
“Moral discernment”: the Churches address ethical issues and the darkest chapters of world history

The newly released publications are the fruit of in-depth multilateral and ecumenical study by a panel of experts - theologians, historians - from 14 different Christian traditions, covering a number of ethical issues: usury, slavery, freedom of religion, marriage, suicide, as well as State-Church relations and involvement of religious faiths in armed conflicts and peace-building efforts. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is underway: at a time when Churches and Christian leaders have intensified ecumenical cooperation amidst crises and for the benefit of the poorest, theological research has continued. At the World Council of Churches headquarters in Geneva, the "Faith and Order Commission" took the courageous initiative of making ethical issues - frequently the cause of "tensions and disagreements within and between churches"- the focus of research. "In an increasingly complex world, in which faithful belonging to different Christian denominations live together in different contexts throughout the world, the Churches are confronted with new moral and ethical issues", explained the WCC. "Sometimes, however, heated debates and potential divisions flare up over specific issues, challenging our ability to be credible, faithful and fruitful witnesses of Christ in this world." The urgency of the matter led to the in-depth study initiative. Orthodox, Catholics, Anglicans and Old Catholics, Protestants and Pentecostals responded to the invitation to form part of the study group. The research comprises **two volumes**: "Churches and Moral Discernment. Volume 1: Learning from Traditions," provides self-descriptions on how 14 different church traditions engage in moral discernment processes, which sources they use, how these sources interplay with each other and who actually participates in the process. "Churches and Moral Discernment. Volume 2: Learning from History," examines concrete historic examples where churches have modified or changed their understanding of a specific moral issue. *Nineteen historical cases of 'moral discernment' are explored in detail, providing insight into some of the darkest periods in world history.* It looks into the long process within the African Methodist Church to delegitimise **slavery** at the time of British colonialism, for example. The section on Church-State relations examines the role played by the Churches in three different crises: **apartheid in South Africa, the military dictatorship in Brazil and Nazism in Germany.** A section is devoted to moral discernment regarding participation in war and the Churches' response when faced with situations of armed conflict. Issues relating to marriage (contraception, polygamy, inter-religious marriages) are of course equally addressed, along with suicide, religious freedom and freedom of conscience. "**An important finding of the studies,**" writes **Simone Sinn in the introduction to volume 2, "is that the Churches' approach to ethical issues is not static but in constant movement,** in the effort to constantly challenge their own perception and understanding of the various phenomena. There are several reasons for this. The Churches have recognised that in the past there were episodes marking their "complicity in systems of power and hegemony", thereby contributing to the "moral bankruptcy" of societies. They have come to acknowledge the "new information provided by human sciences" and the impact of some of their teachings on the human person. "**The ecumenical pilgrimage always requires attentive listening,**" said Rev. Dr **Susan Durber**, moderator of the Faith and Order Commission, referring to the "spirit" animating the work of the group of experts featured in the two volumes. "These two publications invite you first to listen to those who can tell you ... and then to listen carefully for the lessons we can find in our history." She added: "*When the questions we face today feel sometimes intractable and difficult, it is wonderful to find that we have resources already with which to understand each other more fully and to learn wisdom. These two publications are a true gift to the churches in our times.*" "The two volumes are truly unique", said Myriam Wijlens, a Dutch Roman Catholic professor of canon law at the University of Erfurt (Germany) who is a co-editor of both volumes, "They present in a fascinating way the commonalities and differences between how up to 14 traditions engage in moral discernment as well as why and how they actually changed their

view on a given issue that occurred in the past. The studies offer a true and rich learning process for all.”

M. Chiara Biagioni