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Church action for Fair Trade as Public Theology: Learning from the experience of the mainstreaming of Fair Trade in the UK.

Abstract

Church action for Fair Trade in the UK serves as an example of an activity, inspired and guided by theology, which has grown to involve the active participation of large numbers of churchgoers. Public recognition of Fair Trade is high, embracing a wide, secular society. However, the expansion of Fair Trade has come at a price, with the increasing involvement of large commercial organisations threatening diminution of the original theological insight. In learning from the experience of the mainstreaming of Fair Trade in the UK, I suggest that the theological reflection that gave rise to the Fair Trade movement was the beginning of a Public Theology that needs to be acknowledged and now taken further, to respond to the changing context. A Public Theology involving congregations should be nurtured, so that the public theological insight can be disseminated and its guidance put into practice.

Key words

Public Theology, Fair Trade, justice.

Introduction

Fair Trade is an ethical business practice which, from modest origins, has enjoyed a rapid expansion in recent decades and is now, in many parts of the western world, an established part of the consumer economy. Its aim, rooted in a Christian understanding of justice, is to urge respect and fair treatment for producers from poorer communities. In the past two decades the nature of the Fair Trade movement has changed; it has become mainstreamed with the increasing involvement of large supermarket chains and transnational corporations. This has created some dilemmas for church action for Fair Trade, as churchgoing activists perceive a drift away from the original theological insight which inspired the Fair Trade movement. In this article, I will firstly argue for why Fair Trade should be treated theologically and then, drawing on a series of research interviews that I conducted with churchgoing Fair Trade activists, I will discuss the connections that can be made between theology and Fair Trade. I suggest that the theological insight which inspired, and to some extent continues to guide, the Fair Trade movement can be understood as a form of Public Theology. In learning from the experience of the mainstreaming of

Fair Trade in the UK, I identify a role for Public Theology in guiding the Fair Trade movement, assisting it to think through its response to a changing context. For this Public Theology to be disseminated, and its guidance put into practice, the active involvement of congregations is necessary. A second area of learning from the experience of mainstreaming is that a Public Theology involving congregations needs to be nurtured. The Church must take greater ownership of this prominent example of Christians demonstrating their understanding of Public Theology in action.

Fair Trade and Theology

The Fair Trade movement has drawn considerable attention from the academy, especially from business schools, economists and social scientists. However, it has received relatively little attention from theologians. One could ask why should, what many consider to be an economic, political or even a consumer choice issue, be treated theologically? In answer, I will firstly look to history: the Fair Trade movement was founded by the churches with explicit reference to theological motivation. It is a form of business practice underpinned by a Christian understanding of justice, urging respect and fair treatment for producers in the developing world. Secondly, the churches and churchgoers continue to exert considerable influence upon the movement, not least through organisations established in the pioneering days, which are still looked upon as beacons of Fair Trade standards. Thirdly, theology continues to sustain and to guide Fair Trade, playing a role in organisational decision making and in the theologising of those churchgoers who carry out activism in the promotion of Fair Trade.

The first example of what we would now recognise as a Fair Trade Organisation (FTO.) is the American ethical retailer, Ten Thousand Villages, which was established by the Mennonite Church in 1946; Mennonite volunteers taught sewing to members of poor communities in Puerto Rico and bought the embroidery that they produced for sale in the United States.¹ The organisation now operates on a considerable scale with crafts being imported from poor communities across the globe and sold in a chain of over one hundred and eighty shops. The business model and marketing of Ten Thousand Villages is directed with reference to Christian ethics. In the UK, one of the first FTOs was set up by the Evangelical Alliance in 1974 and was, to some extent, based on the model created by Ten Thousand Villages; buying crafts from groups of producers in poor communities and paying a fair price in return. Tearcraft established long term trading relationships and exercised concern for the development of the communities with which they traded.² Hughes and Bennett

¹ Alex Nicholls and Charlotte Opal, *Fair Trade: Market-driven Ethical Consumption* (London; SAGE

Publications, 2005), pp.65-6.

² Dewi Hughes and Matthew Bennett, *God of the Poor: A Biblical Vision of God's Present Rule* (Carlisle: OM Publishing, 1998), pp.171-2.

describe the motivation of Tearcraft as seeking 'to live out the biblical emphasis on giving the poor the opportunity to work themselves out of poverty. It also expresses the biblical concern that all are treated justly'.³ Tearcraft insisted that the producer groups that it worked with were supported by evangelical churches, an element of the model which proved contentious and led to the growth of fellow organisation, Traidcraft, which was set up by a group of Christians from St John's College at the University of Durham.⁴ The Foundation principles of Traidcraft state that 'Traidcraft is a Christian response to poverty'⁵ and they go on to affirm the characteristics of such a response.⁶ The establishment of both Tearcraft and Traidcraft was inspired and informed by theology. They represent different approaches to theology but both organisations acted in support of a common Christian ethic. The most widely recognised facet of Fair Trade is the Fairtrade mark, a form of certification, and this too is of Christian origin. The first ever Fair Trade certification was awarded by the Dutch company, Max Havelaar which certified coffee produced to a set of ethical standards, guaranteeing a fair price paid to the producer.⁷ The emphasis on empowerment for poor coffee producers drew from the experience of the base communities in coffee growing regions of Mexico and were motivated by Liberation Theology.

