favour of globalisation, but as a process which is also beneficial to the poor, which does justice to and fosters the rule of law, and above all which takes into account the exigencies of the environment and the Creation (see Vatican 2015).

Christian social thinking aimed to find a balance between globalisation and control mechanisms. Policymakers, theologians and other academics refer to a concept known as ‘the humanisation of globalisation’. This means reducing inequality between peoples, promoting an inclusive global economy and protecting against economic abuses in the context of an irreversible globalisation process which is not underpinned by appropriate rule-of-law or global governance frameworks. For example, voices within the stream of Christian social thinking emphasise the importance of providing global governance and developing a planetary ethos (Lutheran Bishop Wolfgang Huber and Hans Küng). The goal that such thinkers espouse is to establish for the globalisation process an ethical framework that incorporates values central to the main world religions. This, they believe, would lead to a globalisation with a more humane character (Marx 2010) and

help establish ‘cooperative’ or ‘inclusive’ globalisation (Bodette 2016; Küng 1990; Armstrong 2011). The current author prefers the ideal of a global common good and humane globalisation, as was formulated at the Conciliar Process in Basel in 1989. The process leading up to this historical event, as summarised in the final declaration, promotes peace, the carrying out of justice and the integrity of Creation (Oikoumene 1989). Some may consider this too socialist in character, but such concerns are unfounded. Leftists and so-called progressive political forces have no monopoly on the desire to see a stronger global system of law and equity. Sensible centre and centre–right choices can and should lead precisely to a restoration of the balance between the reality of globalisation and the rule of law and justice. Where the different strands of political thinking differ is in the extent of state intervention. Some advocate strong state intervention and the imposition of just laws and regulations, whilst others recognise society’s own responsibility and capabilities, including the role of the business sector at the global level. Societal forces, soft law and the preservation, as far as possible, of the nation’s own responsibility should come first in this view, and only if inadequate should these be complemented by regulations and control mechanisms on a global level. This basic approach of the social market model can be applied to the process of globalisation in all its dimensions.

Revising globalisation

This interpretation of Christian social thinking can be brought to bear when it comes to addressing five aspects of globalisation that represent unprecedented challenges to politics, the economy and society. These are financialisation, the distribution of the fruits of globalisation, automation, control mechanisms and environmental protection.

1. *Financialisation.*² In Western economies the level of public and private debt has become untenable. If a new crisis were to occur, it would become clear that the means national governments and central banks possess for combating such a calamity are far fewer today than a decade ago. These means have been exhausted as governments have coped with the previous crisis and its aftermath (Geithner 2017). It is important to reverse financialisation and to restore the function banks originally had, that is, to be an instrument for the normal economy of producers and consumers, which provides for their central needs: pensions, studies and housing. Moreover, we see an ongoing incapacity to close down tax havens and safe places for money laundering and to prevent the financing of terrorism. What is required is effective crisis management, a fundamental reform of the Bretton Woods system and the creation of forms of global governance in the domain of finance.
2. *Distributing the fruits of globalisation.* A growing number of economists and experts are coming to the conclusion that wages for industrial workers have not benefited from globalisation in the past decade and that 20% of the population in industrialised countries is not benefiting at all from globalisation. Furthermore, the middle classes, the backbone of democratic societies, have seen both their income and position deteriorate (Stiglitz 2016). On the other hand, incomes for

those working in privileged areas of the economy, such as the financial sector, have exploded. The question is whether the centre-right's ideal of a just and equitable society can be realised within the current system.

