INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT MONEY? SOME THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

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T he widespread belief that well-being comes from money has distorted Western approaches to meeting human needs. Three alternative goals for international development are considered here from the standpoints of Human Rights and World Religions. The key goal for international development is found to be for people to be brought to a knowledge of and relationship with God.

This article is designed for a particular people and a particular age. Use of English has confined me as an author to certain accepted parameters in Western society, language, and scholarship. I would have to write differently if using Japanese, if confined to the use of ancient Hebrew in the time of Moses, or if addressing slum-dwellers in Cambodia. I consider this article to be a nudge in a certain direction, aimed at a certain people (let us say Western missiological scholars), based on my perception of their current "stand."

How Is Well-Being Defined?

If we presume the goal of international development to be to bring "good" to the people of the world, how then would we define "good"? If good is to be equated with human happiness, then what is happiness? Is contentment more important than

happiness? How is contentment measured, or happiness, or well-being? How is poverty measured? And so the questions go on, never seeming to end, and having no clear answers.

Because of the difficulties associated with measuring human well-being as such, scholars have searched for indicators. There are many of these in use, that assess the degree of "development" of a community—such as child mortality, literacy, GDP (Gross Domestic Product), life expectancy from birth, number of doctors serving a given size of community, and so on. If human well-being is put in such terms, then given technology that is known today, improvements in well-being seem to require money. Once the link with money is made, then "money" (and its associated disciplines, accountability and economics) appears to be the answer to everything. Because money is quantifiable and seems to lead to happiness and contentment, supplying money to less developed regions of the world is seen by many as the key to success in international development (as illustrated by Micah Challenge 2007).

This way of looking at international development has become extremely popular in the West for many reasons. It is a convenient way of simplifying complex situations. It is convenient to the West today, because as a result "religion" is made to appear to be a spectator and not a player in the international development game, which obviously pleases secularists. What counts for international development then is getting money and its associated processes, such as technologies, to where it is in the shortest supply. The goal of international development has become that of financial transfer. Jeffrey Sachs has done much to advance this view in his book, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* (2005).

It is almost as if the world stands by in incredulous awe as this money-oriented process continues to charge headlong, as if it could propel everyone to health and happiness for ever and ever, amen! I will not critique this view in detail in this essay, as I have already done so elsewhere (Harries 2006) except to point

out what should be obvious—whatever the importance of finances may be in propelling international development, money itself is never sufficient to bring about development. Money has to be used by a complex human being, and *how* that human being uses it is critical to the impact which it will have.

A false confidence in what can be communicated regarding appropriate uses of money, amongst other things, is often engendered by misconceived models of language and communication. I stand with Sperber and Wilson in suggesting that the widely-assumed code model of language has serious problems (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 9). Words do not carry thoughts, meanings, or anything else. Words are mere sounds (or patterns made in ink on paper, or arrangements of electrons) the impacts of which are totally dependent on the mind of the hearer. Words, such as those giving instructions on how to use money, that may be perfectly in tune with one culture and people, may make totally different sense when "heard" elsewhere. This cultural fact is often ignored in discussions of international development.

The Universal Need for Human Community and Leadership

Humans live in communities and have their needs met by other humans. Who is in charge of meeting those needs becomes critical. Hence the major efforts and publicity surrounding the choice of a president for under-developed countries these days, holding democratic (or so-called democratic[1]) elections.[2] Although numerous debates occur at election time, they are condensed into people's preferences for one person or another. If this occurs in national elections, could the same apply at international and / or super-national (or super-natural) level? Is there an inherent human tendency to give "person" priority over other kinds of goals? Do people acting as a society have a track record for naturally following a person who in turn determines their definition of well-being and means of achieving that well-being (or not)?

What if we considered that God has built into the human condition the need for another human to be the ultimate satisfier of needs? Would not Jesus meet that condition, as both fully human as well as fully divine? In fact, the ultimate judge of what is actually "good" for the nations, must be God.

Theology and Worldview Affect Development

The question of the goal of international development becomes a theological question. Theological beliefs affect economic and social states (Weber 1991:251-253). Weber discovered that religious worldviews that reject or encourage escape from the world do not lead their followers to a "rational, methodical control of life" which could lead to economic advance (1991: 270). Key questions about international development, then, are questions about God, his nature, and his will for the human condition. Thus the key to international development is found in theology. While this is denied by some scholarly approaches, it is implicitly acknowledged by others. This is illustrated by the fact that numerous conflicts around the world: between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East, between Hindus and Muslims in the Punjab, are conflicts between contesting theologies or religious worldviews. It is this sometimes ignored but vitally important component of international development that I want to consider in more detail.

Why focus on issues that appear for centuries to have brought war and conflict, some may argue? The reason, I suggest, is because something that people are ready to fight and die over must be important to them. If it is so important, can scholars afford to ignore it? Could ignoring it lead to disaster? Could it be that a highly "developed" nation without a supporting theology, is like a house built not on a rock but on sand (Matthew 7:24-27)?

