

The Role of Religion in International Development

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The post-war dreams of development are largely shattered today. Despite the investment of billions of dollars and great efforts by tens of thousands of people, we live in a world of dehumanizing poverty, collapsing ecological systems, and deeply stressed social systems. The South Commission concludes,

For many, there was the hope born of success in their liberation struggles. Everywhere there was talk of equality and progress . . . It is important to remember this period of progress and its atmosphere of hope now, when there is deep pessimism in much of the Third World about the prospects of economic development.¹

In part, this failure can be blamed on the continued rapid explosion of the human population. The sheer fact that global famines and government collapse have not taken place more widely is testimony to the fact that significant gains have been made in food production and in the establishment of stable governments. But these gains have not been experienced by the poor and the oppressed.² If anything, inequality between the privileged few and the marginalized many has increased. In countries and between countries the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few continues. What has gone wrong? And what role does religion, or the lack of it, play in this failure?

Definitions

Religion

Traditionally, religion has been defined as belief in supernatural beings and forces. But as anthropologists have studied religions around the world, they have seen that

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- 1 Warden Bello, *Dark Victory: The United States, Structural Adjustment and Global Poverty* (London: Pluto Press, 1994), 7.
- 2 In 1989 about 1.2 billion people lived in absolute poverty, a fact which translates into a world poverty rate of 23.4% (Alan Durning, *Poverty and the Environment*, Worldwatch Paper 92 [Washington: Worldwatch Institute, 1989]). More than 100 million people are homeless, living under bridges and on garbage dumps. The world's poorest 400 million are subject to stunted growth and mental retardation from malnourishment, and 1.9 billion people drink and bathe in contaminated waters (UNICEF, *State of the World's Children* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1989]).

provide worldviews that either foster or hinder development.¹⁰ Specifically, they believe that other-worldly religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism kill desires for this-worldly progress by putting greatest value on other-worldly concerns. Milton Singer, Kussum Nair, and others have sought to demonstrate from empirical data that religious beliefs do not affect peoples' desires to improve their lot.¹¹ Recent discussions focus on the appropriateness of combining religious activities such as evangelism and church planting with activities designed to bring about economic and political development.¹²

Development in the West

What have been the foundations of modern development programs from the West, and what roles has religion played in them? Rather than take a historical approach to this question, we will approach it thematically.

Reductionism: nonreligious solutions

Religion has played no significant part in past scientific and governmental programs of development. The sharp dualism between supernatural and natural domains, combined with the widespread denial of supernatural realities, led to a worldview that reduced development to purely naturalistic interpretations. Even in the sciences there was a tendency to reduce it to single problems and single solutions. In the 1950s the problem was seen as poverty, and the solution was economic development which could be achieved through the transfer of technology, science, and economic resources. It was assumed that such development would lead to political and social advancement. This assumption reflected the linear view of causality characteristic of the sciences in the first half of this century.

10 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons (New York: Scribners, 1958); Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*, 3 vols. (New York: Pantheon, 1968).

11 Milton Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Kussum Nair, *In Defense of the Irrational Peasant: Indian Agriculture after the Green Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). Christian churches and countries influenced by Christianity are most involved in programs of development. For example, when Bangladesh was formed, despite pleas for help by the new government to Muslim countries around the world, most of the funds and personnel came from Christian communities and so-called 'Christian' nations.

12 William van Geest and his associates outline four models of relationship between development and religion, and conclude that all can be effective approaches to development. However, throughout their analysis they stress the importance of including religion as a central component. See William van Geest, "The Relationship Between Development and Other Religious Activities and Objectives" (paper prepared for Church and Development Dialogue, Toronto, June 14-15, 1993), 17-21.

By the end of the 1960s it was clear that solutions based on economic growth and community development had failed. Robert McNamara, president of the World Bank, noted at the bank's annual meeting in 1973 that the development strategies of the past two decades had an unacceptably small impact on poverty.¹³ The food per capita for the poor had not changed; the employment rate lagged behind population growth; growth and basic services were available only in some large urban conglomerations; and overall growth rates were erratic and not sustained. Eventually, trickle-down theories of poverty alleviation were abandoned. A major reason for the repeated failures plaguing many economic development programs was that they did not take social and religious factors into account.¹⁴ Too much effort went into providing project hardware, and too little on the indispensable social software. Development agencies failed to involve local communities in expressing their felt needs, working together to design a solution, and implementing development projects.

