

PROCEEDINGS OF THE CHHSM FORUM 1997

**ON ETHICAL ISSUES
IN
CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES**

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THE NEED FOR CHURCH-RELATED AGENCIES TO ADDRESS ETHICAL ISSUES IN A TIME OF DECLINING RESOURCES

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Let me first of all thank you for your invitation to present a paper at this "Forum on Ethical Issues in Child and Family Services." I feel highly honored. When you extended the invitation to me, you were aware of the fact that I am not a specialist in the field of child and family services. What I am able to share with you today are some of my thoughts on the theological foundations of current social ethics. I have done research on the biblical grounds of both Christian and secular social ethics. Furthermore, I have been working to analyze the problems in addressing ethical issues under the conditions of so-called "post-modernity," and the problems we have in understanding the inner structure of pluralist societies. It seems that ours is a time when morals are experienced as being relative and unstable. This experience of what I would like to term "short-lived moral markets" challenges many individuals and institutions to address publicly ethical issues. From the search for a new "world ethos," which Hans Küng and others try to promote, to recent debates on specific ethical issues in various contexts, it is clear that there is no lack of ethical discourse in our societies.

The question you presented me with is not just whether church-related agencies should address ethical issues at all. Rather, it is more specific. You ask, "Is there a need for church-related agencies to address ethical issues in a time of declining resources?" What do we have in mind when we speak of a 'time of declining resources?' We do not mean situations of economic depression, such as after wars or in economic disasters, when it seems that no resources whatsoever are left to help the sick, the frail and the needy. In those times even healthy people who have jobs do not know how to help themselves. Again and again, we have experienced such chaotic situations in one part of the world or another. But, what we picture as a time of declining resources is the experience that there is an increasing scarcity of financial and other means for diakonal tasks in an otherwise economically orderly society. At the bottom of such a process and preceding it is an increasing lack of interest in and concern for the situations that diakonal work deals with—be it church-related or other organizations. The diakonal situations meet with increasing apathy and neglect by the general public. Thus the decline of financial and other resources is generally preceded by an ethical, cultural, moral, and religious decline in interest in diakonal situations. *Church-related institutions that are aware of this fact must respond to this novel challenge.*

But what more can we actually do in this crisis than pursue traditional paths which were successful before or try to counter the loss of support with better advertising? Can we in fact do more than simply wait for some catastrophe which will touch people's hearts and make them act mercifully? Can we do more than wait for a charitable public person to emerge who, by becoming a myth, will move people to support charitable causes because of their complex affection for this individual, such as Princess Diana did? Or is there potential in offering more diakonal ethical education which will raise the level of sensitivity to the needy and will thus work against the decline in both "moral" and monetary support for diakonal activities? Can church-based agencies, in order to fight the decline, offer such diakonal enlightenment to the public by testifying to the faith-based powers that guide their work?

In what follows, I argue that faith-based diakonal agencies can do so, but that *theological and moral reasons alone will not be enough to bring about a change in the public's attitude towards diakonal work. The appeal to people's feelings and emotions has also to be taken into consideration as a crucial factor in any attempt to turn the tide.* Again, the fact should be emphasized that such appeals to feeling and emotions alone are counterproductive. Princess Diana, for example, has moved many people to support charitable causes, because her person and her life turned into a powerful myth. She incorporated both powerful ideas and images and thereby appealed to people's reason as well as to their feelings, even if the ideas and images she represented were conflicting with each other at times. These underlying ideas are deeply rooted in our cultural heritage. Since these religious and cultural traditions are still alive and foster the deeply rooted ideas, institutions like yours can with some hope of success appeal to people for support of their charitable work. But the chances for success are much better, if in such an appeal both emotional and rational factors come together.

