



‘Religions and Ideologies,
Polish Perspectives and beyond.’

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“Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue”

“Justice” is a key concept in Lutheran thought. However, when Lutherans hear the term “justice” traditionally we think of “justification by faith and not by works”. This was and is considered to be the core of the Lutheran credo. Behind this credo stands the insight that God’s grace is a gift, which is utterly unconditional. This became central for Lutheran self-understanding.

In the preface to his Latin writings, Luther describes his theological discovery:

“But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. ... I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: "The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: 'The just person lives by faith.'" I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God - that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e. that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: "The just person lives by faith." All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings, e.g., the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which he makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

I exalted this sweetest word of mine, "the justice of God," with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise. Afterward I read Augustine's "On the Spirit and the Letter," in which I found what I had not dared hope for. I discovered that he too interpreted "the justice of God" in a similar way, namely, as that with which God clothes us when he justifies us. Although Augustine had said it imperfectly and did not explain in detail how God imputes justice to us, still it pleased me that he taught the justice of God by which we are justified.”

Luther developed his theology of justice and justification by reading Paul’s letter to the Romans.

Subsequently, Lutherans read this Pauline letter with Luther’s categories in mind. The result was a narrow perspective on the Biblical understanding of justice, of *zedek* and *zedaka*, the terms used in the Hebrew Bible and of *dikaioyne*, the term used in the New Testament.

The Jewish-Christian and the ecumenical dialogue gave important impulses to put the Lutheran dogmatic concept of justice into a larger perspective and to open up the wider Biblical perspectives of justice.

Biblical Perspectives of Justice

Zedek and Zedaka

The root of the Hebrew Word “justice”, *zdk*, appears 524 times in the Hebrew Bible, making it an important term. We find it much more often in the Psalms and the prophets than in the Torah. *zedek/a* is an attribute and a form of behavior. It is equally ascribed to God and human beings. Most often, in the Christian translations, the word is translated as “just” or “justice”, a translation that easily misleads. Popular contemporary conceptions of “justice” stress the idea that “justice” entails a form of equal treatment. This is not the focus of the Hebrew term.

(The German Theological Dictionary translates it as “gemeinschaftstreu, heilvoll sein”, as being faithful towards the community and / or the relationship.) The focus of the word *zedek* is on the relationship to the community and its overall well-being. Furthermore, *zedek* is part of the relationship between God and Israel. God’s *zedek* is mirrored in his giving the Torah to Israel. Israel’s *zedek* becomes apparent in fulfilling God’s will, that is, the commandments of the Torah.

If there is strife and conflict, according to the Biblical perspective, there is no *zedek*. It needs to be re-established. *Zedek* is also the consequence of human behavior.

In the book of the prophet Isaiah, God addresses his people: “Listen to Me, you who pursue *zedek*, You who seek the Lord... Truly God has comforted Zion, comforted all her ruins... Harken to Me, you who care for *zedek*, o people who... have my Torah in your heart.” (Jes. 51.1-7)

It is interesting to note the different translations that were chosen. Buber / Rosenzweig chose the term “Wahrhaftigkeit” (veracity). Zunz translates the term as “dem Rechte” (the law) the first time and as “Gerechtigkeit” (justice) the second time. The American translation of the Jewish Publication Society translates the first occurrence as “justice” and the second as “the right”. The American Revised Standard Version, a Christian translation (1952), rather freely chooses the terms “deliverance” and “righteousness”. A contemporary Christian Translation from Germany uses the term “Gerechtigkeit” (justice) twice. These different translations demonstrate that how the term “*zedek*” is rendered mirrors the theological tradition of a translator. In the Jewish tradition “*zedek*” is related to “the right” or “law”, in the Christian tradition it is related to “deliverance” and righteousness.” (This is quite a compelling reason to learn Hebrew, isn’t it?)

However, all the translations agree on how to translate the term in Dtn. 16.18-19: “Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” These are words spoken by Moses on mount Nebo. They are his testament to the Israelite people who will cross the river Jordan and move into the promised land, whereas Moses knows that he’ll die and will not be able to lead the people. His admonition to pursue justice is part of the literary context in which he instructs the Israelites to establish legal procedures. “You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your tribes... You shall not judge unfairly...”

Justice needs law, a functioning juridical system. A juridical system will most often not suffice to create justice, yet it is a necessary precondition. For we all know: if law is abrogated, the foundation of a society is undermined. A drastic example of this is the Nazi inversion of law into injustice.

Among the seven Noahide laws which a Non-Jew must fulfil to be part of “*olam ha-ba*”, the coming world, there are six negative laws and one positive law. The positive law demands establishing courts of law. For a long time, I wondered why this commandment was chosen, rather than any other Biblical proscription. Given the close relationship the Bible posits between justice and law, I recognize the establishment of courts, or in modern terms: a juridical system, as a necessary precondition for justice.

Again and again, prophetic criticism has been directed against the abuse of law and the disturbance of *zedaka*. Thus, Amos addresses the people: “Ah, you who turn law (*mishpat*) into wormwood and hurl justice (*zedaka*) to the ground.” (Amos 5,7)

From the fact that *zedaka* does not exist in the present, the prophets look to the future. Earlier I quoted Isaiah, now I turn to Jeremiah: “See, a time is coming when I will raise up a true branch of David’s line. He shall reign as a king and prosper and act according to right and do justice in the land “*oseh mishpat u zedaka*”)... And this is the name by which he shall be called: “The Lord is our righteousness (*zidkatenu*)” (Jer. 23.5) *Zedaka*, in this case, is an aspect of political actions of the ruler. His rule creates peace and a peaceful society. In the Christian tradition of exegesis, Jesus was identified with this ruler. This mirrors the

hope of his early followers: that Jesus, the Galilean from Nazareth, the hoped for messiah, would create justice. Later on, the concrete political implications were spiritualized, and thus, neutralized.

