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Precious and Precarious Life: Exploring Diaconal Economics

Abstract: In view of recent concrete challenges and creative initiatives arising in diaconal work related to economics and economic structures, this article takes human precariousness as its point of departure for reflecting on what might be seen as “diaconal economics.” I suggest a hermeneutical understanding of diaconia that makes it possible to distinguish between “explicit” and “implicit” diaconal practices, relating recent thinking on precariousness and precarity in the fields of political philosophy (Judith Butler) and economy (Guy Standing) to contemporary theological criticism of the global economic system (e.g., by Pope Francis, Daniel M. Bell, and William T. Cavanaugh). While appreciating the ethical commitment and theological relevance of such a critique, I draw on the contribution of development economists Banerjee and Duflo to suggest that diaconal economics should resist common tendencies toward very general and abstract approaches as well as proposals that are overly optimistic about the critical potential of explicitly faith-based or Christian alternative practices. But by recognizing the vital role of religiosity in situations of precarity (cf. Norris and Inglehart), I also suggest that the resources of Christian faith may be mobilized in multiple ways to foster contextualized and pluriform initiatives that serve to reform economic structures from the bottom up. They may provide such practices with motivation and direction in ways that may be seen as both explicitly and implicitly diaconal in nature.

Keywords: diaconal practice and economy, theology and economics, precariat, precariousness, vulnerability

Prelude in Porto Alegre

In Porto Alegre, the megacity in Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil, women network to sell their products cooperatively.¹⁰⁷ The “just and solidary trade network” is one of the diaconal projects of the Evangelical Lutheran Church’s diaconal branch, the Diaconia, a member of ACT Alliance. In their self-representation,

107 This article is a revised version of an invited keynote address at the 7th bi-annual ReDi Conference held in Berlin 12-14 September 2018.

we read that this network “proposes a different form of thought or consumption, based on social commitment, gender justice, the promotion of cooperative action, and solidarity.”¹⁰⁸ This is but one example among many practices I here call emergent and incipient diaconal economics.¹⁰⁹ This article contributes to the search for alternative economics of solidarity and reflects on the relationship and tension that exists between diaconia/theology, on the one hand, and economy/economics, on the other hand.

These fields of practice and study have long been considered separate. In fact, many would say that they are culturally, theoretically, and practically worlds apart. Nonetheless, they deal with similar phenomena and questions, albeit in different ways. A central common theme is the tension between scarcity and affluence as well as between needs and desires. Indeed, they both address something valuable and how it is or should be shared. From their different perspectives and with diverging presuppositions, methods, and aims, these disciplines both reflect upon the question of what is considered precious and propose what to do with what is experienced as precarious.

By proposing a hermeneutical understanding of diaconia that enables us to distinguish between “explicit” and “implicit” diaconia, I present selected representative examples of recent theological criticisms of economy/economics. These critiques have much in common with the efforts to mobilize theology in relevant ways for the cause of justice for poor and excluded persons or groups. By exploring the resources for diaconal economics, however, I also want to point out some weak spots in them. On the one hand, I detect a tendency toward abstraction and generalization; on the other hand, I find some of the proposals overly optimistic or even pretentious regarding practices that are considered explicitly or uniquely Christian.

Diaconal economics should be open to assessing and evaluating a variety of localized practices that criticize and transform present economic relations from within. By learning from these practices and reflecting upon how they draw on multiple resources of Christian faith, diaconal economics may become relevant to the concrete endeavors of Christian communities as well as to concerned and

108 “A Rede de Comércio Justo e Solidário propõe outra forma de pensar o consumo, a partir de um compromisso social, da justiça de gênero, da promoção do associativismo e da solidariedade.” Retrieved from <https://comerciojustofld.com.br/>

109 I visited the project together with my students and students from the Faculdades EST as part of our joint study course “Precious and Precarious” (MF – Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society and Faculdades EST, Brazil). This course investigates the role of religiosity and the churches in fragile democracies and situations of social fragmentation and instability, and addresses how they may play a role in protecting precious and precarious lives. Central to the course was an analysis of the present challenges related to citizenship, migration, and diversity in Brazil and Norway.

