

## Christian Reflections on Development

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**Abstract:** Development is an epithet that is often used when referring to the progress of countries that are economically disadvantaged. It presupposes a world in which disparity exists and where the right of disadvantaged countries to remedy their condition is recognized by those who have it in their power to help. It would include creating the conditions and structures for growth, advancement in culture and learning, a higher standard of living, being self-reliant and providing more than merely subsistence level resources for citizens in the developing countries. This article seeks to explore some humane and Christian perspectives that enable development to be fulfilling and, therefore, humanizing. We begin by asking about the meaning of development. The author concludes the article by asserting that the true practice of religion encourages accountability to at least three constituencies: the nations that are being developed, the nations that are participating in the development process and God who, as source and goal of humankind, is experienced in the different religions in the world.

**Keywords:** *Populorum Progressio*, *Pacem in Terris*, meaning of development, Papal teachings on development, Christian perspectives on development, common good, sharing, accountability.

The encyclical of pope Paul VI *Populorum Progressio* (The Development of Peoples) deals specifically with the development of peoples as it takes place in the developing nations.<sup>1</sup> Understandably, the pope does not deal with development as a social scientist would but as a person who authoritatively explicates the Christian view of development. Further, he treats of development comprehensively so that the ultimate meaningfulness of human development is viewed as humankind's forward march to its God-appointed and God-directed destiny. The occasion of its issuance is used also to refer to other Church documents dealing with social

questions: the obligation of the 'haves' to the 'have-nots', of the developed nations to the less developed nations, and of the less humanized context to the more humanized context for human growth.

Development is an epithet that is often used when referring to the progress of countries that are economically disadvantaged. It presupposes a world in which disparity exists and where the right of disadvantaged countries to remedy their condition is recognized by those who have it in their power to help. It would include creating the conditions and structures for growth, advancement in culture and learning, a higher standard of living, being self-reliant and providing more than merely subsistence level resources for citizens in the developing countries.

In the first world, countries possess the ability to offer their citizens not only the wherewithal to survive but also the opportunity and requisite means to realize their human potential to a considerable degree. For countries in the third world development is often seen as a process of catching up with the developed countries since the first world is viewed as having better attained the goals that third world countries admire: money power, hegemonic status and access to avenues of power and authority in the affairs of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Developing countries often have economies that are dependent on agriculture though some have an industrial base as well, e.g. India and Brazil. The following paragraph well describes the significant characteristics of developing countries:

They are characterized by very low income per capita (by Western standards), and therefore low savings. Development has often been held back by rapid population growth, crop failure, drought, war, and insufficient demand (at a reasonable price) for their commodities, crops and goods. In addition to many bilateral aid agreements, there are the aid programmes of the international agencies, such as the United Nations, Commonwealth Development Corporation, Alliance for Progress, and the US Aid. There are also many privately-funded charities with aid programmes. Western banks have lent large sums to the developing nations and overdue debt servicing has proved to be a problem.<sup>3</sup>

It is a moot point, however, if development should be restricted to merely realizing the goals pursued by the countries termed 'developed'. Human potential does not come to its full realization by satisfying merely material needs as listed above, even when these needs are seen to be the sole concerns of the developed nations. Human persons are transcendent, and the spiritual in all humankind must be addressed if development is to be truly human. Religion plays an important part in manifesting and articulating the transcendent aspect of human persons and the need to respond to the questions raised. Christian anthropology—as part of Christian theological reflection—seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the human phenomenon in terms of ultimate meaning. From a Christian perspective, developmental concerns include even transcendental factors in addition to those that can be classified as material and temporal since Christian anthropology is a

...critical reflection on the origin, purpose, and destiny of human life in the light of Christian belief. In distinction from cultural and physical anthropology, which, as disciplines of a social science, undertake empirical analyses of specific human societies, theological anthropology employs a variety of methods (e.g. transcendental reflection, historical investigation, phenomenological enquiry) in its study of Scripture, the Jewish-Christian tradition, the findings of the social sciences, contemporary life and thought (e.g. philosophy), and the Church's experience (e.g. worship, communal life, and service).

