The role of the Church in grassroots movements (Fair trade)

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UCIRI’s history has been closely linked to a Catholic missionary team and specially to the Dutch Priest Frans van der Hoff, who settled in the area in 1980. Although the producers were already involved already in their own organization process, he started a dynamic of reflection within the communities about the causes underlying their problems as coffee producers. This process resulted, among others, in the peasants’ awareness of the importance of valuing their product, enabling them to look for alternative coffee buyers with whom to get better prices for coffee. UCIRI was founded in 1983, and in 1985 they received a visit from Nico Roozen in the name of the Dutch ATO Solidaridad. This link was not only critical for UCIRI’s access to the Fair Trade market, but the basis for the funding of the first Fair Trade Labelling Organization, Max Havelaar, which focused its first efforts on coffee (Van der Hoff and Galvan, 1998:130; Roozen and Van der Hoff, 2001: 34). As Mace points out:

In Oaxaca, the plight of indigenous inhabitants has drawn attention from progressive clergy who used liberation theology to support rural-based social movements. A general mission among liberation theologists is to empower the underprivileged indigenous people and assist them to be the ‘subjects of their own development’…(1998: 22)

The relations with missionaries and ATOs were important, also, for the production orientation towards organic methods. As Norget suggests, at the core of UCIRI’s ideology is ‘…an accentuation of qualities regarded as integral to indigenous culture’ (1997: 11). Organic methods, although introduced by Europeans, are similar to their ancestral agricultural techniques, practiced before the arrival of the ‘Green Revolution’ which generalized the use of agrochemicals. They are consistent with indigenous respect for the earth, the forest, and all living beings -of terrestrial or sacred nature- that inhabit them. Also the orientation of the theology that encourages the organization’s efforts has resonance with local notions of organized communal work, mutual aid, and reciprocity, known traditionally as ‘tequio’. Part of UCIRI’s philosophy the continuation of decision-making systems based in the indigenous institution of ‘usos y costumbres’ (uses and customs), which although sometimes associated with colonial times, is broadly considered a democratic process of local policy making, deeply assimilated by the indigenous culture of Oaxaca (Norget, 1997: 11).

This way of organizing of production based on the integration of local indigenous and Christian (liberation theology) values, has been UCIRI’s pillar not only for the peasants motivation, but also in terms of its image and prestige vis-Ã -vis international public opinion, such as ATOs, the media, scholars, and development organizations. For instance, the FAO considers UCIRI’s main goal as ‘solidarity and sustainability rooted in culture and products according to ancestral wisdom and new techniques (organic) in order to preserve soil, water, [forest], and culture’ (FAO, 2002).
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