The influence of the churches is not limited to the foundational history of the Fair Trade movement. FTOs, such as Traidcraft, continue to be highly influential within Fair Trade, helping to determine and improve working conditions and living standards for producer communities.⁸ Traidcraft has never operated a chain of shops; its major source of revenue was initially on sales in churches through its network of churchgoing Fair Traders.⁹ To this day, the Fair Trader network is made up largely of churchgoers. Church-based Fair Trade activists not only encourage promotion of the concept of Fair Trade through the life of the churches they attend, many of them also go on to reach out to the

³ Ibid., p.171.

⁴ 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), pp.169-88 at p.183.

⁵ Peter Johnson and Chris Sugden, eds, *Markets, Fair Trade and the Kingdom of God* (Oxford: Regnum, 2001), p.152.

⁶ Ibid., pp.152-5.

⁷ Laure Waridel, *Coffee with Pleasure: Just Java and World Trade* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2002), pp.95-7 and Michael Northcott 'Fair Trade and Human Wellbeing', in J. Atherton, E. Graham and I. Steadman, eds, *The Practices of Happiness: Political Economy, Religion and Wellbeing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp.98-110 at p.106.

⁸ For an outline of the religious origins of many FTOs, including Fair Trade Organisatie in the Netherlands and GEPA in Germany, see Matthew Anderson, *A History of Fair Trade in Contemporary Britain: From Civil Society Campaigns to Corporate Compliance* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.44.

⁹ Campbell Grant, 'Traidcraft and its Fair Traders' in P. Johnson and C. Sugden, eds, *Markets, Fair Trade and the Kingdom of God* (Oxford: Regnum, 2001), pp.106-16.

wider community, joining forces with like-minded allies.¹⁰ Church-based Fair Trade action is outward looking; its influence stretching well beyond the church walls.

Theology has a crucial role to play in sustaining and guiding the Fair Trade movement. For the twenty first anniversary of the establishment of Traidcraft, members of the Board, and Directors of the organisation, wrote a series of essays entitled 'Markets, Fair Trade and the Kingdom of God', in which they discuss the theology on which Traidcraft was founded and its influence upon current decision making.¹¹ Theology also has an influence over Fair Trade through the participation of large numbers of churchgoers in the Fair Trade movement's activist body. This is a phenomenon little studied by academia, so I have conducted a series of interviews with nineteen churchgoing Fair Trade activists, to investigate how they link their support for Fair Trade with their Christian faith.¹² These activists have not chosen to support Fair Trade purely because they see it as a good cause, rather, they identify a close connection between the concept of fair trading and a biblical understanding of justice. A major implication of this view of Fair Trade as an act of justice, is that it is seen as a means to right wrongs, as opposed to 'charity' or voluntary act of kindness. The relationship between support for Fair Trade and the deeply held faith of the activists is so close that they view Fair Trade as a form of demonstration; a public enactment of core Christian values, such as: the love of neighbour, the integrity of humankind made in the image of God or the right stewardship of creation. To offer a flavour of the theological connections made by the churchgoers, I will briefly discuss two areas raised in the interviews: the right stewardship of creation and the connection between Fair Trade and the Kingdom of God.

The scientific evidence regarding human created climate change, has rendered sections of the Christian community more open to talking about social justice in relation to the stewardship of creation. In the research interviews, eight of the nineteen churchgoers link the practice of Fair Trade directly with care for the environment in a time of environmental crisis. They go on to explain this in theological terms. For example, Brandon¹³ links his support for Fair Trade with sustainability and the right stewardship of creation. He states:

¹⁰ Anderson, *A History of Fair Trade in Contemporary Britain*, p.62.

¹¹ Johnson and Sugden, *Markets, Fair Trade and the Kingdom of God*.

¹² These twenty in depth qualitative interviews were conducted in two locations in the North of England. All of the churchgoers interviewed explained their support for Fair Trade with reference to biblical themes and all viewed this support as part of the Church's work for justice.

¹³ The names of the interviewees have been anonymized.

We are very much stewards of God's creation, that we need to be looking after God's creation. The whole issue of sustainability, and making sure that we do things today that our grandchildren are not going to curse us for, is all about making sure that we nurture the resources in the world.

Brandon points out that the Fair Trade movement works with producers to ensure that their production does not degrade the land and water supply and that producers have a safe environment in which to live and work. The view of Fair Trade as right stewardship of creation is also one that is highlighted by Traidcraft in their Foundation principles. The principles refer to the work of the organisation as 'affirming the call to all people to steward and develop creation'.¹⁴ Chris Sugden, one of the Traidcraft essayists, explains the relevance of the concept of stewardship to the work of Traidcraft.¹⁵ He reflects that it is God's intention that humankind acts in His image, mirroring His care for creation. Human beings as stewards of creation are entitled to a share of its resources; however, in a sinful and fallen world, stewardship has become corrupted, resulting in a straying from right relations between human beings and between human beings and God's creation. The fallen nature of humankind has resulted in uneven access to the world's resources, with the poor experiencing suffering at the expense of the rich. According to Sugden, Fair Trade, as part of the Christian mission, must aim to reverse the corruption of stewardship and combat the sin that destroys relationships.

