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Justice and demonstration of Christian principles: why churchgoers support Fair Trade.

Abstract

From the outset, church support for Fair Trade has been encouraged by what Cloke et al. have termed the Fair Trade ‘evangelists.’¹ These church-based Fair Trade activists have promoted the concept to their congregations, and to the wider community, in a vocal and determined manner. This article examines the motivation of Fair Trade ‘evangelists’ and how they articulate the connection between Fair Trade and their Christian faith. In the face of criticism and indifference, why do these individuals persist? Drawing on my research interviews with nineteen church-based Fair Trade activists, I identify two clear findings. Firstly, that the activists view support for Fair Trade as an integral part of the work for justice, and secondly, that the action that they carry out for Fair Trade provides an opportunity to demonstrate the outworking of core Christian principles. The activists position support for Fair Trade as central to their faith and view it as contributing to the fulfilment of the core mission of the church.

Keywords

Fair Trade, justice, love of neighbour, Christian ethics

Introduction

¹ Paul Cloke, Clive Barnett, Nick Clarke and Alice Malpass, ‘Faith in Ethical Consumption’ in L. Thomas (ed.), *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability: Paradise Lost* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 93-114, on 100.

Fair Trade is an ethical consumption scheme which is supported by a considerable body of grassroots activists. The concept has its roots in the churches and churchgoers continue to constitute the majority of the Fair Trade activist body. Indeed, its church-based support can be credited with shifting the Fair Trade concept from out of an 'ethical niche' and into the mainstream of public consciousness. It represents, to some extent, a success story for the church in seeking to have impact within wider secular society. Key to the expansion of Fair Trade are what Cloke et al. have termed the Fair Trade 'evangelists', church-based activists who they describe as 'energetic and persuasive individuals who present potentially governing repertoires of Fair Trade practices.'² In this article I will examine the motivation of these Fair Trade 'evangelists'; why do they support Fair Trade and view it as an activity fitting to be carried out as part of the life of the church? I will discuss my two major findings: that the activists understand Fair Trade as an action for justice and as a form of demonstration of Christian principles of justice and the love of neighbour. These churchgoers argue that support for Fair Trade should not be side-lined by the church; rather than view Fair Trade as a voluntary act of charity, they see it as a Christian obligation and an important and integral part of what it is to be church.

Context

The practice of Fair Trade is enabled and guided by the Fair Trade movement, a coming together of diverse partners including: producers, businesses, dedicated Fair Trade organizations, non-governmental organizations and grassroots activists. At a fundamental level, the aim of Fair Trade is to empower producers to work their way out of poverty by gaining access to markets and trading on terms that are fair and not exploitative.³ This is realized by means of Fair Trade practices which include: payment of a fair and stable

² Ibid.

³ Alex Nicholls and Charlotte Opal, *Fair Trade: Market-driven Ethical Consumption* (London: Sage, 2005), 6.

minimum price, payment of a social premium to communities, long-term trading relationships, sustainable production and worker empowerment, often in the form of cooperatives and workers' collective decision-making processes.⁴ Many Fair Trade organizations were formed by churchgoers and church influence continues through the ongoing work of Christian Fair Trade organizations and churchgoing activists.⁵ Support for Fair Trade amongst churches in the UK is widespread; Fair Trade goods are sold and the concept is promoted through events. Some churches embed Fair Trade in the day to day life of the church, with support for Fair Trade mentioned in prayers and sermons. This church-based advocacy is not without opposition; there are many churchgoers and members of the clergy who do not regard support for Fair Trade as a sufficient priority. In this view, churches should not set aside what is perceived as their key business in order to spare the time and energy to support Fair Trade. Anderson points out the considerable effort expended by Fair Trade activists to encourage their fellow churchgoers and church hierarchies to support Fair Trade; he comments that 'although it may be tempting to argue that churches were "natural allies" of the Fair Trade movement, this would underestimate the amount of work involved in encouraging some churches to support Fair Trade.'⁶ I shall draw on analysis of research interviews that I have conducted to explain why, in the face of such opposition or indifference, church-based Fair Trade activists persist.