Development must affect the total person both at the level of the individual and the community. In addition to being concerned about GNP, balance of payments, foreign exchange reserves and growth rate in a country, it should envisage development as actively linked with the world of the spirit, ethical norms, faith, the building up of persons and communities, and the practice of values that witness to the divine. Besides, development must be seen as a parametrical concept since deficiencies that must be overcome in the world are many and varied. One may begin by categorizing a country as economically underdeveloped in relation to another that is an economic powerhouse. However, it is possible that the developed country could be classified as underdeveloped as far as its cultural and ethical standards are concerned. In each case, which are the

factors that enable us to discover authentic development taking place in the world? How would religion, specifically Christianity, contribute to the process of development taking place?

This article seeks to explore some humane and Christian perspectives that enable development to be fulfilling and, therefore, humanizing. We begin by asking about the meaning of development.

## **Part One: Development: Its Meaning**

The Victorian Era marked a period in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Victoria (1819-1901) was queen of England (1837-1901) and mechanization was introduced into industrial production with spectacular results as far as manufacturing goods for mass markets was concerned. The march of progress was seen as unstoppable, and England became the dominant colonial power in the world. The Great Exhibition of 1851 held in the Crystal Palace gave expression to the accomplishments and achievements of the country. Science and technology were viewed as passports to development both in England and throughout the world, and the human cost of such development was forgotten.<sup>5</sup>

One can be grateful that Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903) issued *Rerum Novarum* on May 15, 1891 and that this was the first major encyclical to address the concerns of the workers who suffered from the conditions created by the Industrial Revolution. From that time until the pontificate of pope John Paul II, the popes have often called attention to development and the rights and duties of both the developed and the developing countries. However, it was Karl Marx who by analyzing the dynamics of industrial production first drew attention to the plight of the worker. The first volume of *Das Kapital* (1867) preceded *Rerum Novarum* by 24 years, and while one can disagree with Marx's ideology and pronouncements on religion, he must be credited for his concern for the worker who paid the cost for progress in the Victorian Era.<sup>6</sup> After 74 years, the prophetic utterances about communism made by Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) were shown to be period-bound and largely inaccurate as to the spread of communism. However, the cause of the proletariat, and by implication of the disadvantaged and oppressed, was well served and set in motion a series of papal

documents that addressed profound questions to the economically developed countries and reminded them of their obligations towards those that were developing.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has been a time of great advance in the sphere of science and technology. But the euphoria generated by an era of unprecedented inventions, space travel, the emergence of independent states, and visions of the world as a 'global village', has been tempered by two world wars, the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic weapons, the Cold War and fundamentalist militancy. Progress in the fields of science and technology did not mean automatically that the world had become a safer place in which the human family could reside in peace and tranquillity. Attitudes of mind and heart needed to be cultivated so that care, love, hope, ethics and religion would be fostered and practised by all men and women.

A sustainable future for the world as a whole—especially as championed by the votaries of justice, peace and ecology—continues to be seen as a necessary prerequisite for development. It must take into account the need to build up the family of humankind into a community of shared values that transcends the world of mere materialism. It is then that development can take on a human face, that progress will be understood as more than mere economic gain or increase, and men and women will enjoy a Spirit-filled destiny in the world.

In the past, tracing the history of peoples that were Europe-centred was seen as synonymous with plotting the course of humankind's development. In doing so, development meant the growth of learning, appreciation for order and the rule of law, the extension of European culture to those outside Europe and, later on, the new world, and the exercise of political influence over the colonies subjugated by Portugal and Spain. In a word, development was confined to a particular society and little attention was paid to the advancement of those who were colonized. The Second World War changed the political map of the world but countries that gained political independence did not have the means to satisfy the needs and wants of their citizens.

The setting up of the United Nations on October 24, 1945 is a milestone in the history of the world. The aim of the UN body was to preserve world peace and foster international cooperation. While

international cooperation among the nations began through the different bodies in the UN, the Church in its social teaching drew attention to Christian principles that would make for authentic development. In the next section, Christianity's contribution to development—especially in the papal teachings—will be reviewed.

## **Part Two: Development and Papal Teachings**

Today's use of the term 'development' is of recent origin. Even so, it has undergone changes in its meaning. After the Second World War it was focused on nations that were economically poor; later—and taking its cue from humanists—it was applied to fostering culture, human rights and justice. Gradually it began to touch on human fulfilment as a whole.