Fitting with the interviewees' outlook that Fair Trade serves as a demonstration of Christian principles in action, they also express a connection between Fair Trade and the Kingdom of God. In this understanding, trading fairly is a means of proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom. One of the interview participants, Duncan argues that:

It (Fair Trade) is working out in practical ways the basic concerns of God's love for the world, which is what I think the Kingdom of God

¹⁴ Quoted in Johnson and Sugden, *Markets, Fair Trade and the Kingdom of God*, p.152.

¹⁵ Chris Sugden, 'Fair Trade as Christian mission', in P. Johnson and C. Sugden, eds, *Markets, Fair Trade and the Kingdom of God* (Oxford: Regnum, 2001), pp. 3-24 at pp.6-7.

means; God ruling over us. God's values, God's concerns being dominant in our lives [...] Fair Trade is one way of expressing that.

This 'working out in practical ways' forms the demonstration of the values of the Kingdom of God. For these churchgoers, Jesus' declaration of the Kingdom of God initiates a requirement for the Christian to act in accordance with the values of the Kingdom of justice and love. As Bauckham and Hart indicate, Jesus' references to the Kingdom are action-orientated.¹⁶ They argue that to pray the words of the Lord's Prayer 'Thy Kingdom come' is to commit to activism. For the churchgoers interviewed, Fair Trade is a means by which the Christian, working as part of the Church, can act in accordance with Jesus' declaration of the Kingdom of God. The churchgoers do not express unease at equating the practice of Fair Trade with the values of the Kingdom. Although Fair Trade is tiny in comparison to the mainstream economy, and in the eyes of the world may appear a feeble response to the politics of global trade, for the churchgoers, it is adequate to the job because it is underpinned by the values associated with the Kingdom. The interviewee, Doreen makes an explicit link between Fair Trade and life in the Kingdom:

In the Kingdom of God everybody is treated with respect and that they get just rewards for labour. So, that is one of the things that Fair Trade stands for, that people are treated fairly, regardless of their situation and in the Kingdom of God there would not be the inequalities that we fight against in modern day society.

For the churchgoers, the Kingdom is not relegated to a spiritual realm but has a direct bearing on social, political and economic life. The nature of the mainstream economy, and the purpose of Fair Trade, are both measured by the churchgoers' interpretation of the values of the Kingdom. The significance of the declaration of the Kingdom is in its radical reversal of outlook from one which prioritises the rich and successful, to one which places the wellbeing of the poor and marginalised foremost. For the interviewees, this informs their desire to place producers from poor communities at the heart of the trading system: a reversal of the mainstream economy in which capital, profit and the

¹⁶ Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context*

(London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999) p.202.

rights of the consumer take precedence. Moltmann emphasises such a reversal in his theology of the Kingdom of God. In 'God for a secular society' he states:

All Kingdom-of-God theology becomes for Christ's sake a theology of the liberation of the poor, the sick, the sad and the outcasts. So Kingdom-of-God theology doesn't just enter the already existing public forum of its given society. It brings to light publicly the people whom society pushes into the underground or into private life.¹⁷

The interviewees' support for the central role of the producer in Fair Trade represents an attempt to envisage a different form of economy from the mainstream, an economy which is informed by the values of the Kingdom of God. The mainstream economy anonymises the people who produce the goods that are consumed, to such an extent that consumers are unaware of their existence. For the interviewees, the purpose of Fair Trade is to bring to light, in a public manner, the communities that have been forgotten in the global economy and to bring them just reward for their labour.

For these churchgoers, Fair Trade provides the Church with an opportunity to demonstrate what the love of Christ means in contemporary society. Their activism is not a bolt-on addition to their faith but is viewed as an integral part of personal devotion and of the mission of the Church. As can be seen from this brief description of the views of the churchgoers on the stewardship of creation and on the Kingdom of God, they do make connections between their support for Fair Trade and theology. Together with the explicit reference to Christian theology in the establishment of Fair Trade, and the theology which continues to guide Christian FTOs, this willingness of churchgoers to make connections between theology and Fair Trade, provides compelling evidence that Fair Trade deserves to be examined theologically.

The Public Nature of Fair Trade

Fair Trade serves as a prominent example of theology in action, not only because it is theologically informed and guided, but also because of the success it has enjoyed in inspiring a public well beyond the Church. In the UK., public recognition of the Fairtrade mark is high and a large range of Fair Trade

¹⁷ Jurgen Moltmann, *God for Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (London, SCM, 1999) p.253. products are available for purchase from mainstream retailers;¹⁸ Fair Trade consumption is common place. The annual focus on Fair Trade during Fairtrade Fortnight reaches a wide audience through community activities, in store promotions and local and national media.¹⁹ The promotion of Fair Trade brings consumers together with different elements of the Fair Trade movement including: grassroots activists (many of whom are churchgoers), international development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and FTOs. The movement represents an interesting interplay between the secular and the religious. Ostensibly the movement is secular, in that it is open and accessible to all, transcending boundaries of belief and community. However, there is considerable Christian influence over the movement, given that many of the NGOs which act in its support are faith-based: Christian Aid, Cafod and Tear Fund amongst their number. Significantly, the Fair Trade activist base is predominantly made up of churchgoers.²⁰ In the UK many congregations have positively embraced the sale and promotion of Fair Trade goods, as an expression of biblical values. The Fair Trade stall is a commonplace within churches and a widely accepted part of church activity. Despite the churchbased nature of Fair Trade support, the Fair Trade movement has actively sought the widest possible reach and this has required a secular presentation.