As a systematic theologian and a theorist of western cultures, I did not find it easy to appreciate the impact of feeling and emotion. It was Friedrich Schleiermacher, the great German theologian of the 19th century, who taught me to overcome the academic juxtaposition of rationality versus feeling, feeling versus rationality. As a boy, Schleiermacher was sent by his parents to join a pietistic community, the "Herrnhuter Gemeinschaft," to get a thorough religious and theological education. It was under the greatest inner conflicts and tensions with his father that Schleiermacher left the community to study philosophy and theology at a secular university. Still, the impulses of the community and the theological heritage, shaped his thinking in a most original way. Later in his life he called himself a "Herrnhuter h ouherer Ordnung" (a Herrnhuter of a higher order).

The first of his reflections that have come to us in writing—and which were published only in 1985—offer complex insights which are relevant to our questions. These reflections are truly ingenious thoughts of a twenty-year old student who at once wrestles with his own pietistical heritage and with the classical philosophical ethics of Kant and Aristotle. In these reflections, Schleiermacher sets out with the observation that we live in environments which either strengthen us or weaken us. He states that those who are most strengthened by their environments should do the most for those who are most weakened by them. This thought is clearly inspired by the Jewish-Christian heritage mediated through the Herrnhut community. But this is only a first step.

Schleiermacher then asks how people become motivated to help. His answer is that the very powers which cause us to do good deeds radiate and have a moral impact on others, so that they are inspired to follow the good examples they witness. But how can we become aware of these powers? How do we become aware that we share these powers with others or that we could possibly share them others; and how do we become aware that we are stimulated by them and can stimulate others, thus moving beyond the single act of help, the one good deed? Schleiermacher's answer is that the powers that make the good deeds radiate and inspire people to follow the good examples are mediated by complex feelings. (This is Schleiermacher's second step which in itself does not come across as very exciting, but which challenges modern philosophical morality in that it has not much to offer with respect to feelings.)

His third insight is that it is religion which helps us express and cultivate complex feelings. Religion stimulates, expresses, strengthens, and transforms complex feelings which make human actions radiate in such a way that other individuals become involved in them. In very subtle reflections, Schleiermacher makes it clear that religion works in different ways when it cultivates the feelings of younger, more mature, or older persons. Religion uses different approaches to bring about the experience that there are strengthening powers and forces at work in the world. Religion also uses different approaches to spread this experience among different people—all to the end of serving God's purposes which can unfold in variegated, but coherent ways.

The processes Schleiermacher describes are by no means simple. At this point, however, I cannot go into further detail. I simply want to ask how we today can strengthen diakonal motivations by evoking complex feelings and by opening up motivating force-fields which at the same time possess convincing ideas. I should like to offer three perspectives which I will discuss briefly.

Church-related agencies which address ethical issues in a time of declining resources should deal with the following: the frailty and unreliability of morals and the notion of sin; the enormous power of mercy and diakonal action in the shaping of the ethos; and faithful and merciful love and the importance of diakonal immediacy.

The emotional value of these three key notions has been very high: sin, mercy, and faithful love. Today these notions are highly distorted. "Sin" has become a term that is hardly understood any longer. "Mercy" appears to be an outdated concept and seems to imply condescending and patronizing attitudes. "Faithful love" has been reduced to the equivalent of monogamous spousal relationships. What I would like to do now is to uncover the old Jewish-Christian ideas inherent in these notions. I trust that they will generate new feelings and insights which prove fruitful when we address ethical issues in our environments.

1. The frailty and unreliability of current morals and the notion of sin

Modern persons and societies have a hard time understanding that morals are not only frail and unreliable, but that they can become distortive forces. The modern mind puts an enormous trust in morals and is of the opinion that morals operate out of themselves in a necessarily good way. Rarely do people see that morals can become corrupt and distorted in themselves. To be sure, modern societies are quite right to assume that morals are indispensable for any society. We can do without morals as little as we can do without common sense. Morals are very valuable, communicative forms through which we respond to each other. That is, we give attention, pay respect or show tolerance to someone; or, conversely, we withdraw attention, respect, or tolerance from this individual. Certain deeds gain our respect, while others lead to the withdrawal of our respect. The specific value-laden systems of paying or withdrawing respect, and attention or tolerance are what I term "moral markets." Moral markets regulate the ways in which we mutually observe, influence, and respond to one another and in which we mutually influence each other's actions. But why are morals not in themselves good?