committed actors and communities of other or no faith. I argue that, first of all, diaconal economics needs to recognize the God-given goodness of human precariousness as a condition for survivability and a good life in the community. Based on this seemingly paradoxical claim, diaconal economics can criticize and oppose the practice of unjust conditions of human precarity in its many different forms – in order to, in a third step, seek to inspire, interpret, explore, and develop alternative local practices of production, consumption, and (re)-distribution, by the use of critical and constructive resources from Christian faith.

Precious and Precarious?

Why choose *precariousness* as a central concept when reflecting on the economy and the role faith-based social work, i.e., diaconia, in our time? I offer three reasons.

1) Precariousness means vulnerability and fragility, but also it means being dependent during an acute and generally distressful life situation. Such is presently the experience of many people around the globe. All over Europe diaconal organizations and churches as well as public welfare institutions and humanitarian groups and networks report the presence of a new kind of marginalization caused by globalized economic forces and counterforces.¹¹⁰ These forces increase the competition of capital and labor but restrict people's mobility, basic rights, access to safe living, and fair opportunities, in particular among the poor and lower middle classes. Many find economist Guy Standing's use of the concept 'the precariat,' combining 'precarious' and 'proletariat,' relevant to describe and critically analyze this situation.¹¹¹

"The word precarious," Standing notes, "is usually taken as synonymous with insecure. But being precarious also means depending on the will of another. It is about being supplicant, without rights, dependent on charity or bureaucratic benevolence."¹¹² To Standing, then, "(t)he precariat consists of people living through insecure jobs interspersed with periods of unemployment (...) and living insecurely, with uncertain access to housing and public resources."¹¹³ Their situation is also characterized by the lack of "non-wage perks, such as paid

110 For an overview, see, e.g., <https://www.eurodiaconia.org/category/themes/>. Accessed 16 September 2018. Cf. Eurich and Hübner 2013.

111 See Standing 2011, 2014. The concept is applied to diaconal practice in, e.g., Bymisjon 2013. See also Lewis et al. 2014. For critical views and discussions, see, e.g., Munck 2013 and Seymour 2012.

112 Standing, 2014, p. 21.

113 Standing, 2014, p. 16.

vacations, medical leave, company pensions,” as well as any possible income from dividends or rent.¹¹⁴ The precariat lacks occupational identity and control over its time and suffers from low social mobility and varying forms of insecurity and uncertainty.¹¹⁵

What the precariat needs to resist the exclusion and to overcome their precarity is, as Standing sees it, to engage in three overlapping struggles: the struggle for recognition, the struggle for representation, and the struggle for redistribution.¹¹⁶ And yet, these struggles are impeded by a lack of a sense of community and common purpose. A variety of groups belong to the precariat, and these groups are often set in opposition to each other, so that their struggles are further debilitated by fragmentation and internal division.¹¹⁷ This, then, represents a challenge for diaconal economics: to address the precarious situation of the precariat and, from its experienced predicament, propose and mobilize alternatives.¹¹⁸

2) On the other hand, living a precarious life is not just something some unfortunate ‘other’ people experience. Precariousness or vulnerability is also a constitutive anthropological and hence ethical condition. We all, in *this* sense of the word, live precarious lives: *homo vulnerabilis*.¹¹⁹ Political philosopher and leading feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler distinguishes between *precariousness* as that anthropological and existential condition that we all share, and *precarity* as the suffering that is unjustly ‘distributed’ globally.¹²⁰ Hence, she argues for “... demanding a world in which bodily vulnerability is protected without therefore being eradicated and with insisting on the line that must be walked between the two.”¹²¹ This line has to do with what I see as the crucial distinction between vulnerability and woundedness.¹²² Being wounded is life-threatening and can lead to premature death; it should be prevented. Vulnerability, on the contrary, is in itself life-sustaining. Hence, it is, in this sense, precious.