For the Christian humanist, development will mean even more than making of this world a livable place with decent human conditions, a fair sharing of riches, and freedom and opportunity for all. In a deeper sense humanization will not be completed until the cosmos itself becomes man's, subject to his domination, stamped in his image. For, man's vocation (we have the authority of Genesis for it) embraces the transforming of this world. Genesis 9,2-3. Man is called to be the cosmos' saviour. Through his spirit man must give form to the world and to its forces. Through himself, he must rationalize and spiritualize his world. As priest of the world, man stands at the altar of the universe to offer creation, through Jesus the Recapitulator of all things, back to God, its Creator. Through man, in Teilhard de Chardin's eloquent expression<sup>7</sup>, the cosmos finds spiritual unity with the Omega.

The newer understanding of development was well articulated by Kenneth Kaunda, President of Zambia in July 1968 when he addressed the World Council of Churches at Uppsala:

The process of development implies a total transformation. It involves in developing countries the shedding of traditional values, beliefs, and indeed, behaviour relative to membership of traditional organizations or socio-economic and political groups...It

involves the birth of new values and beliefs in relation to life and new institutions<sup>8</sup> which give expression to new ideas and principles.

Ivan Illich views the Christian Church as making a special and specific contribution to development as a whole:

Only the Church can “reveal” to us the full meaning of development. To live up to this task, the Church must recognize that she is growing powerless to orient or produce development. The less efficient she is as a power the more effective she can be as a celebrant of the mystery.

This statement, if understood, is resented equally by the hierarch who wants to justify collections by increasing his service to the poor, and by the rebel-priest who wants to use his collar as an attractive banner in agitation. Both make a living off the social service the Church renders and both in my mind symbolize obstacles to the specific function of the Church, which is the annunciation of the Gospel.

This specific function of the Church must be a contribution to development which could not be made by any other institution.<sup>9</sup> I believe that this contribution is faith in Christ.

It would be difficult to unearth the concept of development, as we know it today, from the books of the bible. In the Old Testament, we find different and sociologically distinct groups referred to as “peoples” but in contrast to these there is the people of Israel. Israel is conscious of itself as called by God to be his people. The events that take place in the national history of Israel slowly lead them to grasp the meaningfulness of their status as God’s people and this status will find its eschatological fulfilment in the New Testament. But society in the past was mainly agrarian and not as mobile as today’s communities that are highly industrialized, governed mainly through democratic structures and situated in a world that has been brought together by trade, culture and interests.

The New Testament too contains little evidence of a developmental process that is sketched out. It remains a testament that people with faith receive and witness to in their lives. One looks

in vain in the New Testament to discover a blueprint of how development should be envisioned and put into practice. Just as Jesus leaves us a vision for the Church but not a blueprint, so too the teachings of Jesus and the inspiration they provide lead one to engage in developmental activity. In doing so one is being faithful to the gospel imperative of loving one's neighbour as oneself. The biblical vision of what Jesus taught did not canonize any one structure of secular authority.<sup>10</sup>

As the enduring witness to the salvific event of Jesus Christ in the world, the Church continues to urge peoples and nations to commit themselves to developmental activity as a sign of God's Reign taking more definite shape in the world. Beginning with Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, the social doctrine of the Church as reflected in succeeding papal encyclicals makes it abundantly clear that development is an obligatory task of developed countries. At the same time, they caution against understanding development in purely materialist terms. Subsequent encyclicals on social questions have clarified the stand of the Church on the means that can be employed in the process of development.

Hailed even in the Soviet Union as of moment, pope John XXIII's encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (May 15, 1961) confirmed the efforts of persons who grouped themselves in society and formed social institutions that were recognized by law (no. 59). Such associations were seen as benefitting the individual, who would otherwise have found it difficult to act on his own.

(59) Certainly one of the principal characteristics which seem to be typical of our age is an increase in social relationships, in those mutual ties, that is, which grow daily more numerous and which have led to the introduction of many and varied forms of associations in the lives and activities of citizens, and to their acceptance within our legal framework...