On the whole, the secular presentation of the movement is actively supported by the Christian organisations and many of the churchgoers involved, in order to scale-up the concept to assist a larger number of producers.²¹ Churchgoers play a prominent role in spreading the message of Fair Trade to the wider community, especially through their involvement in Fair Trade Town campaigns.²² Both of the locations in which I interviewed churchgoing Fair Trade activists are Fair Trade Towns. From the evidence of the interviews, it appears that churchgoers draw on both church-based and secular networks to support their work. Fair Trade Town activity is characterized by a web of networks, embracing political bodies, local media and community organisations, in addition to the church-based networks. This local action must also be set in the context of networking at a national and international level. Community action for Fair Trade is linked through the networks of NGOs, FTOs, and through denominational networks, to draw from, and contribute to, the experience of Fair Trade support at a global level. This facilitates a sense of

¹⁸ Nicholls and Opal, *Fair Trade: Market-driven Ethical Consumption*, pp.10-12.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp.159-60.

²⁰ Anderson, *A History of Fair Trade in Contemporary Britain*, pp.61-2.

²¹ Ibid. p.64.

²² See, for example, Alice Malpass, Paul Cloke, Clive Barnett and Nick Clarke, 'Fairtrade Urbanism? The Politics of Place Beyond Place in the Bristol Fairtrade City Campaign' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 31:3 (2007), 633-45, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2427.2007.00747.x

solidarity with Fair Trade producer communities and activists in the global south. The churchgoing activists who promote Fair Trade view their action as an opportunity to demonstrate biblical values to a wide public. Their action is outward looking and they work with a multiplicity of partners as part of a Fair Trade movement, which is known and supported by many members of society, regardless of their religious background.

Fair Trade and Public Theology

Fair Trade has given voice to theology in the economic realm, providing opportunity to contribute to the construction of a more just economy and to critique the values of the mainstream. Within the discourse of Public Theology, there has been much discussion as to its nature and calls for a broad Public Theology which actively involves, not just academics and church leaders, but congregations.²³ However, relatively little research has taken place into identifying and studying a specific form of such popular Public Theology. The theology which inspired, and continues to guide, church action for Fair Trade can be identified as a form of Public Theology. Fair Trade is the result of an imaginative, but practical, theological reflection. The practical nature of Fair Trade requires that the theology which inspires it must be brought to bear on the market context in which it operates. It is effectively a bringing into conversation of the biblical imperative of justice for the poor and marginalised with an analysis of the trading system, taking into account the economic and political realities of commercial trade. The Public Theology of Fair Trade has raised questions about the treatment of producers in poor communities in the light of a God of justice. It has served to determine a Christian response to the low prices paid to producers, their living and working conditions and the lack of control that they are able to exercise over those conditions and the means of trade. The influence of this Public Theology is not only limited to the establishment of the pioneering FTOs; it has guided sections of the Fair Trade movement on an ongoing basis. For example, the Traidcraft essayists reflect on the nature of their organisation at the time of its twenty first anniversary.²⁴ They bring theology into conversation with the context within which the organisation operates, drawing on their understanding of international trade, market economics and international development. The essayists discuss the role of biblical themes such as justice for the poor, the right stewardship of creation and the foretaste of the Kingdom of God. However, these reflections are contextualised, enabling them to discuss organisational issues which affect the day to day running of an FTO.

²³ See, for example, Sebastian Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere: Public Theology as a Catalyst for Open Debate* (London: SCM, 2011), p.232.

²⁴ Johnson and Sugden, *Markets, Fair Trade and the Kingdom of God*.

The reflections offer a nuanced analysis. They argue for the need for Fair Trade to offer a distinctive demonstration of a different form of trade, whilst acknowledging that the organisation must reflect on the reality of its context, taking into account the need to work within commercial markets in a largely secular society. The Traidcraft essays are a pertinent example of Public Theology, as they involve theology in an interdisciplinary analysis of the contemporary situation, in order to guide the organisation in its outlook, strategy and structure.