So, from this vantage point, human vulnerability is not a misfortune or a fault. Rather, it can be seen as a felicitous feature of human existence because

114 Standing, 2014, p. 19.

115 Standing, 2014, pp. 18-28.

116 Standing 2014, pp. 138-144.

117 The tensions and contradictions within and among the various groups belonging to the precariat prevent them from recognizing the social and economic structures that produce their *common* vulnerability, Standing argues (Standing 2011).

118 In my book *Religion i urolige tider. Globalisering, religiøsitet og sårbarhet* (2017) I present and explore further the rationale for such an approach.

119 See also Stålsett 2015.

120 See Butler 2006, 2010.

121 Butler, 2006, p. 42.

122 Stålsett, 2018.

it enables us to live – and to live well – together. Vulnerability is a form of receptivity. It is the condition necessary for empathy. It is an irremovable and irreplaceable element of love. One could even call this constitutive vulnerability a *hallmark of human dignity*. Such precariousness, as distinct from precarity, should be seen as an asset to be protected and not a burden to be removed. And, importantly for our purposes here, it could also form that common ground on which the struggles for recognition, representation, and redistribution might be founded.

3) Political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart argue that secularization is related to the level of experienced physical and existential security. In other words, they find that “(T)he most vulnerable populations in the world – those who lack the basic necessities of life such as food, running water, and electricity – are far more likely than others to feel that religion is important in their lives and to participate more often in religious practices.”¹²³ Thus, unsurprisingly, the role of religion in orienting peoples’ lives becomes particularly relevant when they are experiencing hardships and suffering. When the precariat grows, the significance of religiosity to its resistance, survival, and well-being should increase as well. And yet this relationship between precarity and religiosity is explored by neither Standing nor Butler.¹²⁴ This void, I suggest, makes a *diaconal* approach particularly relevant if we want to understand and protect precariousness and to overcome the unjust production and distribution of precarity.

In other words, when we ask about the relationship between diaconia and economy in search of a diaconal economics, it makes sense to part from the ambiguous experience of life as both precious and precarious.

Diaconia as a Hermeneutical Term

So what does “diaconal economics” really mean? A variety of definitions and theories of *diakonia*/diaconia are in use, some of which overlap and some of which conflict.¹²⁵ I find it helpful to see diaconia as a *hermeneutical term*. According to this approach, what makes a given practice diaconal is that it is *interpreted* in light of the Christian faith in God. There is, in other words, not necessarily something *inherent* in a practice that makes it diaconal. Rather, it is

123 Norris and Inglehart 2011, pp. 263-264.

124 Stålsett, 2018.

125 See, e.g., Nordstokke 2013; Fretheim 2013; Wyller 2009; Haslinger 2009; Nissen 2008; Latvus 2008).

the way this action is seen, interpreted, or understood – by the practitioners themselves or by others – that qualifies it as diaconal.

Such a hermeneutical understanding of diaconia enables us to distinguish between what I call ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’ diaconia. The difference between the two depends on the relationship between the particular transformational practices on the one hand, and their interpretation on the other hand. Whenever social work or caritative service is being illuminated, inspired, or corrected by reflection on symbols and values drawn from the Christian faith, it may be called diaconal. Whenever this interpretation of such social practice is an integral and expressed part of it, i.e., when it occurs *as* the work is carried out and *by* the ones doing it, I would call it explicitly diaconal. More controversially, I would call such action *implicitly* diaconal whenever it can be interpreted to be concordant with Christian symbols and values, even though this interpretation may not be undertaken *as* it is carried out or *by* whom it is realized.