3. *Automation.* The processes of automation, digitalisation and robotisation certainly have their positive side in that they result in production processes returning from distant countries to national economies. Moreover the technological breakthroughs can replace manual and other human labour. However, automation can affect whole segments of the population, such as lorry drivers or industrial workers. The normal laws of the labour market do not function properly in many of these cases. In most of our countries a growing shortage of employees in one sector goes hand in hand with high unemployment rates among youth and minorities. According to the latest studies (ManpowerGroup 2016; Wolf 2015), the demand for (semi-) public services (care, education and security) will grow exponentially in the coming years. This demand will not be met without government intervention. Employment, job creation and the shift to (semi-) public services will require a greater role for the public sector.
4. *Control mechanisms.* The traditional instruments for security and protection have become insufficient. Foreign interests and elitist groups that are buying elections threaten to pervert democracy (Confessore et al. 2015). The US has been unable to control or limit this development, and it is becoming a real threat in many other democracies as well. Thus, it is rendering the system less attractive than people at the end of the twentieth century had expected it to become. When the credibility of democratic systems diminishes, authoritarian systems and other alternatives—such as those found in Vietnam and Singapore—become less detestable. Moreover, the spreading of fake news and direct meddling in electoral campaigns by foreign interests via social media demand not only stronger national protection and control measures, but probably also effective international supervision.
5. *Environmental protection.* More attention has to be paid to environmental issues. Air pollution and global warming do not respect national borders. Luckily, there have been significant international agreements in the last 30 years. However, without a well-functioning and powerful multilateral system, the implementation of such agreements will be lopsided. When we have to deal with matters of war and security, there are provisions. When it comes to the systematic violation of human rights, we can bring governments and those responsible to court. But when it comes to the living conditions on earth and the survival of Creation, we still lack comparable instruments. Only in the domain of CO₂ emissions has the international community developed a market mechanism in the form of a taxation and auction of emission rights. But as Governor Carney of the Bank of England states, markets lack the capacity to price in the real long-term costs of climate change (Izza 2016). The prices of air travel provide an example everybody can understand, for these prices are far too low in comparison with those for train tickets. A 'true' price, that includes the real costs of pollution, damage to the climate and the extraction of minerals, would change consumption patterns more or less automatically in favour of environmentally fair choices.

Conclusion

In 2018 all political families, including the European People's Party (EPP), are faced with the challenge of positioning themselves on the political spectrum. In response to the dramatic changes in society, leftists and Social Democrats will probably fall back on their affinity with more state intervention, more regulations and more subvention. On the right there are strong proponents of business as usual, of accepting as much as possible the globalisation process and the unfettered functioning of the market. Additionally, populist movements are rallying against globalisation and advocating the restoration of national sovereignty. But there is the alternative Christian social answer.

We find ourselves at a historic watershed. Many of the phenomena comprising this watershed moment have arisen because of globalisation. Globalisation has rendered neither Christian social thinking nor the social market economy obsolete. The same values and inspiration behind Christian social thinking which, in the last century, twice underpinned the architecture of an inclusive and humane society can be instrumental for a far-reaching new concept of politics and the economy. But this demands a new interest in and understanding of these principles and values. What does 'the common good' mean in a global context? What does 'subsidiarity' mean in a world which does not place a high value on cultural and national diversity or on the power of citizens' associations? What is the significance of the rule of law and justice in a world where the systems of law and justice are lagging behind the realities of interdependence and of current power relations? What is 'solidarity' in view of the persistent world poverty and inequality generated by globalisation and technological progress? What does 'stewardship' mean in the context of a short electoral cycle which is ill-equipped to tackle the challenge of environmental protection?

Christian Democracy and the centre in European politics recognise the indispensability and the potential benefits of the market economy and of the laws and logic of the economy. They also see in enterprises and associations a reflection of human freedom, individual responsibility and people's ability to solve problems. While the centre and the centre-right in the EU have performed well in the past five years, these years have been characterised by crisis management and ad hoc responses to unforeseen domestic crises and global developments. The EPP should establish a strong position on the above-mentioned watershed moment and translate this position into a future-oriented, values-based and visionary programme for 2019–24.

Developing a recognisable EPP programme with real long-term relevance and acceptance requires trust. Are our representatives, our leadership and our researchers aware of what is really at stake in the new developments of globalisation, digitalisation and ecology? Are they motivated by a sense of responsibility, compassion and solidarity? Words and programmes are no longer trusted in an age in which the main challenge for democracy is exactly the lack of trust in political parties and their representatives. What is urgently needed is to restore the bond with the electorate—but this has to be done in accordance with our long-held principles. Opportunism, crying wolf alongside the

populists and careerism are likely to lead to marginalisation. By drawing on Christian values, we can develop our own future-oriented programme based on trust. It will be a programme which ensures that the market, the laws of the economy, the need for global governance and the exigencies of the environment are compatible with the dignity of the human person, human responsibility and a strong role for society.

Notes

1. The World Council of Churches is an international organisation of non-Catholic Christian and Orthodox churches founded in 1948, which on the basis of its ecumenical religious dialogue and cooperation promotes an understanding of the Christian faith as inclusive of societal and political responsibilities.
2. Financialisation refers to ‘the growing scale and profitability of the finance sector at the expense of the rest of the economy and the shrinking regulation of its rules and returns’ (Collins 2015).

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