In the 1970s the cause of poverty was seen primarily as oppression and unjust sociopolitical systems. The assumption was that the poor lacked power, and if power were given to them, they would improve their own lot. The solution was seen as the transformation of sociopolitical structures. Development-oriented social scientists were widely involved in the planning of projects. Target groups—the poor with an income below the absolute threshold of poverty—became the focus of concern. Attempts were made to adapt projects to their cultures, and to involve them in the process. The central issues were land reform and social justice.¹⁵

But political transformations also missed the mark. They failed to consider human nature and the power of individuals. In India land reform led to a redistribution of only a small amount of marginal land: rich land owners registered the maximum acreage allowed in the names of each member of the family, the family cows, and the family pets. Transforming systems without transforming people has few lasting results. It overlooks the fact that government officials, bankers, merchants, politicians, and other power brokers have vested interests in preserving their own positions and can circumvent the legal and economic changes designed to help the people. It also fails to recognize that people want more than a good living—they want meaningful lives.

By the 1990s it was obvious that programs of political development had largely failed. Peasant revolts in Nicaragua and Zimbabwe were successful but did

13 Vinay Samuel, "The Development Movement: An Overview and Appraisal," paper, n.d.

14 Michael M. Cernea, "Using Knowledge from Social Science in Development Projects" in *Project Appraisal 9.2* (June 1994), (Guildford Surrey: Beech Tree Publications), 83-94.

15 During this time co-author Paul Hiebert became involved in work being done by U.S.A.I.D., the Agricultural Development Council, and the International Crop Research Institute of South Asia. Land reform and agricultural development were the central foci of these development programs.

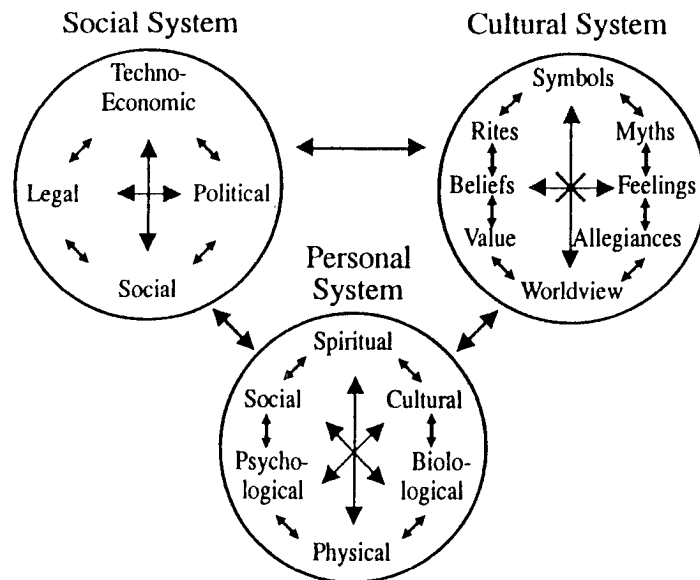
wholistically, as a process of change involving whole people and whole sociocultural systems.²¹ Second, it is seen to require a partnership between the people and the agents of change. The paternalistic approaches of the past, in which we define the needs, provide the resources, carry out the work, and evaluate the results, have failed. The people involved in development must participate in each of these steps from the outset.²²

HOLISM: A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO HUMANS, SOCIETIES, AND CULTURES

Current anthropological theory sees individual human beings, corporate social orders, and cultural maps as intersecting systems (Figure 1). By "system" is meant a set of related elements that interact in distinct ways to form a functioning whole.

FIGURE 1

The systemic nature of human organization



21 Van Geest.

22 An example of this is the El Salvadoran government's latrine project. A promoter was sent to poor communities such as La Linea to sign up families for dry latrines. Although few knew what these were, everybody signed up for one. After all, the program was free and required little or no effort on the part of the community. Like a whirlwind, teams of builders came and constructed the dry latrines with bricks and mortar. The government promised a follow-up program to teach the people how to use them, but months passed and no one came. The people used the small structures to store grain and other household goods. Soon the structures began to disappear as families used the bricks to build walls and structures they felt were needed.

For example, individuals can be analyzed as separate systems made up of physical, biological, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual subsystems. At the corporate level, people are parts of larger social systems which have economic, social, political, legal, and ideological dimensions. Cultural systems consist of beliefs, feelings, and values—of maps of reality that people use for planning courses of action. They are made up of subsystems of rituals, symbols, beliefs, and, at their core, religion and worldview. These three systems interact to form the macro-human system—a system of systems. Changes in individuals affect societies, and changes in societies affect the people in them. Similarly, shifts in cultural belief affect both social organization and individuals, and vice versa.