People will suffer and die with or without war. One difference is that in the case of war, someone appears to be directly responsible for the suffering. War, murder and killings draw high levels of media interest and public attention, to a

degree that other ways of dying do not. Diseases like AIDS[3] cause enormous misery and usually no one can be convicted of murder in the case of an AIDS deaths. Similarly the disasters arising from misdirected international development policies imposed on the poor world by the West go unnoticed, or are covered up. These can be of many kinds, discussed in more detail in Harries (2006). In short, initiators of outside interventions that take away people's control of their own lives (often through financial inducement) are apparently not considered accountable for the messes they make by current national or international law. But messes they certainly do make, that often result in disorientation, confusion and even death. Just as freely available credit can ruin the lives of thousands or millions in the West, so the West's interventions outside its borders have created numerous calamities (Harries 2006).[4] These are the kinds of situations in which a new perspective is badly needed.

Models of International Development

I want to consider three different widely promoted models or ideals of international development in light of the above insights about the important role of theology; that of Christianity, that of Islam, and that of Human Rights. All three are textually based belief systems. All three historically have common roots in ancient Israelite religion. They all interact amongst themselves in complex ways. There is far from total agreement over the definition of each model; so we must tread carefully in comparing and contrasting the three with the ever-present danger that we can over-simplify. The differences between the three are complex rather than objective—as human beings are complex—so must our understanding of necessity be complex. But differences are surely there.

Human Rights

Western Humanists prefer the UDHR (Universal Declaration of Human Rights) to other Scriptures, presumably because it is

the most recently devised formula for well-being (1948) (General Assembly 1998a). So it fits with certain Western ideologies—it is individualistic, liberal and secular. In "fitting with the age" however the question arises—what will happen to it when "the age" changes? And the straightforward answer seems to be that it will no longer fit. If this generation thinks that it has, through documents like the UDHR now reached the pinnacle of human understanding and achievement; then it is kidding itself, as did prior generations who considered themselves to be in the same position in their time.

Islam

A large percentage of the world's population prefer the tenets of Islam to those of human rights. It may be true that many of those who prefer Islam have little choice: leaving Islam can result in social isolation by one's family or community; or even in the death penalty.[5] This points again to the importance of correct theology as a goal of international development. Islam arose from dissatisfaction with Judaism and Christianity (Guillaume 1966: 12 and 17-18), and has common roots with them, combined with Arab traditional religion. Muslims consider *their* law to be the ultimate and final—a very copy of an original kept in heaven (Sookhdeo 2001:25). For a Muslim the goal of international development is global Islamisation. As in the case of UDHR above, Muslim scriptures are considered authoritative and final. Also as for UDHR, the authoritative version is considered to be untranslatable.[6] A Koran in any language apart from Arabic is merely an imperfect copy of the real thing.[7] The language in which human rights are defined is clearly English.[8] Unlike UDHR, the Koran is considered to be the outcome of divine revelation. Interpretation, including ongoing divine inspiration, ensures certain degrees of flexibility; arguably more than that of the UDHR; which makes no claims to having a "divine origin." (Hence it attempts to conceal its deep Christian roots.)

Christianity

Christians are, or at least should be, all too aware of some of the failings of the Koran—an aggressive piece-meal reaction to and re-presentation of ancient Semitic, Christian, and Jewish teachings (Morey 1992:107-109). Islam's prominence arose, in part at least, from a weakening of Christianity caused by division and infighting. The Christian Bible, unlike UDHR or the Koran, was not written on one occasion for one generation, but over many years and oriented to many different contexts. Despite the canon being largely closed in terms of content, it is very open to translation and re-interpretation. The prominence of Protestantism has led to a proliferation of translations and interpretations. The Bible continues to be translated and re-translated into numerous languages—not as "copies" of the "real thing" (as would be the case with the Koran) but every time as fully inspired. As much of the rest of the Bible itself can be considered a commentary on the words of Moses (the Pentateuch), so numerous texts are a part of that still ever-expanding literature—including ancient Jewish writings such as the Talmud, writings of the church fathers, Augustine, church councils, right up to devotional books produced in contemporary times. Even the Koran and the UDHR itself are in a sense all later interpretations of the Bible. So the question can be asked—is the goal of international development to achieve allegiance to only small parts of an ancient heritage that ignores most of its roots (UDHR and Islam), or is it to enable the globe to benefit from the whole gamut of God's intentions for the world?

Interpretation—the Key

It should be clear that no authoritative text can survive through many generations without being either re-interpreted, or re-written. Important questions therefore regard the re-interpretation process.

Let as take an example from the UDHR. As it stands it strongly promotes education (General Assembly 1998), but it does not specify in which language education is to be conducted. This has resulted in one people's educational system (Westerners') being spread around the globe in one language. While this may be of enormous benefit to the people concerned (native English Speakers) in bringing the world into their service, it may hamper the prospects of education developing independently or addressing peculiar contexts not found in the native English speaking world. In due course, a stipulation is likely to be added to the UDHR, that the education children receive should be in a language that they understand. Such addition is the kind of 're-interpretation' that I am referring to.