This distinction is not new. Nevertheless, I do think it is fruitful for formulating it in this manner and (re-)introducing it into our scholarly debate on diaconia. In my view, such a distinction follows from the fact that fundamental values in diaconal work such as service, justice, and dignity are both explicitly and implicitly Christian, while certainly being neither unique nor exclusive to Christian faith. Therefore, for any economics to be considered explicitly or implicitly diaconal, its practices must be interpreted through the lens of Christian faith resources. Before looking into what these resources could be, we need to have at least a working definition of economics.

Economics: Scarcity, Desire, and Relations

What should be considered precious and precarious in our lives and societies? In general, this question is central to economics. It focuses on the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. According to *The Economist*, the “most concise, non-abusive, definition” of economics is “the study of how society uses its scarce resources.”¹²⁶ In other words, the tension between affluence and scarcity is central to this particular branch of social science. Since this tension only becomes significant relative to our needs and our wishes, an essential concept in economics is also desire,⁷ more commonly expressed through the category of demand.⁷ While it is true that we desire (and demand) what we value, we may also *need* some things that we do *not* desire. That means that the competition for different goods and services does not directly follow

126 See <https://www.economist.com/economics-a-to-z/e#node-21529558>. Accessed 13 May 2019.

from our actual needs, but rather from our *perceived* needs. Hence, economics cannot merely address the production, consumption, and redistribution of goods and services already desired by us: It also needs to reflect on the creation and possible transformation of desires.

Desire is not merely an emotion; it is also a relation. When a person desires someone or something, she or he also wishes to relate more closely to, or even to control or to consume, that other person or product. Significantly, a *relational approach* is also something that brings together diaconia and the study of economics.

Theology versus Economy?

What resources from Christian faith might illuminate, inspire, and criticize economic theories and practices? Theological reasoning has practically been separated from the field of economics ever since, at least, Adam Smith and his (in)famous “invisible hand.”¹²⁷ Yet the two – theology and economy, diaconia and economics – are indeed related. They both deal with the human experience of precariousness. Both deal with constitutive relations that form our daily lives; both respond, albeit in very different ways, to the question of what is to be considered desirable.

Economy, in the form of reflection on scarcity and affluence, and the production, consumption, and distribution of human and material resources, is unmistakably present in the Scriptures as well as in the theological tradition. Christian theology has always had something to say about *oikonomia*, “household,” from, say, “blessed are you poor” and “Woe to you rich ...” in the Sermon on the Mount (Luke 6:20;24), to the warning in Martin Luther’s Large Catechism that mammon has become the “most adored god on earth.” Not surprisingly, liberation theology with its emphasis on the ongoing struggle to overcome poverty and social injustice as a privileged hermeneutical position also led to a rediscovery of the centrality of economic themes in the Scriptures.¹²⁸

On the other hand, economic systems and policies build on presuppositions about human life and visions for the society that are, at least implicitly, normative. Hence, from a Christian viewpoint, they have a theological dimension. Not the least in Latin America during the 1990s neoliberal policies often linked to so-called structural adjustment programs (SAPs), triggered a productive theological reflection on economics as implicit theology.¹²⁹

127 (Smith, 2000 (1776)).

128 See, e.g., Kinsler and Kinsler 2005.

129 See, e.g., Assmann 1993, 1994; Duchrow and Hinkelammert 2004; Hinkelammert 1997; Mo Sung 1994, 1998; Stålsett 2008.

In their co-authored book from 1989, *A Idolatria do Mercado* (“The Idolatry of the Market”), economists and liberation theologians Hugo Assmann and Franz J. Hinkelammert claimed that economic theory since Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ has reflected often hidden theological presuppositions. In their own way economists are “eminent and dangerous theologians,” they claimed.¹³⁰ Theologians should, therefore, address economics critically and constructively, *since it is already theological*. To Assmann and Hinkelammert, the neoliberal turn in globalized economics at the end of the 20th century represents an even stronger theologization, or re-theologization, of the economy.¹³¹ Economics entails the most potent theologies in their present. The dominant economic model is seen as idolatric and sacrificial:

... economic rationality “hijacked” and functionalized certain aspects of Christianity. The “economic religion” unleashed a significant idolatric process which finds its most evident expression in the supposed autoregulation of market mechanisms. This economic idolatry is nurtured by a sacrificial idolatry that implies constant sacrifices of human lives.¹³²

The Legacy of Liberation Theology in Present-Day Ecumenical Economics

This critical theological interest in the economic field remains strong today. This assessment of the present-day economy is made by Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, (“The Joy of the Gospel”) from 2013¹³³:

Just as the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality. Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses

130 Assmann and Hinkelammert 1989.

131 Assmann and Hinkelammert 1989, p. 18.

132 Assmann and Hinkelammert 1989, p. 7, my translation.

133 Available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape.¹³⁴

However harsh, these words are not exceptional. Condemning economic globalization as a form of market fundamentalism and idolatry is a recurrent theme of the Argentinean-born pope.¹³⁵ He refuses to leave the market or economy as such to the supposedly benevolent invisible hand: “We can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market.”¹³⁶

It is quite remarkable the degree to which the present leader of the Catholic Church is echoing Latin American liberation theology, so much criticized by the previous Pope.¹³⁷ Pope Francis speaks strongly on behalf of the excluded and sees a dramatic worsening of their situation. “Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded,” he points out. In the “throw-away” culture of the globalized market,

... it is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the “exploited” but the outcast, the “leftovers.”¹³⁸

Such a critique of the prevailing capitalist economic system on behalf of the excluded is widely shared throughout the ecumenical community. While warning the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 20, 2017, on the destructive consequences of rising inequality in the world, Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, made a strong

... call for an economy of life that embraces and cares for all human beings, especially those who have been pushed aside: the impoverished, many women, children, and migrants. In the Holy Scriptures, God expresses a preferential option for the poor, over and over again.¹³⁹

134 *Evangelii Gaudium*, 53.

135 Tornielli and Galeazzi 2015.

136 *Evangelii Gaudium*, 204.

137 See Lourenço 2017. On the relationship between liberation theology and the Pope, see, e.g., Valley 2015, pp. 29-84.

138 *Evangelii Gaudium*, 53.

139 See <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/messages-and-letters/a-moment-of-truth-in-davos-address-inequality-now>. Accessed October 2018.

As already indicated, these references to an economy that kills and to the preferential option for the poor demonstrate the living legacy of Latin American liberation theology in the broad ecumenical community.

The Economy of Desire the Works of Mercy

We find similarly critical reflections on the global economic system in more recent scholarly works from various currents within theology: Daniel M. Bell Jr., for one, also draws upon liberation theology in his *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World*.¹⁴⁰ Bell addresses more directly the world as “postmodern” and analyzes the capitalist system with the help of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. He is particularly interested in revealing and overcoming how capitalism shapes, and brings out of order, our human desires. Human desire, he holds, drawing on Augustine, is meant to find its completion in God. In this aim, all the other qualities of human life may find their proper, that is ordered, place.

... Christianity has long held that humanity was created to desire God and that sin is a matter of the disordering of our desire so we do not desire God and the things of God. The solution to this predicament, however, is not simply the repression of desire. Rather, the church confesses that God in God’s grace has given us Christ, who heals our desire as we are graciously gathered by the Spirit into Christ’s body and partake of the various means of grace that constitute the church as an economy of desire that sanctifies desire.¹⁴¹

So what would be a proper Christian response to the sinful economic system of this world, according to Bell? It is to develop an alternative economy of *desire*, by sharing explicitly Christian symbols and practices: the sacraments, Christian virtues, and institutions, thus receiving Christ’s healing presence, which is “graciously mediated through material objects, such as bread, wine and water; material bodily practices, such as worship, fasting, and almsgiving; and material relations, such as neighborliness, friendship and marriage.”¹⁴²

This is what may genuinely reorient or reeducate our desires and thus lead us back to our divine economic purpose. The solution then, in Bell’s view, is to engage in what the Christian tradition calls ‘works of mercy’:

140 Bell 2012.

141 Bell 2012, p. 127.

142 *ibid.*

The work of mercy is a fitting name for what the Christian economy of desire sets Christians to doing in this world, for mercy is the virtue that responds to the distress of another, and it captures as well the church's call to participate in Christ's self-giving for the sake of renewing communion.¹⁴³

Such works of mercy that respond to the distress of another would certainly belong to the core of diaconal economics.