One value of a human systems approach to development is that it puts people first in planned development interventions and avoids the weaknesses of reductionist and stratigraphic approaches. A second value is that this approach avoids a linear view of cause and effect, and recognizes that needs and solutions may emerge in any of the systems. This means we must distinguish between root causes and consequent symptoms. If the underlying cause in a dysfunctional society is economic, we may treat the politics, social or religion outcomes, but until we deal with the root economic causes, our remedial programs will be only superficial and temporary. Similarly, if the root cause is religious, then economic and political solutions will be nothing more than band-aids mitigating the problem. A third advantage is that we may enter the system at any point to introduce change. We can begin with felt needs through programs of economic development, or medical work, or spiritual ministries. However, we must move from these to their underlying causes—to the systemic evils that give rise to them. Ultimately all the systems and subsystems involved in the problem must be transformed.

RELIGION AND HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

Given a systems view, then, what is the role of religion in development? If religion constitutes the core of a culture and defines its ultimate realities and values, then development that does not include religious change is clearly superficial and transitory. In a recent evaluation of the role of religion in development, sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), William van Geest and his associates write,

We conclude that basic beliefs generally, and religious activities specifically, cannot be separated from the development process. Basic beliefs are inherent, both in the approaches of western agencies and in the development process in southern communities. All development concepts, including those dominant in western culture, are driven by basic beliefs about how societies ought to develop.²³

23 Van Geest, i.

of human dignity. Development, so understood, will require more difficult changes from the rich world than for the poor.²⁹

Ultimately these transformations of individuals, societies, and cultures are rooted in religious transformations.

Causes of poverty and injustice

The failure of secular development programs is partly due to an inadequate concept of evil and the locus of its power. Some views tend to root current problems in the individual (modern evangelicalism, capitalism). Sin is then reduced to personal alienation that separates people from God. To deal with it, we seek transformed individuals. But this overlooks the corporate nature of human rebellion against the reign of God that finds its expression in the societies and cultures humans build, as well as the corporate nature of God's salvation in the establishment of his reign on earth. Other views assume that evil lies in social systems, and look for revolutions that break the control of the powerful and wealthy over governments and markets, or for education to uproot ideologies that blind people to the fact that they can change their world. But these views overlook the fact that individuals, too, are sinners, and can subvert corporate systems to their own ends.

The transformation of individuals, societies, or cultures without transforming the other systems will have no lasting results. Transformed individuals leave their communities and join the privileged. Social revolutions lead to new tyrannies as the oppressed become the new oppressors. Ideological change that does not change the lives of individuals and social systems will not eliminate the evils we seek to address.

Means of development

In the past agencies have reduced development to matters of technology, economics, social organization or politics, but none of these has led to comprehensive and lasting transformation. Change in all of the human systems is needed.

INDIVIDUAL TRANSFORMATION

On the individual level, we look for transformed people—people who seek righteousness, peace, and justice; people who love their enemies and seek their well-being. This vision must include the material well-being of everyone, their psychological and sociological health, and their spiritual salvation. Transformed individuals are important to indigenize community development. Until local

29 Leslie Newbigin, *Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1984), 56-57.

people emerge with the vision of holistic development, our programs remain potted plants dependent on outside nourishment. Development will take root and grow naturally only when individuals arise in the community who emulate the compassion, servant leadership, and self-sacrifice modeled in Christ.

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Ultimately social transformation must include the transformation of global systems. Peter Berger notes:

If there is *one* proposition that today dominates in the Third World, at least among its politicians and intellectuals, it is that there is little hope for Third World countries to emerge from poverty unless they free themselves from their present state of dependency on the rich countries.³⁰

As Christians we seek this change not by violent revolution, nor by assisting the hand of 'progress'. We must stand as prophetic voices condemning evil and nurturing righteousness, and we must build the church as a model of a community of justice and righteousness.³¹ It is the church that often serves as the locus of development in a community; it provides local accountability and a bridge to the people. Unfortunately, the local church has often been as much a part of the problem as a part of the solution. Transformation thus must begin in the church, and it is a process in which all of us must be involved, Christian and non-Christian, foreign and native. Finally, as part of global social systems, churches and development agencies need to model the oneness of God's people and partnership in ministry in intercultural settings. We must work with the local people to define, plan, execute, and evaluate our development programs.³²

RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION

A religious transformation is needed to bring about self-sustaining and self-reproducing development. For several reasons, this transformation must not only be religious but Christian.³³

30 Berger, 217.

31 C. Norman Kraus, *The Authentic Witness: Credibility and Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know that Something is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991).