If UDHR is open to such amendments, then one must question its universality. (If not, then, one must question its flexibility!) If the course of time requires such 'amendments' (or re-interpretations), as has always been the case for every other text in the world (classically the Law of Moses), then the same will apply to UDHR. But then, if the passing of time forces amendments and re-interpretations, how can one be certain that one text is valid inter-culturally? That is—if shifts in (say) Western culture require re-interpretation of authoritative texts, do the simultaneous differences *between peoples* around the world not imply that particular interpretations of UDHR were never universal in the first place? Perhaps the UDHR is best understood as just another of many texts arising in the Judeo-Christian tradition that will have their place in history like any other. If so, then it ought not be given a singular status as universal. And if the UDHR is not "universal," then how and where is it to be applied? Can it then legitimately be the goal of international development?

Sanneh points to significant differences in acceptable means of interpretation between the Bible and the Koran, because the true Koran is only legitimate in one language, namely, Arabic (Morey 1992:117). But does confinement to one language (Arabic) in one written text (the Koran[9]) mean that Islam is

unchanging? It would seem hardly so—as generation follows generation, Arabic as any other language will be used differently, so the Koran will be interpreted differently. Confining legitimate re-interpretation through the use of one language cannot mean that the interpretation of the Koran never changes, but rather that Sunni Islam (at least[10]) is tied to the whim of certain native Arabic speakers. That is, that "prescriptive authority" is given to relatively few experts so, in Sanneh's words "Arabic acts to disenfranchise the vernacular" (1989:212).

While the current internationalization of English may be threatening to do the same for the Christian church's Scripture, the Bible, the inherent and widely accepted translatability of the Bible acts against the likelihood of authoritarian control. Even the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) Jesus used was after all a translation (the Septuagint—a translation from Hebrew into Greek). The Bible retains manifold possibilities of re-interpretation, which have contributed to the kind of diversity that has long been a feature of the Christian church.

Understandings of God in Relation to the Goal of International Development

The above discussion, although of necessity brief and simplified, has considered three contemporary contenders for the role of 'goal' of international development, from the point of view of history, flexibility, universality, and ease of re-interpretation. This approach has made implicit theological assumptions. It has assumed that God exists, that he is concerned for mankind, and that therefore it is in mankind's interests to seek to pay attention to him. Those who do not share such assumptions may struggle with the arguments presented. Unlike much recent scholarship, I do not consider secularism (the theory of natural evolution, the materialist worldview etc.) to have privileged status—so my assumption are as or (I would argue) more valid than those, for example, that underlie science.

Questions on international development often implicitly concern the role of international aid-flows and transfer of science and technology. An appropriate Christian theological view of such is a part of the wider theological project. The Biblical emphasis would seem to be on *enabling* people, especially by setting them free (Luke 4:18-19) from what is evil and untoward (such as demons, e.g. Luke 4:18-20) and not on providing them with money.

By way of conclusion, I submit that the goal of international development should be to bring people to a knowledge of and relationship with God, as he is known through his Son Jesus who came to the world in human form, guided by followers of Jesus who are led by God's Spirit, as outlined in the Christian scriptures, and considered in contemporary contexts.

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Endnotes

1. Many questions have been raised as to whether African countries can have 'true democracy', especially following recent elections in Kenya and Zimbabwe. See Muhammad (2008) and Nation (2008): "The conduct of the 2007 elections [in Kenya] was so materially defective that it is impossible … to establish true or reliable results for presidential or parliamentary elections" citing an official report.

2. As I write in 2008 the Kenyan, Zimbabwean and especially American elections are taking up enormous amounts of media attention, and the focus in each case is strongly on choice of President.

3. I understand that technically AIDS is not a disease, but a state of increased vulnerability to disease.

4. I give three simple examples. One, the attack on traditional "courting" systems combined with promotion of condoms in Africa that has resulted in promiscuity which, combined with AIDS, has caused enormous suffering and early death. Two, encouragement of democracy which implies majority rule in Rwanda, that contributed to the massive genocide of 1994. Three, untold church splits in Africa arising from disputes over donor money and relationships with Westerners.

5. "In Islam all schools of law (*madhhahib*) agree that adult male apostates from Islam should be killed" (Sookhdeo 2007).

6. I suggest that the UDHR is considered 'untranslatable' because it is implemented internationally without consideration of linguistic and cultural differences. At least in much of Africa, "rights" are a foreign import and applied according to Western values (and linguistic / cultural presuppositions)—not indigenous African values and standards.

7. Illustrated by Sanneh by recounting the opposition met by an attempt to translate it to Hindi (Sanneh 1989: 211).

8. As far as East Africans are concerned. An accomplished Kiswahili speaker reading the Kiswahili version (General Assembly 1998b) easily discovers that it is a translation from English, and rooted in Western and not East African values.

9. I am for purposes of this essay ignoring the hadith and other guiding texts of Islam that may be more 'flexible" then the Koran itself.

10. Sunni Islam is more closely tied to a 'literal' interpretation of Islam than are Shia Muslims (Sookhdeo 2001:66).