Doubts and Dilemmas

Other contemporary theological accounts of the economy widely share Bell's focus on desire and grace. William T. Cavanaugh draws on Augustine, too, when developing what he calls "a kind of theological microeconomics."¹⁴⁴ The freedom of the market is deceptive and seductive. We can only be free as human beings when we let our desires be transformed.¹⁴⁵ "Humans need a community of virtue in which to learn to desire rightly."¹⁴⁶ This is the task of the churches, Cavanaugh holds. They should "take an active role in fostering economic practices that are consonant with the true ends of creation."¹⁴⁷

However, developing and engaging in such economic practices is no small task. Exploring diaconal economics, we also encounter some doubts and dilemmas: For instance, although Christian faith no doubt has a lot to say about economics, one wonders whether the church as a community is necessarily *the* central actor in forging alternative economic practices?

Perhaps we should pause here to recall that we do also find contemporary theological voices countering such critical approaches, instead offering a theological *defense* of capitalism and affluence. In his book, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* (2002), John R. Schneider argues that "... the workings of modern capitalism (...) are unusually well suited to the expression of an integrated Christian faith and life."¹⁴⁸

Still, in general, as we have seen, ecumenical statements as well as recent theological scholarship sharply criticize the present global economic system. The globalized economy is seen as unethical and in conflict with basic Christian tenets since it is held to give priority to profit and property over the basic and

143 Bell 2012, p. 196.

144 Cavanaugh 2008, p. viii.

145 Cavanaugh 2008, p. 9.

146 Ibid.

147 Cavanaugh 2008, p. 32.

148 Schneider 2002, p. 9.

just needs of all people. It is also condemned for creating vast social inequalities and threats to the global environment. This criticism expresses solidarity with the poor and excluded, whether part of the precariat or not.

However, the criticism is often quite general. So another doubt arises: Does such prophetic denunciation make a difference for people? We need to ask what *concrete alternatives* these analyses offer. What guidance might the women of the 'just and solidary trade-network' in Porto Alegre or people involved in income-generating diaconal projects in other parts of the world find in such statements? Diaconal economics needs to be concrete, contextual, and practical. What to do? What might work?

From "Poor" to "Diaconal" Economics

In their ambiguously entitled book *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (2011), development economists Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo propose a radical rethinking of what kind of economics might be of use for the poor and excluded.¹⁴⁹ They regret that "many of the most vocal experts tend to be fixated on the 'big questions': What is the ultimate cause of poverty? How much faith should we place in free markets? Is democracy good for the poor? (...) And so on."¹⁵⁰ Banerjee and Duflo make use of a scientific method often favored in medicine and research on health, the randomized controlled trial (RCT). In so doing, they aim to be concrete, contextual, and fact-based in their approach. This "bottom-up" approach is commendable for concretizing diaconal economics. Importantly, they critically examine whether and in what situations "poverty traps" may exist. They also critically discuss the effectiveness of microfinance, a method that has been met with such high expectations, not the least since it gave Mohammad Yunus and his colleges in the Grameen Bank the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 "for their efforts to create economic and social development from below."

Banerjee and Duflo offer fresh self-critical insights for diaconal practice. For instance, one mistake in earlier efforts to help the poor inside and outside of the explicit sphere of diaconia was to assist them without due regard for their own existing resources. Different forms of paternalism increased poor people's dependency and lack of self-esteem and self-confidence. This top-down, at times implicitly authoritarian interventionism has been rightly criticized. And yet, Banerjee and Duflo note that

149 Banerjee and Duflo 2012. In 2019, the married couple Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo won the Nobel Prize in Economics. They got the prize together with economist Michael Kremer, for their "experimental approach to alleviating global poverty."