Public Theology in general has certainly struggled to contribute in the economic sphere, rendering the achievements of Fair Trade all the more remarkable. It fulfils Kim's call for a Public Theology that reaches well beyond the Church leadership and academy to involve church congregations.²⁵ Its impact stretches out further, to a public recognition beyond the bounds of academy and Church. However, there is a danger that the role of theology in Fair Trade is viewed primarily as one of initial motivation. As Anderson points out, the significant role of Christian groups in the growth and development of the Fair Trade movement has been downplayed by the academic literature of Fair Trade.²⁶ Even within the Church, as my research participants express, there is a growing belief amongst churchgoers and clergy that the role of theology, and the Church, within Fair Trade is now complete. In this view, the action has been effectively secularized and there is no need for a continuing theological commentary; God makes no difference, save for motivation in the lives of some supporters. There is a paradox for Public Theology in that it may become the victim of its own success; its contribution to a project recognised by a wide secular public may render theology effectively redundant in the specific action, its role limited to the foundational. This is particularly pertinent now that mainstream economic actors, such as supermarket chains and transnational corporations, have become involved in the Fair Trade project. Are these market actors best placed to drive Fair Trade forward, rendering the involvement of the Church no longer necessary? An overview of the changing nature of the Fair Trade movement over time can inform an answer to this question.

The mainstreaming of Fair Trade

The most notable dynamic of Fair Trade in the UK, is its expansion from a niche ethical position in the 1980s to the high levels of public recognition and support witnessed today. This expansion has been achieved largely as a result of Fair Trade certification, which has resulted in a shift of the supply of Fair Trade

²⁵ Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, p.232.

²⁶ Anderson, *A History of Fair Trade in Contemporary Britain*, p.44.

goods from dedicated ethical businesses and towards the mainstream market; bringing large corporations and supermarket retailers into the Fair Trade project.²⁷ Harriet Lamb²⁸ outlines a vision for the Fairtrade Foundation, urging the expansion of the values of Fair Trade into the mainstream economy, so that Fair Trade becomes the norm.²⁹ At first sight, this mainstreaming of Fair Trade may appear to be a straightforward measure of progress for the movement; however, there are many voices within the movement and the academy, which express a more ambivalent attitude towards the process.³⁰ In its origins Fair Trade served as a stark counter-cultural example to mainstream trade by eschewing the profit motive but it occupied only a tiny fraction of the market.³¹ The only pathway available for Fair Trade, to achieve its aim of becoming a significant force within the market, has been to work within the mainstream mechanisms of the capitalist economy. In particular, this has entailed persuading supermarkets to stock Fair Trade products, the creation of supermarket Fair Trade own brands and the encouragement of major corporations, including large transnationals, to switch to buying from producers on Fair Trade terms. The emphasis for Fair Trade has always been to bring about change in the wider economy. According to the business ethicist, Geoff Moore, the Fair Trade practice of offering critique of mainstream trade, whilst providing demonstration of an alternative form of trading, impels a closer contact with the mainstream in order to effect change.³² The benefits of mainstreaming are clear: in expanding the volume of produce sold on Fair Trade terms, Fair Trade can come to the assistance of millions more producers and, in working with transnational corporations, it can ameliorate some of the most widespread cases of abuse of human dignity within the market.

²⁷ Laura Reynolds and Douglas Murray, 'Fair Trade: Contemporary Challenges and Future Prospects' in L. Reynolds, D. Murray and J. Wilkinson, eds, *Fair Trade: The Challenges of Transforming Globalization* (Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2007), pp.223-35 at pp.224-5. Also, Ronan Le Velly, 'Fair Trade and Mainstreaming' in L. Reynolds and E. Bennett, eds, *Handbook of Research on Fair Trade* (Cheltenham and Northampton MA., Edward Elgar, 2015), pp. 265-80 at pp. 272-3.

²⁸ Harriet Lamb is the former CEO of the Fairtrade Foundation and is now the CEO of Fairtrade International. The Fairtrade Foundation is the body that awards and administers the Fairtrade certification mark in the UK. It also holds a remit to promote the concept of Fair Trade to the general public through initiatives such as the Fair Trade Towns movement. Fairtrade International oversees Fairtrade certification on a global basis.

²⁹ Harriet Lamb, *Fighting the Banana Wars and other Fairtrade Battles* (London, Rider, 2008), pp.152-8.

³⁰ See, for example, Daniel Jaffee, 'Fair Trade and Development' in M. Warrier, ed, *The Politics of Fair Trade: A Survey* (London, Routledge, 2011), pp.87-104. Also, David Goodman, E. Melanie Dupuis and Michael Goodman, *Alternative Food Networks: Knowledge, Practice and Politics* (London, Routledge, 2012), pp.200-244.

³¹ Michael Barratt Brown describes the early Fair Trade movement, in its guise of 'Alternative Trade', in his book: *Fair Trade: Reform and Realities in the International Trade System* (London, Zed Books, 1993), pp.156-76.

³² Geoff Moore, 'The Fair Trade Movement: Parameters, Issues and Future Research', *Journal of Business Ethics*, Issue 53 (2004),73-86 at 82.