What modern people do not clearly see is the fact that morals can become partly or totally corrupted. Fascism in Germany, Italy and elsewhere, racism, ecological brutality, and other evil powers which can capture a whole society teach us that morals are corruptible. Another example of moral distortion nowadays is the extremely liberal economic politics in my own country which favor the shareholder-value-system to a degree that promotes the development of attitudes that are dangerously close to social Neo-Darwinism.

Biblical traditions have found a name for the power which corrupts moral communication in such a way that people do not even realize that something is deeply wrong. They call this power "sin." Sin is not simply any bad or very bad deed. Sin is the power that overrides our moral orientation and communication in distortive ways. Things deteriorate, but people have the feeling that they are on the right track. Sin cuts off people from life-supporting resources. It destroys the potential for renewal and the potential for people to leave a wrong path. We have to understand and remember this destructive power. The meaning of sin becomes blurred when "sin" is only discussed in individualistic terms. In view of the fact that moral markets are corruptible, it is of great importance that *church-related agencies make the public aware that all moral communication cannot operate out of itself and is not good per se, but that it depends on an ethos. Church-related agencies need to encourage people to consider the quality of their ethics and their inner ideas.* But what are the powers in an ethos which make people become aware of the presence of sin and which are counter to its life forces?

2. The enormous power of mercy and diakonal agency in the shaping of the ethos

The Old Testament law traditions see very clearly that the inclinations and actions which they call "mercy" are not only important to the recipients, but are also of benefit to the whole society. "Mercy" is devotion to the weak, to the strangers, the widows, the orphans, the persecuted, and to those who are in the minority. Without continuous mercy, that is, the institutionalized readiness to help the weak and the frail, a society degenerates and the social system becomes more and more brutalized and defensive. The early prophets—Isaiah, Micah, Amos and Hosea—explained this clearly, and that was almost 3000 years ago. About one century ago, the Social Gospel Movement in this country made this its central theological issue. There can be no true justice in a society without mercy towards the old, the sick, the weak, the excluded, and the marginalized members of this society. Only the fruitful tensions between justice and mercy help legal ethics and the legal system to expand and improve in appropriate ways. Only in constant striving after justice—on the other side—do we avoid situations in which mercy becomes condescending and patronizing.

The picture would not be complete, however, without the third element of the law traditions—the third besides justice and mercy. This has to do with the cult and the knowledge of God. For ancient cultures, particularly ancient Israel, the search for the knowledge of God was not a luxury. When people come together to worship God, to reflect on God's deeds, on God's history with the people and on God's intentions with God's people, they again and again asked for the truth, for the knowledge of reality in God's eyes, and for the reality which God intends for them. In real worship,

people try to see the world through God's eye. Therefore, they question their own achievements of justice and mercy again and again. They do so not in order to do away with them, but to improve them, to enhance the sensitivity and the efficacy of both.

Justice, mercy and worship (cult and faith) thus are the very powerful and dynamic forms which shape the ethos of a society and work against the power of sin. We have to rediscover these fruitful dynamics and have to sensitize our societies to their interactions and workings. *It is one of the great tasks of church-related agencies to disclose the inner structures and the foundation of our ethos and to make clear that moral communication alone cannot give this orientation.*

Good morals are formed by an ethos, which in our tradition is shaped by the dynamic and fruitful interaction of justice, mercy, and the search for the knowledge of God or, in a more secularized version, for truth. *Agencies who raise ethical issues should time and again point out that striving for truth and the knowledge of God, striving for justice and striving for mercy cannot be disconnected, but that they mutually enhance and strengthen one another.* Furthermore, they have to make it clear to the public that individual and group concerns for the needy are directly and indirectly relevant to the shape of the society as a whole and its inner orders.