Research methodology

My research took the form of a case study based on interviews with nineteen church-based Fair Trade activists in two locations in the North of England. The interviews probed the ways

⁴ Ibid., 6-7.

⁵ Mark Dawson, 'Church Action for Fair Trade as Public Theology: Learning from the Experience of the Mainstreaming of Fair Trade in the United Kingdom', *The International Journal of Public Theology* 13:1 (2019): 55-71, on 56-8.

⁶ Matthew Anderson, *A History of Fair Trade in Contemporary Britain: from Civil Society Campaigns to Corporate Compliance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 140-1.

in which the churchgoers understood the action that they carried out in support of Fair Trade and investigated the relationship between the action and their faith. The interviews were semi-structured, enabling me to retain a clear research focus whilst remaining open to the interviewees' agenda. From an early stage, churchgoing Fair Trade activists assisted in shaping the outline of the research. Before the interviews were conducted, a series of four workshops were held at different churches which carry out action on Fair Trade. I outlined the proposals for my research and received feedback which helped formulate the interview questions. These were further clarified following analysis of the first six interviews. It was from this initial data that the emphasis the churchgoers place on justice in their support of Fair Trade emerged. I developed more detailed questioning for the next series of interviews, to enable an unpacking of what the churchgoers understand by the term 'justice' and to learn where they draw their inspiration from. Throughout the research process I was conscious of the need for reflexivity on my part. I took inspiration from the social researcher Mats Alvesson, who offers a definition of reflexivity as 'conscious and systematic efforts to view the subject matter from different angles.'⁷ Following Astley's description of 'ordinary theology',⁸ I sought to bring the testimonies of the churchgoers into conversation with the texts and traditions of the church, including thinking on Fair Trade by contemporary theologians. The analysis of my research data was also carried out in conversation with social scientific literature. Introducing a multiplicity of vocabularies into the research process offered scope for challenging the preconceptions of any of the parties including, or perhaps especially, my own. The research was carried out as part of my doctoral thesis in accordance with the University of Leeds 'research ethics policy' and its protocols on 'data protection,

⁷ Mats Alvesson, *Postmodernism and Social Research* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), 171.

⁸ See Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2002).

anonymization and the sharing of research data’ and the protocol on ‘informed consent.’⁹

Before the research began, an outline of the project passed through a process of ethical review conducted by the University of Leeds. By means of an information sheet and the signing of a consent form, the participants understood that, although they would not be named in any of the research outputs, it may be possible for people with specific knowledge of their position to ‘work out’ who they are from the information given in reports and publications resulting from the research. The names of the interviewees given in this article are pseudonyms.

Motivation for action on Fair Trade

At a fundamental level, the interviews indicate that the churchgoers’ support for Fair Trade is motivated by their faith and the participants are able to articulate this connection with reference to biblical narratives and Christian principles. Indeed, there is an intimate link between their actions and beliefs. All of the participants refer to the Bible as a source of motivation and guidance in the work that they carry out. They view the concept of Fair Trade as clearly supported by biblical evidence, with social justice being perceived as central to the teachings of Christ. The reaction to those Christians who do not place action for social justice as central to their faith is incredulity. For example, one of the participants, Margaret argues:

I can’t see how you can be a Christian and not support Fair Trade. I find it really difficult when I come across Christians who don’t support it, because I think hang on a minute here, what is your faith all about?

For these churchgoers, support for Fair Trade is not an activity solely to be carried out on the periphery of church life, rather support for Fair Trade is, or should be, more central to church

⁹ University of Leeds, *Research Ethics Policy* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 2013); *Data Protection, Anonymization and Sharing Research Data Protocol* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 2013); *Informed Consent Protocol* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 2011).

concerns. I investigated the ways in which the churchgoers connect the work they carry out on Fair Trade with their deeply-held beliefs. The most prevalent connection was in viewing Fair Trade as informed and guided by the principle of justice.

