The Millennium Share and the Council of Conscience – conceptual notes from Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp

In all spiritual traditions the adherents are commanded to share from one's wealth with the poor - not as an act of charity but of justice. The prophet Isaiah specifies to give even from your own bread. The Millennium share is based on this sacred duty.

The aim is to receive from all citizens an individual extra amount of at least one thousandth of one's annual income. I firmly believe that in this juncture of history this voluntary taxation is called for.

The human family has in an unprecedented act of solidarity undertaken the commitment to realize the Millennium Development Goals to reduce degrading poverty and safeguard dignified living conditions in harmony with nature by the year 2015 and provide every child with a basic school education.

Although progress has been made it seems painfully clear that the promise will not be fulfilled. Whatever the reasons, political and economic, this dismal failure would constitute moral bankruptcy.

I would of course not suggest that the amount collected through the Millennium Share would fully bridge the financial gap but this universal levy constitute a formidable appeal to the government to redouble their efforts.

The expression of civil courage and self sacrifice will help the political representatives to dare take measures which on the short term seem to contravene national self interest but on the long run are necessary to safeguard the dignity of the individual and safeguard the community of life on Earth.

It would strengthen our sense of unity in diversity and demonstrate that we truly are one human family, and indeed one Earth community with a common destiny and thus contravene forlornness and engender hope.

And it is here that people touched by a spiritual impulse can and must take the lead. We can reach the hearts and minds of the members of our vital faith communities. Together we can refine our ways of collecting funds which have been developed in a long tradition.

All that has been collected in the individual faith communities can then be gathered in a national Millennium fund. And these national resources can then be put to universal use.

This exemplary activity on the local level would inspire an ever growing number of people inside and outside religious communities to follow suit. Eventually this extraordinary willingness to donate to universal goals will persuade governments to take extraordinary measures like allowing these voluntary annual contributions to be part of the national tax collection system, when every individual citizen could indicate on his tax collection form whether she is willing to donate this extra 0.1 % of income. It all must start however on the local faith level.

It is essential that it will be clear how the Millennium share will be distributed. An agreement thereof has to be made with the United Nations, governments and through them with the relevant NGO agencies.
When there is a will there is a way. I suggest that a Council of Conscience is formed to oversee the process of installing and distributing the Fund.

**The Council of Conscience:**

A decent society is one where in no one is degraded. Mutual trust is indispensible for building and maintaining such societies. The Council of Conscience embodies this trust. In contrast to the Security Council whose members are the mightiest nations the members of the Council of Conscience should be individuals whose qualification is that they have earned trust in their various communities.

The Council of Conscience’s main purpose would be to provide moral guidance on the urgent global challenges humanity is facing. In recent years thanks to the advance of interactive communication individuals and organizations all over the world have taken part in consultations that have produced significant statements on ethical behavior like the Earth Charter and The Charter for Compassion.

In every instance a group of individuals was invited to oversee the process and take responsibility for the final text. Within a remarkable short time these people’s documents received wide endorsement.

In the case of the Charter for Compassion, the impassioned initiative by Prof. Karen Armstrong, the editorial group is in fact named “Council of Conscience”. Members of the envisioned Council of Conscience with a wider scope would be drawn through a democratic online consultation process.

I its composition it would bring together different generations. Thus the living dialogue and cooperation between the generations which is the key to open the door to a just and peaceful future will be exemplified in the working of the council.

They would serve on a rotation basis. Their aim would be to serve as an independent body of trustworthy individuals whose aim is to advance the solution of conflicts which deprive people or even nations of having a dignified life.

Their only mandate would be to weigh the evidence and to share their findings with those involved. When such a council would have been in place at the time when all the governments of the world had committed themselves to implementing the Millennium Goals by the year 2015 they would have overseen the performance from year to year and made recommendations.

In this juncture one of their first responsibilities would be to take custody of the Millennium Share Fund and oversee its effective and just distribution. It would constitute as a Jury of Juries without the power to sentence but extending moral judgment.

And thus it would foster synergy and unimpeded cooperation, helping ones locked in the conflict to overcome mistrust, and inspiring others to become leaders in their respective communities.

*If you would like to share your comments, ideas and suggestions on the Millennium Share and the Council of Conscience, please write to Soetendorp Institute manager Michael Slaby at mslaby@soetendorp.org*