In the interviews I conducted with churchgoers who carry out action in support of Fair Trade, the majority of the churchgoers acknowledge the benefits that come with the mainstreaming of Fair Trade, including the ability to improve working and living conditions for poor communities across the globe and the greater public recognition of the concept. Indeed the 'Fairtrade' mark enjoys high levels of recognition in the UK and in other parts of Europe. The Fairtrade mark is a form of certification which serves as a reassurance to consumers that the producers of the good receive fair payment and fair working conditions.³³ Fairtrade certification has not only been bestowed on goods sold in world shops or in churches but also on some high-volume products such as Nestle's 'KitKat' chocolate bar or on many of the bananas sold in supermarkets. For the churchgoers I interviewed, the high level of recognition achieved in recent years has greatly assisted their task in promoting the concept. None of the interviewees suggest that the mainstreaming of Fair Trade should be reversed; despite potential problems in working so closely with large businesses, they point out the benefits to producers. In this respect, my findings tally with the work of Goodman et al, who describe support for the mainstreaming of Fair Trade, from both activists and FTOs, because of the ability for the movement to increase in scale in terms of sales, with the possibility to reach many more producers and improve their livelihoods.³⁴ However, Goodman et al view the mainstreaming of Fair Trade as a 'Faustian bargain'.³⁵ The benefits brought by increased sales has been achieved at the expense of a moving away from some of the founding principles of the movement. The churchgoers in my study are aware of this trade off and the majority of the participants express concerns associated with the process of the mainstreaming of Fair Trade.

The churchgoers' view of a Fair Trade characterised by justice, and serving as a demonstration pointing to biblical values, engenders concern with the process of the mainstreaming. From analysis of the interviews, I have identified three key concerns of the participants with the mainstreaming of Fair Trade. Firstly, there are concerns about some of the unjust practices of large corporations and supermarkets. In particular, there is criticism of the widespread supermarket practice of squeezing down the price paid to producers. The worry for these churchgoers, is that Fair Trade certification of a small part of a business operation would be perceived by consumers as setting an ethical seal of approval on all the business practices of that operation. Secondly, the churchgoers express concern about the motivation of mainstream actors for their

³³ Nicholls and Opal, *Fair Trade: Market-driven Ethical Consumption*, pp.10-12.

³⁴ Goodman et al, *Alternative Food Networks*, p. 208.

³⁵ Ibid., pp.200-201.

involvement in Fair Trade. It is important for the churchgoers that all partners involved in the provision of Fair Trade products have a clear focus on the wellbeing of the producers. Finally, the churchgoers consider it vital to promote Fair Trade alongside other action for trade justice, including lobbying and campaigning for changes in trade rules and in mainstream business practice. Too close an identification between Fair Trade and mainstream market actors could adversely affect the ability of the Fair Trade movement to carry out such activity in order to bring about change to a more just form of international trade. The churchgoers speak of a belief amongst some of the members of their congregations that Fair Trade no longer needs the support of the churches and that it can now be handed over to mainstream business actors, who are in a position to take Fair Trade on to the next level. The following statement from the interviewee, Naomi is typical in expressing the churchgoers' fears of this level of complacency:

We are at a bit of a turning point here and we are in danger of falling into the trap of believing that the job is done and that we can leave it to the big players (large corporations) to get on with it. And that is really frightening because everything that has been achieved could be thrown away so easily [...] because they will not give the producers the respect that they deserve.

For these churchgoers, Fair Trade will cease to effectively assist producers in poor communities, if it is no longer guided by underlying principles. They argue that churches are needed in the Fair Trade movement to hold to account the large corporations to ensure the rights of the producers.

Mainstreaming and Public Theology

The concerns expressed about the mainstreaming of Fair Trade by the churchgoers interviewed contradict the view that the role of theology in Fair Trade is now complete. The respect for the producer at the heart of Fair Trade is dependent on the original ideals of the movement and, without those ideals, there will be no Fair Trade. Theology is not only foundational; the original reflections which guided the movement must be continually reinvigorated, to

ensure that the values of Fair Trade are not subsumed by the values of the mainstream economy. Northcott warns against the potential loss of the original ideals of Fair Trade with the expansion of Fair Trade certification involving large business corporations.³⁶ He argues that Fair Trade practices ‘arose as an expression of a distinctively Christian account of justice and fairness’.³⁷ The connection between current practice and this theological underpinning should not be lost, for to serve as effective critique of the mainstream economy Fair Trade must remain distinctly different from it.³⁸

The mainstreaming of Fair Trade presents a clear role for Public Theology, as an ongoing reflection to guide the Fair Trade movement in this time of change. The interdisciplinary conversation between theology and an analysis of the contemporary situation of the international trading system, and of the Fair Trade project itself, is required to reinvigorate Fair Trade in its mainstreamed context. Because mainstreaming has brought change to the contemporary situation, fresh theological insight is required in response. The theological reflection that gave rise to the Fair Trade movement was the beginning of a Public Theology that now needs to be acknowledged and taken further. Its task is to generate new ways, appropriate for the changed context, of ensuring that the practice of Fair Trade is true to its values of justice and fairness and that the wellbeing of the producer is the paramount concern in the trading process. Recognition of the need for conversation between the ethical values of justice and fairness and an analysis of the contemporary situation of Fair Trade is not confined to churchgoing activist and Christian FTOs; much of the social scientific commentary on the mainstreaming of Fair Trade identifies the necessity of guiding practice with overarching distinctive values. For example, Barrientos et al state: ‘One critical point is to ensure that the success of Fair Trade does not lead to the undermining of the core values which have underpinned the movement and which lend it its legitimacy’.³⁹ The reflection provided by an ongoing Public Theology can inform discussion within the Fair Trade movement regarding the core ethical standards of Fair Trade. As Moore argues, achieving clarity on standards is essential for the Fair Trade movement to flourish under mainstreaming.⁴⁰ Such clarity will enable Fair Trade to offer an effective and ethically transparent witness to the wider economy.