Fair Trade as action for justice

For the great majority of the participants in my study, Fair Trade is described as an action for justice.¹⁰ The participants explain their understanding of justice with reference to biblical texts. In her interview, Julie says of Fair Trade:

To me it is a question of justice and you have got that throughout the Scriptures; that we live in a world that is not fair and, to me, it is so unfair that, if you are born in one part of the world, you going to be poor and, if you are born in the West, you are going to be so much more advantaged.

Julie's reference to poverty is typical of the participants' responses in linking justice with God's concern for the poor and there is much support for this way of thinking from scholarly theology. Gorringer, discussing the concept of justice derived from the Hebrew Scriptures, argues that 'Justice consists, in the first instance, in loyalty to the covenant which binds two parties. When one of the two parties is Yahweh, the God who frees slaves, then justice is seen to involve standing up for the poor.'¹¹ The participants' support for Fair Trade is motivated by the opportunity that it offers in 'standing up for the poor' and in bringing them justice. Christian ethicist, Michael Northcott identifies the centrality of justice to the concept of Fair Trade, arguing that, rather than Fair Trade being the product of a rational universal response

¹⁰ Seventeen of the nineteen churchgoers interviewed.

¹¹ Timothy Gorringer, *Fair Shares: Ethics and the Global Economy* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 16.

to the problems of the global trading system, it is a practice that emerged from the churches and is informed by a Christian understanding of justice and fairness.¹²

In explanation of their understanding of the concept of justice, the participants' most frequently cited sources of inspiration are from the Hebrew Scriptures. These include references to the right payment and treatment of workers contained within the books of the Law. Westlake and Stansfield, who identify a Christian response to worker exploitation in the textiles industry, draw on this legislation.¹³ They describe a social system which is guided by justice and urges employers to treat their workers fairly. The books of the Prophets are also cited as sources of guidance for the participants in the biblical call for justice. In his interview, Keith states that he draws inspiration from the books of Amos and Hosea. Through these prophetic texts, Keith is motivated to carry out action for justice and they offer him an indication as to what the outcome of faith should be. Of course, a clear theme that runs through the works of the Prophets is not only the upholding of the righteous justice of God but also the denunciation of injustice. By virtue of its existence, Fair Trade highlights that there is injustice present in the global trading system. In its role to draw attention to injustice and exploitation, the Fair Trade movement possesses an element of the prophetic. In her interview, Julie discusses the need for Christians to address injustice, she comments that:

There's a lot in Scripture which talks about injustice, in particular the eighth century Prophets asking people to have a concern for the poor, and not to cheat, and to give fair measure.

¹² Michael Northcott, 'The World Trade Organization, Fair Trade and the Body Politics of St Paul', in J. Atherton and H. Skinner (eds.), *Through the eye of a needle: theological conversations over political economy* (Werrington: Epworth, 2007), 169-88, on 185.

¹³ David Westlake and Esther Stansfield, *Lift the Label: The Hidden Cost of our Lifestyle* (Milton Keynes and Waynesboro GA.: Spring Harvest and Authentic Media, 2004) 40-41. Examples include: Deuteronomy 24:14-15, Leviticus 29:13 and Leviticus 25:17.

Drawing on the book of Amos, Westlake and Stansfield identify the need for a prophetic voice in world trade.¹⁴ They call on Christians to challenge the status quo by speaking out about the exploitation of the poor. For the majority of the participants, the justice of God is counter-posed against the market values of the global trading system. Chloe in explanation of her views on the Kingdom of God states that:

God cares about justice and it's not going to carry on in this shocking travesty of justice forever.

