EDITORIAL ESSAY

JUSTICE AS THE "COMMON CAUSE" FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE? REVISITING A COMPLEX QUESTION

Paul F. Knitter
Union Theological Seminary

Back in 1986, when I first took up the effort to connect interreligious dialogue with "global responsibility" or with "liberation," I spoke of *justice* as a common concern, or a common cause, that can rally all religions to a new kind of liberative dialogue.[1] Soon, I was soundly and properly pounced upon as imposing my agenda—a very Jewish-Christian agenda—on other traditions.[2] Most of the protests and critiques took up the theme of Alasdair MacIntyre's much-referenced book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*[3] Chastened, I refocused (without redirecting) my proposal. Instead of *justice* as the bugle call that would summon all religions to a common effort, I held up the specter of widespread, unnecessary human and environmental *suffering.* Different religions and cultures will have different takes on justice (or maybe, like Buddhism, no take at all). But all of them have something, usually something urgent, to say about suffering.[4]

[1]"Toward A Liberation Theology of Religions," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions,* John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 178–202.

[2]Some of the sharpest, though always friendly, criticisms came from S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995) 71–98, and Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) 30–39.

[3]Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

[4]I tried to do this mainly in *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

Paul Knitter, known especially for his work in religious pluralism and dialogue, is the Paul Tillich Professor of Theology, World Religions, and Culture at Union Theological Seminary, New York (10027). Previously, for some thirty years, he taught theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati, OH. He holds degrees from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome (1966) from the University of Marburg, Germany (1972). His most recent book is Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian *(2009).*

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But deep and hidden in my Christian heart, I harbored my conviction that once we take up the kind of suffering that wracks our world—the suffering of hunger and homelessness, the ravages of curable diseases, the violence that imposes or reacts to exploitation of one human being by another (or one gender by the other)—eventually we will have to face questions that come under the category of justice. Issues of justice are, stubbornly and inherently, unavoidable. Sooner or later, my Christian heart told me, in the interreligious and international conversation, we have to speak about justice.

A recent book by Amartya Sen urges that this conversation take place sooner rather than later. In fact, in his *The Idea of Justice*[5], he makes a strong case that the question of justice can be, and must be, among the most pressing topics for a global dialogue of nations—and, that implies, of religions. "Global dialogue . . . is vitally important for global justice" (151). And that means: global justice is vitally important for global dialogue.

But can the notion of justice have global resonance? To answer that, Sen looks at the other side of the coin and begins with *injustice.* He seems to understand the reality and the effects of injustice in a way similar to how the Supreme Court approached pornography. We all know what it is, even though we cannot all agree on a definition of what it is. More tellingly, it disturbs us even though it may elude us. And in disturbing, it calls us to common response.

> We are increasingly linked not only by our mutual economic, social, and political relations, but also by vaguely shared but far-reaching concerns about injustice and inhumanity that challenge our world, and the violence and terrorism that threaten it. Even our shared frustrations and shared thoughts on global helplessness can unite rather than divide. There are few non-neighbours left in the world today (173).

Sen goes on to carefully but tightly lay out his argument that this "vaguely shared concern about injustice" or these "shared frustrations" do not just call us but hold us together in dialogue and common efforts. And this happens even though (a) we can not agree with each other, or within ourselves, about what the final end of "justice" would really be and (b) we each have differing analyses or actions for achieving justice. What Sen is saying is that although the concern for justice is a "vaguely shared" goal, it is still "far-reaching" in its ability to animate shared

[5]Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2009). Further page references will be in the text.

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conversation and collaboration among differing viewpoints. The hoped-for but not fully envisioned end is more powerful and unitive than diverse disagreements about the means to the end.

Sen marks two divergent schools of thought about how to strive toward justice. The approach that he terms "transcendental institutionalism" wants, as it were, to get all its theoretical and institutional ducks in order before it will move forward on the realization of justice. Reflecting the thought of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and (most recently and influentially) John Rawls, this viewpoint "first . . . concentrates attention on what it identifies as perfect justice rather than on relative comparisons of justice and injustice . . it concentrates primarily on getting the institutions right. . . ."—institutions that will assure a movement toward "perfect justice" (5–6).

Contrasted and preferred to the conceptual and procedural clarity of "transcendental institutionalism" is a procedure that Sen calls "realization-focused-comparison," or more simply "comparative approaches." I would suggest the even simpler term "dialogical approaches." More practical and more contextual, it seeks to deal with "the world that actually emerges, not just the institutions and rules we happen to have" (20). In line with the views of Adam Smith, Marquis de Condorcet, Jeremy Bentham, Mary Wollstonecraft, Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, this procedure postpones universal truth claims and universal programs and affirms the possibility of "the removal of manifest injustice from the world" as we see it (6).

Sen's proposal for a "comparative" or dialogical approach basically reminds us that we do not have to agree on everything and we do not have to have a "best position" in order to work together and learn from each other. We can "prevent manifestly severe injustice" even though we disagree about what makes for a "perfectly just society" (21). "Evaluative incompleteness . . . would not prevent making comparative judgements." In fact, such "persistent incompleteness may be a hardy feature of judgements of social justice" (103). Sen calls upon all those engaged in a concern for justice "to accept the absence of once-and-for-all finality" (89). This means that we can not only live with, but thrive from, "the inescapable plurality of competing principles" and "the durable conflicts of non-eliminable principles. . . ." Such a swarm of viewpoints, such an elusive finality of results, in no way prevents us, in our dialogue about justice, from "making comparative judgments about justice in a great many cases" (105–06).

Sen's description of the two approaches toward understanding and dealing with the general notion of *justice* and the manifold manifestations of *injustice* bear an uncanny and perhaps helpful resemblance to

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the divergent schools of theological thought regarding religious pluralism and dialogue. His description of "transcendental institutionalism" is strikingly similar to the "theology of religions" approach to pluralism that prefers first to clarify a theological blueprint and a common ground before building a program of interreligious dialogue. And his understanding of a "realization-focused-comparison" that stresses "the world that actually emerges" from a comparative engagement (20) mirrors the let's-get-on-with-it appeals of "comparative theology" that prioritize the praxis of dialogue over the theory of theology. Sen evidently would line up behind the comparativists rather than the systematicians.

But it doing so, he would challenge the comparative theologians to recognize that in order to properly carry out their practical project, they need to operate on the axiom endorsed by the so-called pluralist (or mutualist) theologians of religions: they have "to accept the absence of once-and-for-all-finality" (89). If, as Sen urges, the "plurality of competing principles" is "inescapable" (106), and therefore we must live with "evaluative incompleteness" (105), then theological claims of finality or ultimate superiority are inimical to the comparative project.

However one might judge my musings about the theological implications of Sen's understanding of justice, the practical challenge he levels for religious believers is clear. In all our efforts to understand and engage each other across our confessional and cultural boundaries, the question of justice can be—perhaps must be—placed squarely in the middle of the table. To MacIntyre's nagging question "Whose justice?" Sen enables religious practitioners and dialoguers to respond politely but firmly with the Buddha: "Your question does not fit the case." We do not have to provide certain or final answers to that question in order to work together. We can all engage our differing understandings of justice (or our lack of an understanding) in order to respond, together, to the situations that we all experience as "manifestly severe" (21), namely the "injustice and inhumanity that challenge our world, and the violence and terrorism that threaten it" (172).

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