Justice in the New Testament

The New Testament term “*dikaiosyne*” should be understood in line with the Hebrew terms of *zedek* and *zedaka*. This is evident in the gospel of Mathew. In his gospel, *dikaiosyne* is stressed over and over again. Above all, *dikaiosyne* is the practice of justice, the fulfilling of the *mizvot* of the Torah. (Mt. 5.17-20). “But first seek his kingdom and his justice...” (Mt. 6.33) This admonition echoes the verse of Deuteronomy: “Justice, justice you shall pursue.” Yet, the echo has often been rendered inaudible, since translations often use the term “righteousness”, rather than “justice.”

And last, but not least, for Matthew’s understanding of justice it is necessary to look at his description of judgment day: Jesus invites the righteous ones with the words: “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, for I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me.” (Mt. 25.34-35) Then the righteous ones ask when they did all these things to Jesus, for they do not recall them. And Jesus answers: “As you did it to one of the least ... of my brethren, you did it to me.” (Mt. 25.40)

The message is clear: those who do concrete works of justice will enter into God’s kingdom.

The Biblical concept of *zedek/ zedaka* opens our eyes for Matthew’s understanding of *dikaiosyne*. The exegesis has found a special term to describe this form of justice: *iustitia connectiva*. It means acting in a social and communicative way, understood as part of the relationship to God.

A contemporary example: The conciliar process to justice, peace and the integrity of creation (JPIC)

In 1983, the General Assembly of the WCC in Vancouver stated as its goal: “To engage member churches in a conciliar process of mutual commitment (covenant) to justice, peace and the integrity of creation...” The scope was subsequently expanded to other churches that are not members of the WCC as well as ecumenical organizations and movements committed to these issues.

In putting forth this call, the WCC Assembly was responding to a situation of crisis. The assembly stated: “Humanity is now living in the dark shadows of an arms race more intense and of systems of injustice more widespread than the world has ever known. Never before has the human race been as close as it is now to total self-destruction. Never before have so many lived in the grip of deprivation and oppression.”

The call to work globally as well as locally for justice, peace and the integrity of creation touched a nerve, and many initiatives were formed. In 1990, the convocation in Seoul affirmed ten fundamental convictions. They include that the earth belongs to God and that all human beings are equal, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or social status. Justice and human rights are seen as intertwined. “The source of human rights is God’s justice, who frees his enslaved and impoverished people from oppression.”

In the 10 affirmations there are a number of references made to the Biblical understanding of justice.

Besides Mathew 25, 31-46 (to which I referred earlier), Deuteronomy 24, 17-18, Amos 5,7 and Isaiah 32.17 are quoted. Biblical aspects of justice of *zedek*, *zedaka* and of *dikaiosyne* in Mathew’s understanding have found their way into this ecumenical commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

A study aid from Wurttemberg gives many examples of how to integrate the manifold aspects into the daily life of a congregation. It tackles concrete questions such as: which kind of coffee to use (fair-trade coffee is recommended), how energy can be saved and how money invested, as well as theological questions concerning possibilities of when to preach on these topics during the course of the church-year. On a grass-roots level, as well as on an institutional level, are a number of activities are suggested which contribute to more justice in this world.

Working together for Justice?

Given my presentation, one may assume that a movement which carries the word “Justice” in its title and which refers in its founding principles, more than once, to the Hebrew Bible, sees Jews as partners in a project striving for peace, justice and the integrity of creation.

The Second European Ecumenical Assembly that convened in Graz in 1997 stated: “We are thankful that discussion has intensified between Christians and churches and Judaism and is giving rise to a new

departure in theological teaching and church practice, as a number of recent church documents show. We are also thankful that the number of Jewish congregations is gradually rising again in many countries of Europe, and that Christians again have the chance to live together with Jews and to discover and understand their common heritage."

Yet, Jews are not seen as (potential) partners in the pursuit of justice. The reasons are multiple and I will refrain from speculations.

Conclusion

Christians and especially Lutherans profit by studying the Biblical understanding of *zedak/zedaka*. Furthermore, it is important to listen to the rabbinical interpretations of *zedaka*. David Rosen will talk of them.

The Christian – and it seems to me also the Jewish - obligation to work for justice can be seen as an obligation towards God, which finds its expression in acting towards one's fellow human beings. Furthermore, the pursuit of justice transcends opinions, values or good intentions. It does not remain inside our hearts, but it involves our mouths, our hands and our feet. Acting – rather than bearing one's fate – empowers the individual and the community, who no longer is passive, but actively engages the world. The pursuit of justice can and should take many forms. The journey towards more justice begins here. Thus, I would like to invite you to join me in a small act of justice for God's creation. Most of us have taken airplanes to come to this conference which harms the environment. Planting trees counteracts this damage. Therefore, let us plant trees in Israel with the help of the KKL. One tree costs 10 Euros. No matter how many trees we plant: it will be better than planting no trees at all. Let us enlarge the *forest of peace* outside of Jerusalem which is dedicated to the memory Pope John Paul II.
Thank you very much.