The denunciatory role of Fair Trade is underlined by some of the theological commentary on the concept. The use of Fair Trade as a means to highlight the injustice inherent in the global trading system is identified by Northcott, who contrasts the ethic of the law of love, which guides the Christian Fair Trade organisation Traidcraft, with the exploitative practices of transnational corporations.¹⁵ He cites 1 Corinthians 12-14 and argues that the law of love, governing Christian concern for the poor, provides the crucial difference between a sacred politics and the politics of empire. The positive values that some of the theological commentators identify as embodied in the practice of Fair Trade can be contrasted with the values of the mainstream economy. Song describes church action for Fair Trade as an expression of Eucharistic community and contrasts its values with those of the market.¹⁶ Whereas Fair Trade values the relationship between producer and consumer, in the global economy, Song argues, the human relationship is lost and the producer objectified. For the churchgoers in my study, Fair Trade is action for justice and prophetic denunciation of

¹⁴ Westlake and Stansfield, *Lift the Label*, 83-8.

¹⁵ Northcott, 'The World Trade Organization', 183-4.

¹⁶ Robert Song, 'Sharing Communion: Hunger, Food, and Genetically Modified Foods', in S. Hauerwas and S. Wells (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Malden MA. And Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 388-400, on 395.

injustice; it is in the business of the righting of wrongs. What it certainly is not, is an act of pity or ‘charity.’

Fair Trade is not charity

A major implication of this focus on Fair Trade as justice is that it is not viewed as a voluntary act of kindness or form of charitable giving. For the majority of the churchgoers I interviewed, to understand Fair Trade as such is insulting to the producers. The participants perceive the producers as being disadvantaged by the global economy to such an extent that Fair Trade represents an attempt to level the playing field. In this understanding Fair Trade is not about giving to the poor out of generosity, it is about allowing the poor to have that to which they are entitled. In his interview, Keith is critical of the perception of Fair Trade as charity.

Jesus said that the labourer is worthy of his hire, that the workman deserves his pay.

Everyone is entitled to their dignity of earning their own way and not being the victims of charity.

Keith views the role of Fair Trade as strengthening, rather than undermining the agency of the producer in poor communities. It is about worker empowerment rather than dependency on charitable giving. The view of Fair Trade as charity is also criticized by Bruce Crowther, the founding father of the Fair Trade Towns movement. Crowther states of Fair Trade ‘people see it as charity, but it is not, it is justice. We have to get rid of the charity way of thinking.’¹⁷ Keith also points out another implication of Fair Trade as action for justice rather than charity: it is not a voluntary act, there is a duty incumbent on all Christians to support justice in the trade system.

¹⁷ Bruce Crowther quoted in Nicholls and Opal, *Fair Trade*, 4.

If the Kingdom of God is righteousness and justice and peace, then doing that which is fair (...) has got to be part of it. If I am prepared to let someone work and not get a decent living when I could do something about it, to me that is actually working against the ethics of the Kingdom of God.

This is a key theme within the research interviews: Fair Trade is about fulfilling Christian duty rather than giving that bit extra to charity if time allows. For these churchgoers, although Fair Trade is operating within the market mechanism, it is not about choice. There is a moral obligation to support Fair Trade, in order to highlight and attempt to correct injustice. There is some support for this position from scholarly theology. Roger Ruston chooses Fair Trade as a case study in his discussion of the thinking of Aquinas on human rights.¹⁸ Ruston concludes that, in Aquinas' view actions towards justice can be understood as manifestation of the image of God. Such actions have the status of obligation for the believer. Regarding Fair Trade, Ruston goes on to state that viewed in this light, support for Fair Trade is not optional but an obligation. The churchgoers' understanding of Fair Trade as a Christian obligation shapes their practice in promoting Fair Trade and it drives them in their determination to convince the fellow members of their congregations to support it.

Fair Trade as part of wider action for justice

The churchgoers' understanding of Fair Trade as an action for justice leads them to view their support for Fair Trade as fitting within a much wider outlook. They are reluctant to draw strict boundaries around the concept, rather it is perceived as one form of action, complementary to others. Fair Trade is not delineated from campaigning for trade justice or other international development, economic justice, environmental or social issues. This

¹⁸ Roger Ruston, *Human Rights and the Image of God* (London: SCM, 2004), 40-58.

statement by Cheryl is typical of the way in which Fair Trade is mentioned alongside other justice issues:

Whether it is Fair Trade, whether it is development of any sort, whether it's human rights. I think all of these are part of my Christian principles.