150 Banerjee and Duflo 2012, p. 3.

... it is easy, too easy, to sermonize about the dangers of paternalism and the need to take responsibility for our own lives, from the comfort of our couch in our safe and sanitary home. Aren't we, those who live in the rich world, the constant beneficiaries of a paternalism now so thoroughly embedded into the system that we hardly notice it?¹⁵¹

This remark connects well with Guy Standing's observation that the precariat is being deprived of many rights other citizens may take for granted. They are "denizens" – i.e., citizens with limited rights – he holds. "The state treats the precariat as necessary but as a group to be criticized, pitied, demonized, sanctioned, or penalized in turn, not as a focus of social protection or betterment of well-being"¹⁵² In this way, the accusation of paternalism is directed back at those who suffer from the lack of having their rights respected: In the name of avoiding dependency-inducing mechanisms, the state ends up blaming the victims.

For diaconal economics, another of Banerjee and Duflo's observations carries great significance: Amid their insistence on scientific evidence to what "really works" through the use of RCTs, they nonetheless point to the centrality of such an arguably abstract and theological human phenomenon as hope. To them, hope is a capability. "... optimism and hope can make all the difference."¹⁵³ It represents an asset, a force for good: "... a little bit of hope and some reassurance and comfort can be a powerful incentive. (...) Moving goalposts closer may be just what the poor need to start running toward them."¹⁵⁴ Having hope, it turns out, is not something abstract nor purely spiritual. When struggling for an economy of dignity and daily survival, hope is quite practical and concrete.

Conviviality – The Economy of Living Together

The temptation of lofty theoretical abstraction and generalized critique – a "fixation with the big questions" – is still present in contemporary theologies and church statements on the economy. However, there are exceptions. The Lutheran World Federation's (LWF) work on 'conviviality' comes up with tangible and creative proposals for diaconal action to counter economic exclusion.¹⁵⁵ The

151 Banerjee and Duflo 2012, pp. 69-70.

152 Standing 2014, p. 21.

153 Banerjee and Duflo 2012, p. 202.

154 Banerjee and Duflo 2012, p. 204.

155 LWF 2017, accessed at https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/dmd-conviviality_theology_report.pdf

LWF proposes an inductive approach that starts with building relationships and emphasizes “participation, trust building and transparency” in diaconal work. Small-scale actions are needed, as they “gradually build confidence on the basis of people’s knowledge, skills and interests.” However, it is underscored that this action should not be only for the members of the group, the church, or the diaconal organization. Local decision-makers should be challenged, too, “to join in the process and to open up economic decision making to participation and challenge unjust practices in the local economy.” So we see, although locally based and inductive, the inclusive vision of conviviality as an alternative to the exclusion of prevalent economics is certainly also ambitious: It should “(S)tep by step create a new vision for the local economy through local initiatives and collaboration in a variety of sectors: food, energy, water, finance, transport, care, etc.” This could present “new visions for the future so overcoming apathy and resignation.”¹⁵⁶

For his part, William T. Cavanaugh also privileges a concrete and contextual bottom-up approach, offering a christological reason for this:

All of this can only be instantiated in concrete, local practices. For it is only in the encounter with other persons that Christ is encountered, in the concrete and not the abstract (...). The call to Christians is not so much either to embrace or try to replace abstractions such as “capitalism” with other abstractions. It is rather to sustain forms of economy, community, and culture that recognize the universality of the individual person.”¹⁵⁷

LWF’s conviviality process as well as Cavanaugh’s emphasis on concrete, local practices are thus important contributions to fleshing out diaconal economics in practice.