Diakonal institutions like yours, institutions which are, so to speak, "specialists in the field of mercy," should open the public's eyes to the fact that diakonal work is indeed not only crucial to the directly needy and helpless persons, but crucial to the wider society. Beyond this focus on the needy, diakonal work is also centered on the relatives, friends, and neighbors in the direct environment of persons in need, also addressing their suffering and helplessness. Diakonal work also addresses society as a whole when it gives examples of how life can be supported in the midst of indifference and helplessness, when it promotes trust and hope in the midst of resignation and despair, and when it testifies to a power which counters sin by addressing a multitude of contingent individual crises.

But how can church-related agencies which are representatives of the forcefield of mercy avoid the dangers of a self-righteous juxtaposition of mercy versus sin? Here come the merciful who fight the sinful rest of the world! As powerful as mercy is as an element of God's good law, it too can deteriorate into a moral weapon in the processes of gaining and withdrawing respect. *Church-related and faith-bound agencies, unlike secular institutions, have to point out one more fact, and that is the corruptibility of even an ethos which is partially shaped by the strong power of mercy!* The problem is not only that an ethos does not work like

a machine which, once started, performs as prescribed. In itself, the ethos can become a vehicle for self-righteousness and self-deceit both for the society and its individuals. Acts of mercy, forms of diakonal work, can function as alibis in an ethos or in morals which are distorting, unjust, and even cynical. How can this be revealed and corrected?

3. Faithful and merciful love and the importance of diakonal immediacy

According to the gospel, it is God's revelation which continually challenges the seemingly best forms of our ethos, the seemingly most sensitive modes of mercy, even the seemingly most appropriate forms of justice and the most sincere and successful modes of searching for and expressing faith. *The cross of Christ reveals the total corruptibility of our religion, our politics, our legal, and moral institutions.* The cross of Christ challenges all forms of normative religious and moral triumphalism. In the name of religion, in the name of the law—even two forms of law, the Jewish and the Roman one. In the name of politics, in the name of public opinion Jesus was brought to death. Not only the Jews but also the Gentiles, not only the rulers, but also the occupied, not only the natives but also the foreigners put Jesus to death and fought against the presence of God.

But the gospel does not leave us with this revelation of the triumph of sin and death. *The gospel names several powers to rescue us out of this situation of despair. The resurrection of Christ, the outpouring of the Spirit, and the coming of God's reign are such powers.* But please note: *what they all have in common is that they work among human beings in emergent ways.* The powers of God which counter evil and the forces of sin and which free creation from self-jeopardy and self-destruction come in the most astoundingly modest forms. This is very clear with respect to the coming reign of God. It does not come like a storm, not even like a train or a bus. It comes like green leaves out of the ground. While for some they are still completely invisible, for others the leaves predict the good harvest. God's reign comes like the early morning light which some see as the beginning day; meanwhile, others still call it night and darkness. Jesus' parables speak of this emergent reality brought forth in numerous experiences of mercy, forgiving, and free unexpected deeds of justice and love.

Similar observations can be made with respect to the powers of the Spirit. The Spirit of God is "poured out," "overcomes" the creatures, and establishes forms of order which are not easy to grasp. When the Spirit is poured out from heaven, men and women, the old and the young, free persons and slaves will prophesy, says the prophet Joel. The Pentecost story in Acts 2 quotes this passage and adds that people from different countries, cultures, traditions, and languages were overcome by the Spirit and brought into a complex unity. The apostle Paul, in Galatians, describes this unity of

the Spirit and in Christ when he stated that there were no longer the divisions between men and women, masters and slaves, and Jews and Gentiles. Yet there is no such thing as a simple, mono-hierarchical unity, but, rather, the unity of the members of the body of Christ, the unity of a multiplicity of charisms, and of gifts of the Spirit. This complex unity is not a luxury or a "post-modern" invention. The complex and even "pluralistic" unity of the Spirit is the power by which God works through frail and finite human creatures against the powers of sin and distortion.