This understanding of Fair Trade as an integral part of wider work for justice shapes the nature of church support for Fair Trade. The purchase of Fair Trade products is viewed as a starting point for involvement with trade justice issues. For these churchgoers, the encouragement of ethical consumption must be supported by campaigning and lobbying for more systemic change, which may take the form of highlighting exploitative practices carried out by large corporations. The solution will go further and involve, not only the mobilizing of consumer pressure, but also government intervention and international regulation to tackle injustice. Most of the churches in my study carry out educative, campaigning and lobbying actions in support of Christian Aid. The interviewees view this work as complementary to the work that they carry out in support of Fair Trade. Indeed, the Fair Trade 'evangelists' are not only evangelical about Fair Trade, they tend to be involved in other work for social justice.

Duncan, a retired minister, points out that:

The people who are mostly at the forefront of Fair Trade issues are the same people as those who are involved in Christian Aid and in the ecumenical movement, Churches Together. In other words, those people who have not just a social conscience, but a desire to be involved in the community and in the big issues in the world. I have found that in all the churches where I have been a minister.

Many of the interviewees mention their support of the campaigning activities of non-governmental organizations including Oxfam, Global Justice Now and environmental groups, such as Friends of the Earth. Support for Fair Trade is not only referred to alongside the work

on international development but also anti-poverty action in the UK. Several of the churches in the case study market town¹⁹ are involved in the provision of the local food bank (which is administered by the Baptist church in the town) and a number of the participants in my study refer to this work, making explicit the connection between this and support for Fair Trade. In her interview, Cheryl argues that as Fair Trade is an action for justice, it is difficult to separate from other actions with the same end in sight.

Where does Fair Trade start or Christian Aid stop? I don't know. But we will have Christian Aid partners who will come and talk about their work, so there is quite a lot of overlap. It is hard to know where the church starts and stops and Fair Trade, Traidcraft, Christian Aid all merge into one.

Fair Trade as demonstration

The second major theme emerging from my analysis of the interview testimonies is the emphasis that the churchgoers place on Fair Trade as an opportunity to demonstrate Christian principles, such as the justice of God for the poor and the love of neighbour. For these churchgoers, Fair Trade is an enactment of the principles which are at the heart of their faith. Chloe defines Fair Trade in a remarkable way.

It is living out a thoroughly biblical approach to dealing with people.

For Chloe biblical teaching is not merely an ideal to be subscribed to, or a set of doctrines to be learnt, it has to be lived out. Indeed, a key theme from the activists' testimonies is that what is important about biblical teaching is that the instruction is acted upon. Astley and Christie point out that 'what matters most for most people in theology is not "right doctrine" but "right (religious, spiritual and moral) practice": in particular, letting the story of Jesus

¹⁹ The research participants are drawn from two localities in the North of England. Thirteen of the nineteen participants worship in the case study market town or surrounding villages.

have its way with them.’²⁰ This concern for right practice over right doctrine is evident in the research interview responses. Belief is only made meaningful when it is incarnated in action. The following statement from Keith is typical of the direct manner in which this attitude is expressed:

The Church has a far greater impact when it’s seen to be doing something, and standing up for something, than simply promoting its beliefs; because if beliefs are not backed by action, there seems little point believing them.

For these churchgoers, faith and action are intimately related. Their beliefs are expressed through practical action and this can be understood as a form of praxis. Graham et al. describe a ‘theology-in-action’ as praxis, whereby theology serves as ‘performative knowledge’; there is no hard boundary between knowledge and action.²¹ Support for Fair Trade is one means by which the churchgoers can express their faith by practical means, as Heather explains in her interview:

It [Fair Trade] is so closely linked with justice and peace and also trying to live out our faith, trying to do things, not just sort of having the faith, but acting on it.

