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**Faith-based Perspectives on Comprehensive Justice:
Moral Foundations for an Economy of Life**

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Since the dawn of civilization, to build a just society has been one of the most fundamental aspects of human aspirations and experiences. The search for justice seems to have been at the heart of human social experiments. The earliest written records testify to this fact.

Ancient Egypt: Ancient Egyptian religion and law dated as far back as 3000 BCE were inexorably framed with at their core the idea of justice (Ma’at).

Mesopotamian cuneiform documents: The Lipit-Ishtar Code and the Laws of Eshnunna from the 19th century BCE were also framed with an overarching concern for justice.

The well-known Code of Hammurabi, named after the king of Babylon (1792-1750 BCE),² specified in its prologue that the purpose of the law was to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong might not oppress the weak. Hammurabi introduces himself as the king of justice.

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² See ANET, 164.



“I am Hammurabi, noble king. I have not been careless or negligent towards humankind, granted to my care by the god Enlil, and with whose shepherding the god Marduk charged me. I have sought for them peaceful places, I removed serious difficulties, I spread light over them. Let any wronged men who has a lawsuit come before the statue of me, the king of justice, and let him have my precious pronouncements and let my stela reveal the lawsuit for him.”

Ancient Near East or Western Asia Hittite treaties show this constant concern of nations/states, empires and civilizations for the establishment of justice.

Ancient Greece

During the time of Plato (427—347 B.C.E.), the key concept Ancient Greece was wrestling with was that of justice. The whole book of Republic and the dialogues and analyses therein were about delineating the meaning and reality of justice: societal or political justice. Once this is done then one could derive an analogous concept of individual justice. The dialogues between Socrates, Thrasymachus, Cephalus, Adeimantus, Polemarchus and Glaucon bore on the nature of justice in the city and in the soul. Justice as the greatest good, was meant to save what was considered a then decadent society on the verge of imploding.

Ancient Israel: The Northern Kingdom of the 8th Century BCE. The case of Ancient Israel of the 8th century before our common era is significant for our purpose as we explore the promises of an economy of life.

The biblical book of Amos, a prophet from Tekoa, 16 km from Jerusalem, was sent to the Northern kingdom before the Assyrians conquered Samaria and put an end to its existence in 722 BCE.

The correlation between justice and life seems to intimate that without justice life itself is unsustainable. Amos’ major indictments were connected to the lack of justice in a decadent society which, also similar to Athens in Ancient Greece, was on the verge of disintegrating,



although all external signs seemed to say otherwise. The mid-8th century BCE was a time of economic prosperity, for the leadership, military success and border security. Private property expanded since the Omride dynasty in the 9th century BCE brought new disparities. The gap between the rich and the poor increased considerably. It was a time of widespread injustices in Israel but also among surrounding nations. A time Amos called an evil time. It appears though a time of injustice is a time of self-inflicted wound. Nations succumb to decadence when justice is despised.

It was observed that “Prophecy reveals the hidden connection between social injustice and historical catastrophe.”³ For people valuing life, establishment of justice, a comprehensive holistic justice, one that promotes, sustains and favors life over death, and over a culture of death, must be kept as an absolute priority in our financing philosophy and practice.

Before indicting Judah and Israel, Amos began his speech with six oracles against the nations. The charges were crimes against humanity: violence against the vulnerable, war atrocities, and war crimes, territorial incursions, annexations, and expansions even if it meant genocides. The crimes included populations displacements, deportations, human trafficking, slavery, violence against women and children. The whole nomenclature of crimes against humanity seems to have been present back then among nations/states surrounding Israel and Judah. Obviously, one has to be cautious not to read contemporary issues and challenges back into ancient nations/states. The similarities, however, are impossible to miss or ignore.

When it comes to Israel, the Northern kingdom of the 8th century, the main indictments consisted in exploitation and oppression of the poor. The variety of words to designate the poor viewed poverty from different angles: the needy, the vulnerable, the physically affected, the innocent deprived of justice because of bribes and corruptions. Market-place practices favored the rich. Legal practices disadvantage the powerless. Over-taxation of farmers reduced many

³ H. J. Kraus, “Die prephetische Botschaft gegen das soziale Unrecht Israels,” *Ev Th* 15 (1955), 299-300. Quoted in J. David Pleins. *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 376.



debtors into slavery. “Social elites failed to fulfill their obligations towards the poor. Once caught in the web of indebtedness, the abused ‘ani’ and the destitute ‘ebyon’ became the prey of the wealthy.”⁴

Provisions in the Torah to protect the poor were simply disregarded: “in addition to the abuse of debt slavery, those who turned over their garments as loan collateral were defrauded when lenders disregarded laws designed to protect the destitute (Ex. 22:25-26 [26-27]; Deut. 24:12-13).”⁵

In 8th century Israel, the powerful were set to win because might was right. The sum of all the indictments consisted in a lack of justice both among nations and in Israel. The prophet Amos wrote on behalf of God the famous words quoted time and again in the twentieth century by Martin Luther King Jr. “Let Justice roll like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

As important as the incontrovertible necessity of justice for any nation to flourish, the repeated calls to choose life found in the center chapter of the book draws our attention to the importance of the second term in the expression “Economy of Life.”

Here we are in the 21st century addressing multifaceted challenges of injustices; not just criminal justice but beyond the laws of retribution, people consider the need for the righteous deeds of distribution and responsible involvement in the production, management and care for the common good.

We now mobilize for social justice, economic justice, gender justice, racial justice, climate justice and ecological justice. One could add the concept of “interactional justice” “which adds

⁴ J. David Pleins. *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 170.