Finally, the resurrection of Christ comes in a much less triumphalistic mode than often depicted. In his many appearances and revelations, in the midst of uncertainties and doubts, the insight emerged that Jesus had risen from the dead. Out of a multitude of witnesses, mingled with skepticism and uncertainties, grew the post-Easterly body of Christ which bears Christ's new presence. It is this complex reality which overcomes the powers of death and destruction—a reality, which guides the search for truth in the midst of certainties and doubts. "...But they did not believe them..." This statement is not only true for the witnesses of the resurrection today, but also for the biblical ones (Mark 16:11.13). The Emmaus story tells us that the eyes of the disciples were opened when the resurrected Jesus "...took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them." But then it says: "...they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight" (Luke 24:30.31).

This emergent, anti-triumphalistic working of the powers of God among us is also to be noticed with respect to the power of diakonal work. When diakonal institutions address ethical questions in a time of declining resources, they easily fall into the trap of a self-righteous fighting against the powers of sin "on the other side." They easily get into the danger of making moral use of individuals and groups of individuals in need. They easily get into the danger of bringing faith under a moral pressure, and so functionalize faith in order to enhance the diakonal success. But this is to miss the point that it is God's powers which endows life with a dignity worthy of respect, a dignity our projects cannot create or withdraw.

In the face of these dangers, the gospel challenges diakonal institutions working on the basis of faith to rise to a third level of witness. *Church-related agencies active in child and family services today should address the problems of self-jeopardy, of systemic distortions in our societies and in our morals. They should, in other words, address the deep theological problem of sin.* Church-related agencies that work in child and family services today should know and should make known that they do not only do something good and very important for individuals and groups of individuals in need; they also care for central normative and symbolic forms crucial to the ethos of the society and to the cultivation of morals which deserve to be attributed to human morals. *Church-related agencies that*

care for the needy—among others, for families and for children—should on the third and deepest level make it very clear that they do help persons in need for the sake of these persons. No other motivation is legitimate, be it religious or organizational. Although diakonal institutions may fight the power of sin in their work—they do not help persons in need in order to fight this power. They witness to God's powers.

Matthew 25 gives a most important and central clue that faith-bound agencies should bear in mind and should make clear ethical statements in all their endeavors. The message to proclaim is that God's blessing rests on what I would call "diakonal immediacy." God's blessing rests on faithful and merciful love which sees the need of the family and the child, and addresses this need—and, yet, faithful love leaves it to God to fight the powers of sin and to establish the power of mercy exactly through this specific activity and care.

Matthew 25 states in its message of Christ's parousia and the final judgment that those who did not feed the hungry and did not give anything to drink to the thirsty, who did not welcome the stranger, who did not visit the sick or the prisoners did not know that Christ was to encounter them in exactly these needy people. But before this, the text says that the righteous, too, did what they did without an expressly religious motivation (25:34ff):

Then the king will say to those at his right hand: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

This Christian insight that any ethical engagement should not use the needy by religiously functionalizing them must be emphasized time and again. Still, this insight must allow for the fact that diakonal work has a prophetic and missionary dimension. Although we cannot count on the religious or moral impact an agency may have, such a radiance cannot be denied. For this reason it is possible and necessary to make it clear to the diverse pub-

lics of a society why church-related agencies do what they do. In doing so, church-related agencies bear witness to the religious powers that guide all their diakonal activities. In doing so, they address complex ideas and deep feelings including: a new understanding of sin, an appreciation of the power of mercy, and the readiness to extend faithful and merciful love to persons in need. These are focal topics for this great prophetic and missionary task.