Theology gifts to the Fair Trade movement a firm rooting in principles of justice, fairness and love for humanity. Learning from the experience of the

³⁶ Northcott, ‘The World Trade Organisation, Fair Trade and the Body Politics of St Paul’, in Atherton and Skinner, eds, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Theological Conversations over Political Economy*, p.184.

³⁷ Ibid., p.185.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Stephanie Barrientos, Michael Conroy and Elaine Jones ‘Northern Social Movements and Fair Trade’ in L. Reynolds, D. Murray and J. Wilkinson, eds, *Fair Trade: The Challenges of Transforming Globalization* (Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2007), pp.51-62 at p.61.

⁴⁰ Moore, 'The Fair Trade Movement', 84.

mainstreaming of Fair Trade in the UK,, it is clear that these principles are not just foundational but also need to be continually applied to the work of the movement. The bringing into conversation of theology and an analysis of the international trading system which enabled the establishment of Fair Trade, is just as necessary in the current context of mainstreaming. Public Theology can assist in developing the mainstreaming strategy, empowering the functional role of Fair Trade in coming to the assistance of marginalized producers, and informing discernment to guide the engagement of the movement with wider society and the capitalist economy. Public Theology, as an interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and an analysis of the international trading system, can serve to develop a demonstration of trading in the light of the values of the Kingdom of God. Given this demonstration is taking place in the midst of the contemporary economy, Public Theology can assist by generating insight which is not purely about asserting theological values but bringing them into dialogue with analysis of the context in which Fair Trade operates. This will include taking into account the organisational issues which affect FTOs, the implications of operating in the global trading system and an understanding of the implicit demands of supermarkets and other market actors. As the Church still plays a key role in the Fair Trade movement, Public Theology is also necessary to reflect on the work of churchgoing Fair Trade activists in the context of mainstreaming and how they are supported by the Christian community. Crucially, Public Theology can assist in thinking through how the role of churchgoing activists can be developed in order to address the threat of the diminution of the original vision of Fair Trade. Public Theology has much to offer the Fair Trade movement in the context of mainstreaming in formulating an interdisciplinary assessment of the way forward. Theology can be brought together in conversation with disciplines such as politics, economics and global development in order to formulate a response which is realistic and implementable but also inspired by the values of the Kingdom of God.

A Public Theology involving congregations

Having identified that an ongoing Public Theology has a valuable role to play in assisting the Fair Trade movement to work through its approach to a changing contemporary situation, I will suggest how this Public Theology can gain a voice within the movement. A Public Theology which involves congregations possesses the advantage that its insights can be disseminated, and its guidance put into practice, by a mass movement. Forrester asserts that Public Theology is 'necessarily ecclesial theology'.⁴¹ It must retain a firm rooting in

⁴¹ Duncan Forrester, 'Working in the Quarry: A Response to the Colloquium', in W. Storrar and A. Morton, eds,

Public Theology for the 21st Century (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2004) pp.431-8 at p.432.

the life of the Church and spring from its insights and practices. The ability of Public Theology to guide the Fair Trade movement through the dilemmas presented by mainstreaming is dependent on the Church retaining a strong involvement in the movement. In particular, the continued support of Fair Trade by congregations is necessary to ensure that the voice of Public Theology is heard and acted upon.

An ongoing Public Theology which inspires and informs Fair Trade, can fulfil Kim's call for a Public Theology involving congregations.⁴² However, for congregations to be truly involved in the work of Public Theology they must participate, not only in the social action which it seeks to assist, but also in an ongoing theological reflection. Public Theology generated in the academy can both inform, and learn from, the theological reflection of the churchgoers. The changing nature of the contemporary situation, of which the mainstreaming of Fair Trade serves as example, requires fresh theological reflection involving the active participation of churchgoers. It is a reflection on lived experience, which occupies the space at the intersection between theology and the contemporary situation. The interviews I carried out with churchgoing Fair Trade activists indicate that these churchgoers do make connections between their faith and their support for Fair Trade, conducting their theologizing as individuals or with small groups of like-minded Christians. This is an ongoing process with faith informing action and the experience of carrying out action assisting in the shaping, and reshaping, of faith. However, I was surprised to find that thinking theologically about support for Fair Trade was largely absent at a congregational or institutional level. In part, the success of the secular presentation of Fair Trade has resulted in a diminished ability for the Church to be able to articulate its support for Fair Trade in the language of faith. Rather than marginalise action for Fair Trade as an optional nicety, if congregations are to fully embrace the practice, it must be perceived as having a direct relationship with the Christian faith and this can only be achieved by articulating support for the practice with reference to theology. The application of theology to the changing nature of the Fair Trade movement over time will require continual theological reflection. Articulation in the language of faith must be a living discourse with churchgoers preserving the terminology, not only through their theologizing, but also by regular practice in the life of the church; including sermons, prayers and other acts of collective worship. To bolster a mass movement to ensure that the insights of Public Theology can be disseminated and implemented, the Church must recognise and