32 Cernea, 8-10.

33 One might argue that Islam and Hinduism have failed to be major agents in global development because they do not seek the welfare of people other than their own. Islam does not offer non-Muslims full human rights and dignity, while orthodox Hinduism has little concern for others who are not part of one's immediate caste and family. People involved in development programs are mainly those who have been influenced by Christianity and its value on compassion for all humans, particularly the marginalized, such as members of the Rama Krishna Mission, which arose out of encounters with Christianity.

these skills and involving the community in decision-making built self-esteem and gave ownership of the ministry to the community.

After much discussion the members of the community decided to build a church/community center as a sign that they were putting down roots and planning for the future. Many of them helped carry heavy cement blocks or containers full of sand to the building site which was inaccessible by vehicle. Women carried blocks on their heads, grasping a small child in one hand. Men carried two or three blocks at a time, their backs bent by the weight. Children carried small containers of sand, while old women prepared food at the site. Because the people participated in the building process by volunteering time and labor, they felt ownership in the project. When asked to express what the community was achieving, one woman said, "We are building a place here for our children, something for them to have when you all are gone."

Guidance and teaching

Team members also began to build an understanding of a greater vision for the community by getting the people to ask, "Who are we? Where will we live five years from now? How will we live? And what will our children's lives be like?" Until challenged by these questions, the people were used to thinking one day to the next, without greater hopes for the future. Sharing a dream for a better future sparked new life and hope in the community, and rejuvenated belief in life's possibilities. The team also cultivated emerging leaders by working with them, teaching them skills and literacy, and providing them with educational opportunities such as regional conferences and workshops.

Challenge

The team challenged the people to think about what they could do about their lives. Many believed they were victims of the political turmoil. This belief, while sympathetic to the adversity suffered by the poor, is a paternalistic view which discounts the skills and ability of individuals to respond to their situations, and leaves them with feelings of resignation and apathy. Poor communities often accept this view, causing them to seek dependence on agencies and government programs rather than to organize and act to improve their conditions. Challenging this view was key to bringing community members into a greater understanding of themselves and the larger society. Denouncing structural injustices was an integral part of the teaching, but the people were shown that they could do something about these injustices.

On the personal level, the pastor worked to instill biblical values in personal and social relationships. The community suffers from family feuds, gossip, slander, and broken relationships; the youth face problems with drugs, gang activity, and violence. While recognizing the suffering the community faced due to adverse conditions, the pastor continued to denounce sinful personal behaviors and called members of the community to reconciliation and to Christian love.

Personal relationship with Christ

Finally, the team believed that development is not sustainable in the individual or the group unless they become followers of Jesus Christ. By practicing discipleship, sharing personal testimony, and integrating biblical teachings into all aspects of the ministry, the team helped bring members of the community to the point where they wanted to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior. Baptism was not pushed, but was offered to those who requested it and who demonstrated an understanding and commitment to the church and its outreach.

The ministry developed around weekly worship meetings. The team facilitated biblical reflection by the members of the community in the Anabaptist tradition, allowing each member to relate to the passages based on their own experience. The community discussed its economic situation, lack of education, and need for food and health care. Members also participated in games, group discussions, and other participatory activities that helped develop personal relationships and build a sense of common purpose.

As an outgrowth of methods implemented by the mission team, the worship group grew to approximately eighty members in four years. The community built a church/community center that houses not only worship services but also classes for health promoters, a library for children and youth, and a community garden. Recreation teams compete with outside leagues. Some of the young people run the children's library and assist in the summer Bible school as teachers. Women in the community formed a sewing society and sell their wares in the local market. Above all, they have a growing sense of their own dignity and power, and of their reconciliation with God and their neighbors.

Implications for Christian development programs

What must we do to make our development programs authentically and fully Christian? First, we need to be holistic practitioners. It is not enough for each of us to do our specialized tasks. We need to recapture the vision of the whole gospel for a needy world, to examine and revise the deep assumptions—the worldviews—we bring with us in development, and to reflect together, as office staff and project workers, on the underlying premises of our work. Second, we must re-develop our tools of analysis, for our current ones too often further reductionistic or stratigraphic approaches to knowledge. A recent study by leaders at World Vision International found that

Our information is about family size, incidence of disease, agricultural productivity, and water contamination. This material analysis tends to lead to material solutions: family planning, immunization, introduction of improved seeds and bore holes. Our lack of knowledge about values, religious practices,