⁵ *Ibid.*



additional insight and explanation into organizational justice dynamics across a wide variety of organizational processes and outcomes.”⁶

The overarching and incredible ally to help heal the wounds of society is a deliberate commitment to an economy of life. A new awareness compels the human family to search for new ways to succeed in the quest for the establishment of justice. For the state of management of world resources to align itself with an economy of life there is an urgent need to embrace the promising concept of an economy of life itself.

The expression “Economy of life” is meaningful. It is predicated upon the premise that life is the ultimate point of reference, many have argued that it is in fact the highest good.⁷

An Economy of life is about the management of life through which the goal is abundant life for all. An Economy of life puts the value of human life first. Saving lives, creating conditions for life to flourish, sustaining dignified lives.

Consequently, an Economy of Life prioritizes human life over corporations and profits. An Economy of life invests in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, reduction of inequality, overcoming the disadvantage of illiteracy, giving people means not to succumb to avoidable or curable diseases. An economy of life invests in responsible environmental and sustainable care. It also invests in the long overdue rights of women and children. It fosters partnership of all sectors of society to make life flourish for all. Human life is valuable.

⁶ Robert J. Bies. “Interactional Justice: Looking Backward, Looking Forward.” *The Oxford Handbook of Justice in the Workplace*. Edited by Russell S. Cropanzano and Maureen L. Ambrose. Online Publication, August 2015.

⁷ Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. Second Edition (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018), 314, explains, “The reason why life asserted itself as the ultimate point of reference in the modern age and has remained the highest good of modern society is that the modern reversal operated within the fabric of a Christian society whose fundamental belief in the sacredness of life has survived, and has remained completely unshaken by secularization and the general decline of the Christian faith. In other words, the modern reversal followed and left unchallenged the most important reversal with which Christianity had broken into the ancient world, a reversal that was politically even more far-reaching and, historically at any rate, more enduring than any specific dogmatic content of belief.”



A Moral Imperative as Foundation to an Economy of Life

The reversal of the unjust state of any given society in which the poor and the oppressed suffer, is a moral necessity. It is also a testament to the fact that inscribed in human consciences is the normality or legitimacy of living in a society in which the dignity of the disenfranchised is protected, the plight and predicament of the poor reversed, and the fate of the vulnerable members of society is challenged and changed to descent living.

It is significant when nations gathered after WWII to find an international contract, in order to stop waging wars and start building peace, the central pillar of the UN agreed upon became Justice and Development.

Justice as the Second Pillar of the UN

Justice is a value which seems to be a core mandate of both political and religious institutions. Governments and religious actors partnering for the establishment of a just society. This happens to be a perennial quest since the dawn of civilization.

That is certainly helpful but there must be more from a faith-based perspective. If justice is about regulating, restoring and restituting rights, another concept also found in the book of Amos paired to justice must be factored in: it is righteousness.

Righteousness goes beyond justice. Justice is strict and exact, giving each person his due. “Righteousness implies benevolence, kindness, generosity. Justice is a form, a state of equilibrium; righteousness has a substantive associated meaning. Justice may be legal; righteousness is associated with a burning compassion for the oppressed.”⁸

⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, 256.



Righteousness is the state that would not give room to wrong others in any way. But it is also about funding rightly for what matters to secure the dignity of all members of the human family.

It is political leaders encouraging all members of society to abide by the just rule of law at national, regional and international levels. The SDGs and before them the MDGs, are in fact articulations of the various aspects of justice: rights of women to equality, rights of children, right to have access to medical treatment.

It is religious leaders encouraging personal righteousness, moral rectitude as antidote to corruption. It takes people who have embraced righteousness to bring about the best in societal relationships: dignity, courtesy, respect and honor for all.

In his well-known plenary speech on economic Justice, Hyunju Bae mapped the prioritizing of a path through which an economy of sharing and equality, the politics of justice and compassion and the religion of God's freedom would replace respectively an economy of affluence paired politics of oppression and exploitation and a God domesticated to serve triumphalist cause of the status quo.⁹

Conclusion and Perspectives

Embracing the Deep Moral Roots of an Economy of Life can contribute to save our time. The economy of life is a fascinating and very promising concept to fully embrace and promote as an integral part of culture. It expands the demands of our day for a holistic justice based on our collective and deep commitment to manage world resources for life to flourish for all. This is

⁹ Hyunju Bae. "Theological Reflection on Economy of Life" wrote with the following words: "the economy of sharing and equality replaces the 'economy of affluence' which promises the individualist happiness of consumerism and self-satiation, the politics of justice and compassion substitutes the politics of oppression and exploitation,' and the religion of God's sovereign freedom stands in for the religion of God's captivity in which God is domesticated to serve triumphalist cause of the status quo." He also noted the feminization of poverty bearing the brunt of economic injustice. and undergo human trafficking, forced migration, and all kinds of gender-based violence.



justice not shifting opinions in courts but perennial justice inseparable from the meaning and justification of human life. If justice, as the Sophists argued, was a matter of shifting opinion, we would adhere to skepticism and relativism. In fact, there would be no basis for delineating what is right. The very use of the expression economy of life firmly grounded in the notion of justice means that if the world was to be given a chance for peace then a just management of the house, the global house, grounded on the affirmation, promotion and sustainability of life becomes paramount.

Faith-based perspectives on an economy of life are anchored in the premise that life is not just a value to be respected or valuable in itself. It is sacred.

A faith-based perspective affirming the sacredness of every human life is the foundation and the deeper justification of an economy of life. Handle every life with care, and every person with respect, dignity, and solidarity.

What a privilege to have us all as what I would call “walking mysteries,” infinitely valuable, irreducible to any program, but worth investing in for the betterment of our life together, in peace and justice, freedom and responsibility in dignity. Our future depends on it.

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