⁴² Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, p.232.

value the work of church-based Fair Trade activists. Grassroots church support for Fair Trade is still vital for the movement. This support includes the sale of goods and promotion of the concept, both in a church setting, and in the wider community as part of the Fair Trade Towns network. Cloke et al identify the importance of what they term Fair Trade ‘evangelists’: ‘energetic and persuasive individuals who present potentially governing repertoires of Fair Trade practices that reflect appropriate faith-ethics in church networks’.⁴³ These Fair Trade activists require the acknowledgement and support of the Church leadership and the wider Christian community. Indeed, the churchgoers I interviewed call for the Church to take greater ownership of this opportunity to demonstrate the application of Christian theology to the workings of the economy. They are concerned to see more explicit support from church leaders and encouragement for more congregations to become involved in the promotion of Fair Trade. Empowered by the support of the Church, and the guidance of an ongoing Public Theology, church-based activists can assist in shaping a Fair Trade which is appropriate for a contemporary economic and social context and yet remains true to a theology of fairness and justice.

The role of activists in shaping the Fair Trade movement has been underestimated in academic commentary, largely as a result of viewing Fair Trade in terms of a consumer demand being met by a commercial response. As Anderson argues, Fair Trade has grown largely as a visionary social movement, rather than as a response to consumer demand.⁴⁴ Far from activism being peripheral to the functioning of Fair Trade, it is vital in driving Fair Trade forward and has a key role to play in shaping values. An important task for Fair Trade activists will be to build a discursive space which can enable activists to form a bridge of communication between corporate interests and the rights of producers. Moore stresses the importance of the campaigning role of the movement in order to ‘minimise the potential subversion, dilution or redefinition’ of Fair Trade by commercial forces’.⁴⁵ To do this, it will need to hold the Fair Trade labelling organizations and commercial companies to account, to ensure that ethical standards are being met and that the focus of Fair Trade is on the wellbeing of the producer rather than the profit motive. This has resonance with the words of the interview participant Naomi, as she warns against the withdrawal of activism. The activists are needed to act as counter

⁴³ Paul Cloke, Clive Barnett, Nick Clarke and Alice Malpass, ‘Faith in Ethical Consumption’, in L. Thomas, ed, *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability: Paradise Lost* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp.93-114 at p.100.

⁴⁴ Anderson, *A History of Fair Trade in Contemporary Britain*, p.1.

⁴⁵ Moore, ‘The Fair Trade Movement’, 84.

balance to commercial forces, to give voice to the producers, whose voice would otherwise be overwhelmed in the prevailing logic of the global economy. Public Theology is needed to guide the activists in thinking through a response to the dilemmas engendered by mainstreaming. The complexity of balancing the need to grow Fair Trade to assist more producers, with the need to hold on to the original values of justice and love, will require the insights of a vibrant Public Theology. The theological reflection which gave rise to the Fair Trade movement was the beginning of a Public Theology that now needs to be acknowledged and taken further, fit to guide Fair Trade through the next chapter of its history.

Conclusion

There is an intimate connection between theology and church action for Fair Trade. Fair Trade was founded by churchgoers and Church organisations with explicit reference to theology; Christian FTOs, guided by theological principles, continue to be influential within the Fair Trade movement; and theology continues to sustain and guide Fair Trade through the theologizing of the churchgoers who carry out action in its support. The theological insight which inspired and guides church action for Fair Trade can be identified as Public Theology: an interdisciplinary conversation between theology and an analysis of the international trading system. In the UK, this Public Theology has achieved a wide public reach. Fair Trade has inspired many congregations who view the practice as an opportunity to demonstrate Christian principles in action, and the Fair Trade concept itself has gone on to receive high levels of public recognition, well beyond the boundaries of the Church. However, Fair Trade's entry into the mainstream economy has not come without a price. The churchgoers in my study express concern at the growing influence of commercial enterprises over the Fair Trade movement and the threat of diminution of the original theological insight. In learning from the experience of the mainstreaming of Fair Trade in the UK., I suggest that Public Theology's guidance of the Fair Trade movement must be viewed as an ongoing project. The theological reflection which gave rise to the movement was only the beginning of a Public Theology. In the context of mainstreaming, an ongoing Public Theology has much to offer; it can assist the Fair Trade movement in thinking through its strategy, so that Fair Trade can both grow and remain true to the original values of justice and love at the heart of the Fair Trade concept. A second learning point, is that a Public Theology involving congregations needs to be nurtured. The insights of Public Theology can be disseminated and put into action by a mass movement of churchgoers. To truly involve

congregations, church action for Fair Trade as Public Theology requires the

active participation of churchgoers in theologizing as church. It must also receive greater recognition from church leadership and the wider Christian community. Church-based Fair Trade activism can provide a vital role in the context of the mainstreaming of Fair Trade. Guided by Public Theology, it can provide a bridge of communication between the rights of producers and the involvement of commercial organisations in the movement. Far from the mainstreaming of Fair Trade signalling that the Church is no longer required in the Fair Trade movement, in the context of mainstreaming, it is needed now more than ever.