The Value of Vulnerability

These relational approaches, stressing the ‘living together’ (LWF), ‘responding to the stress of another’ (Bell), and the ‘encounter with Christ in the encounter with other persons’ (Cavanaugh), further point to the need for reformulating our often one-dimensional understanding of precariousness and vulnerability in diaconia. The basic human condition for entering into a relationship with others is precisely our ability to be touched, to be moved, to be affected. This

156 Cavanaugh 2008, pp. 41-42.

157 Cavanaugh 2008, p. 86.

condition is not just inescapable; it is also prior to our awareness of it. And yet, as Judith Butler points out: “A vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter, and there is no guarantee that this will happen.”¹⁵⁸ Theologically interpreted, as I have argued elsewhere, this vulnerability should not be understood as a result of human fallenness or sinfulness.¹⁵⁹ Like every living organism, we are created vulnerable. *Homo vulnerabilis*, the vulnerable human being, is created in the image of the *deus vulnerabilis*, the vulnerable God. Therefore, diaconal economics should recognize the God-given goodness of human precariousness as a condition for survivability and a good life in the community. Precariousness, in this sense, is precious. Vulnerability is also a precondition for a good life.

When people’s vulnerability is not protected but misused, harassed, or violated, for instance, through structural economic relations that prevent them from living good lives, the ethical demand arises. This is the moment of diaconia. From concrete experiences of human precarity, diaconal economics needs to resist in practice the uneven and unjust distribution of economic resources and opportunities. Furthermore, it will not reach this goal by only *opposing*. To fulfill its task as both economics and diaconal, it should also *construct*. It should nourish hope by suggesting, initializing, and supporting alternative models and practices for economic life together.

Implicit Diaconia and the Struggle of Interpretation

Diaconia draws on its Christian faith resources. As we saw, both Cavanaugh and Bell place their hope in explicitly Christian symbols and practices. Although I share many of their positive interpretations of the (possible) implications of engaging in such Christian relations, I do see a certain danger of creating too high expectations, with even a temptation for Christian triumphalism lurking. Christian models of interpretation and faith practices have no doubt also served to sustain and legitimize unjust economic systems. Hence, in addition to the three struggles proposed by Standing for the precariat – the struggles for recognition, representation, and redistribution – diaconal economics needs to add a fourth: the struggle of *interpretation*. Diaconal practice today should interpret Christian faith resources in light of and in favor of the struggles of the precariat. Diaconal economics would, then, be an attempt to see and judge what is precious and what precarious from their perspective – and from the standpoint of faith in God, a God who savingly relates to the world and to all

158 Butler 2006, p. 43.

159 See, e.g., Stålsett 2015, 2018.

humans through the testimonies about the life, death, and resurrection of a vulnerable human being, Jesus of Nazareth.

This is also what Bell and Cavanaugh advocate. Nonetheless, by stressing the Christian identity of their proposed alternative models and actions, even as being contrary to, say, government action or initiatives of other non-faith-based actors, in my opinion they unnecessarily limit the potential of diaconal economics. Not only do they raise too high hopes about what Christians and Christian communities can accomplish on their own; they also risk failing to detect and appreciate how God's creative and saving activity is expressed throughout the 'secular' political and social world – a world that precisely as such continues to be God's creation.

This is also why I hold that implicit diaconia is a helpful category. According to the hermeneutical understanding I proposed above, diaconia means social action interpreted to be in tune with the Christian calling to serve human well-being and fight for social justice, regardless of whether or not this interpretation is part of the action itself. This hermeneutical understanding offers an opportunity for regarding *as* diaconal both secular and differently faith-based struggles and initiatives for building an economy that safeguards the good life for all.

Let me end by noting that the intention here is not to "Christianize" someone – persons, groups, or institutions – behind their backs, by seeing their endeavor as diaconal. The point is rather to be able to recognize, respect, and even celebrate God the Creator's continuing care for the whole creation through all humans 'of good will.' Thus, by recognizing and engaging with a variety of initiatives and actors in favor of an alternative economy to ensure a flourishing life for all, we may give full prominence to diaconia as something that works for good, not something that carries a particular name.

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