Heather’s reference to Fair Trade as a means to ‘live out’ faith underlines that, for these churchgoers, faith is less about knowledge of doctrine and more something to be appropriated and which finds its expression in the day to day life of the believer. Cloke and Beaumont identify a practical turn as the church reshapes its role in postsecular society.²² Christian participation in social projects, such as the promotion of Fair Trade, is a means by which the church can reconnect with the wider community, as these are often carried out in partnership

²⁰ Jeff Astley and Ann Christie, *Taking Ordinary Theology Seriously* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2007), 26.

²¹ Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM, 2005), 170.

²² Paul Cloke and Justin Beaumont, ‘Geographies of Postsecular Rapprochement in the City’, *Progress in Human Geography* 37.1 (2012): 27-51.

with individuals and organizations from outside of the church. Participation and leadership of such social projects can be viewed as a means by which to express one's faith in the public realm. Graham argues that public theology has the potential to take the form of an apologetics in postsecular society, with Christian involvement in social action an opportunity to present and support the truth claims of the Christian faith.²³ The practical turn for the church places its emphasis on 'doing', foregrounding the demonstration of faith, whilst verbal assertion is complementary, but has more of a background role to play. This emphasis on demonstration is fitting for a plural and multi-faith postsecular setting, and may prove a more effective means of communication than straightforward proselytising. Graham argues that 'new understandings of apologetics are displacing a modernist cognitive model which emphasises the priority of assent to propositional truth, and positing the object of apologetics as an invitation to participate in a way of life.'²⁴ For the interviewees, the Christian faith is viewed very much in terms of a way of life and Fair Trade is one way in which it can be realized and demonstrated to others. My finding that the participants view Fair Trade as a form of demonstration tallies with the research of Cloke et al., who stress the action-orientated outlook of church-based Fair Trade supporters.²⁵ Naomi explains that she views Fair Trade in terms of demonstrating the teachings of Jesus.

It [support for Fair Trade] is carrying out what Jesus would have done. It is very difficult to think of it in those terms with Jesus having lived two thousand years ago. What really matters is still the same: that every person is given respect, and is shown care, and our transactions with others should be respectful, and honourable, and

²³ Elaine Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-secular Age* (London: SCM, 2013), 251-89.

²⁴ Graham, *Between a Rock*, 294.

²⁵ Cloke, et al., 'Faith in Ethical Consumption', 100.

should be showing love. That was just as important in a market in Palestine two thousand years ago as it is when you go to Sainsbury's today.

Naomi argues that daily transactions should be guided by love and, for the participants, this is a key Christian principle that can be demonstrated by support for Fair Trade.

Fair Trade as the love of neighbour

Following justice and the prophetic denunciation of injustice, the love of neighbour is the next most commonly referred to biblical principle in the research interviews.²⁶ Fair Trade is seen as a means by which to love our neighbour in the global economy and it serves as a demonstration of the principle in action. In response to the question 'what is it about Fair Trade that makes it a suitable cause for Christians to support?', Heather offers a reply with reference to concern for our neighbours.

I think we are encouraged to think about our neighbours and how they are living, and whether we are helping them, and trying to support people wherever they are, and whatever their circumstances, and not just closing our eyes and carrying on in our own little world.

The participants conceive of the concept of neighbour in a broad manner. In answer to the same question, Brandon comments:

Well I come back to 'love thy neighbour' and 'thy neighbour' is anyone in the human race and therefore we should be looking out for those people less fortunate than ourselves. The developing world has got major problems of poverty, corruption, sanitation, huge issues that need to be tackled.

²⁶ Referred to by ten of the nineteen interviewees.

This broad definition of neighbour as ‘anyone in the human race’ is, to some extent, echoed in the theological reflections on Fair Trade which point to the interconnected nature of the global economy. Discussing the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Westlake and Stansfield argue that the workers who produce the goods that we consume are effectively neighbours.²⁷ Although the parable refers to the physical proximity of the victim and the Samaritan on the road to Jericho, the producers who supply us with goods become our neighbours through the economic transaction. Northcott reflects on the interconnected nature of the global economy.²⁸ Those who live on the other side of the globe may become our neighbour by virtue of the journeys created by the demands of global trade. This can take the form of goods in the supply chain; however, Northcott extends this logic to flows of capital and even industrial pollutants. He identifies Fair Trade as one means by which to love the neighbour in the interconnected global economy; it is ‘a work of love’ which transforms the exploitative relations of the mainstream economy. These relations are transformed ‘into relationships where humanity and the earth are loved as neighbourhood.’²⁹ For the participants, reference to the love of neighbour in support of Fair Trade is closely related to their understanding of Fair Trade as justice. Showing love to the producer is to act for justice, to counter the disadvantages that poor producers face in the global market. The participants’ inclination towards praxis leads them to view the command to ‘love thy neighbour’ not as a call to preach or vocalise support, but as an imperative to act it out. Fair Trade is, in this understanding, a means by which to love thy neighbour and to demonstrate to a wide public what this love looks like in the context of the global economy.

²⁷ Westlake and Stansfield, *Lift the Label*, 8-18.

²⁸ Michael S. Northcott, ‘The concealments of carbon markets and the publicity of love in a time of climate change’, in S. Kim and J. Draper (eds.), *Christianity and the renewal of nature: creation, climate and human responsibility* (London: SPCK, 2011), 70-84.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

Fair Trade and the church

The positioning of Fair Trade as action for justice and as demonstration of Christian principles, such as the love of neighbour, renders support for Fair Trade as central to faith. It also has something to say about what it is to be church. For these churchgoers, action for Fair Trade and other forms of social justice is important as it provides an opportunity for the church to fulfil its mission. The participants are aware that many members of their own congregations, clergy or church leadership do not make these connections. Indeed, in their interviews, all of the participants mention that the work to persuade their own congregations was one of the most difficult and onerous parts of their work on Fair Trade. Action which is perceived as being on the margins of faith, tangential to its core principles, will not persuade congregations. An ‘add-on’ extra, however charitable and well-meaning, will swiftly be deprioritised when set against the pressing needs of church finances, pastoral support or the planning of church services. For action for social justice to be viewed as an integral part of what it is to be church, it must be embedded in the life of the church. It must not be perceived as ‘bolted on’ but there in worship, prayer and sermons, accepted as part of what the church does. As the participants are keen to point out, it also requires the support of the clergy and church leadership. Above all, it requires that the connections made between the action carried out and core principles of the Christian faith are articulated back into congregations. Despite the practical turn that Cloke and Beaumont identify,³⁰ there is still a considerable job to be done to persuade congregations that carrying out action for social justice, such as support for Fair Trade, is intimately related to the major tenets of the Christian faith.

³⁰ Cloke and Beaumont, ‘Geographies of Postsecular Rapprochement.’

Conclusion

Drawing on my research interviews with churchgoing Fair Trade activists, this article has examined the motivation of these Fair Trade ‘evangelists.’ Grassroots support for Fair Trade has persisted amongst congregations, in the face of some opposition. The churchgoers interviewed make a strong connection between their Christian faith and support for Fair Trade. Indeed, their support for Fair Trade and other social justice issues is placed centrally to their faith. There is an emphasis on action, for these churchgoers, faith is made meaningful by doing, practice is foregrounded and doctrine is in the background. Two clear findings emerge. Firstly, the participants view Fair Trade as an action for justice. It is about the righting of wrongs and not a form of charitable giving. Rather than be seen as a voluntary act of kindness, for these churchgoers, support for Fair Trade is a Christian obligation. As part of the work for justice there is no firm boundary around the practice, it complements and is supported by other action for justice. Secondly, support for Fair Trade provides a means by which the church can demonstrate basic Christian principles, of justice and the love of neighbour. With their action orientation and emphasis on praxis, these Fair Trade ‘evangelists’ argue that where there is injustice the church should denounce and then offer a response based on justice and love. Far from being on the periphery of the church’s concerns, they view this response as central to its mission.