(60) This development in the social life of man is at once a symptom and a cause of the growing intervention of the State even in matters of such intimate concern to the individual as health and education, the choice of a career, and the care and rehabilitation of the physically or mentally handicapped. It is



also the result and the expression of a natural, wellnigh irresistible urge in man to combine with his fellows for the aims and objectives which are beyond the means or the capabilities of single individuals. In recent times this tendency has given rise to the formation everywhere of both national and international movements, associations and institutions with economic, cultural, social, sporting, recreational, professional and political ends.

Transposing this principle to development, one can say that the church would support nations that together take a stand against a policy that demeans the rights of the human person, e.g. South Africa, before the apartheid policy was disowned. The task that developing countries must apply themselves to is tellingly brought out by Pope Paul VI in the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*:

(41)...modern civilization itself often complicates the approach to God, not for any essential reason, but because it is excessively engrossed in earthly affairs. Developing nations must know how to discriminate among those things that are held out to them; they must be able to assess critically and eliminate those deceptive goods which would only bring about a lowering of the human ideal, and to accept those values that are sound and beneficial, in order to develop them alongside their own, in accordance with their own genius.

(42) What must be aimed at is complete humanism. And what is that if not the full-rounded development of the whole man and of all men? A humanism closed in on itself, and not open to the values of the spirit and to God Who is their source, could achieve apparent success. True, man can organize the world apart from God, but without God man can organize it in the end only to man's detriment.

Today, first world countries are developed economically, socially and politically. However, many of the underdeveloped countries would seem to have a more concrete and functional sense of religiosity than the developed ones. In matters of religiosity, is it not correct to claim that these countries are underdeveloped? An answer in the affirmative is possible only if development is not restricted to

the economic, social and political spheres. In fact, for pope Paul VI, the context of development is “the transition from less human conditions to those which are more human.” (20) The pope continues to identify those conditions in detail:

(21) Less human conditions: the lack of material necessities for those who are without the minimum essential for life, the moral deficiencies of those who are mutilated by selfishness. Less human conditions: oppressive social structures, whether due to the abuses of ownership or to the abuses of power, to the exploitation of workers or to unjust transactions. Conditions that are more human: the passage from misery towards the possession of necessities, victory over social scourges, the growth of knowledge, the acquisition of culture. Additional conditions that are more human: increased esteem for the dignity of others, the turning toward the spirit of poverty, co-operation for the common good, the will and desire for peace. Conditions that are still more human: the acknowledgement by man of supreme values, and of God their source and their finality. Conditions that, finally and above all, are more human: faith, a gift of God accepted by the good will of man, and unity in the charity of Christ, Who calls us all to share as sons in the life of the living God, the Father of all men.

Clearly, pope Paul VI has traced an axis for types of development that includes at its summit faith in God as that which most truly humanizes men and women in this world. This was in line with the idea of Mother Teresa who spoke about the exchange that should take place between the world of persons who were economically well-to-do but lacking faith, and the economically deprived who were rich in faith!

*Populorum Progressio* no. 19 shows that the pope was well aware of the pitfalls of understanding development uncritically

Increased possession is not the ultimate goal of nations nor of individuals. All growth is ambivalent. It is essential if man is to develop as a man, but in a way it imprisons man if he considers it the supreme

good, and it restricts his vision. Then we see hearts harden and minds close, and men no longer gather together in friendship but out of self-interest, which soon leads to oppositions and disunity. The exclusive pursuit of possessions thus becomes an obstacle to individual fulfilment and to man's true greatness. Both for nations and individual men, avarice is the most evident form of moral underdevelopment.

Pope John XXIII had already drawn attention to this same point in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963). Speaking about the common good and its content, the pope says the following:

(58)...the common good of all *embraces the sum total of those conditions of social living, whereby men are enabled to achieve their own integral perfection more fully and more easily.*

(59) Men, however, composed as they are of bodies and immortal souls, can never in this mortal life succeed in satisfying all their needs or in attaining perfect happiness. Therefore all efforts made to promote the common good, far from endangering the eternal salvation of men, ought rather to serve to promote it.

Through all the writings of the popes on social questions, there is an insistence that (a) those helping and those being helped possess the same human dignity; (b) that material assistance does not fulfil all the needs of persons since they possess transcendence and have immortal souls; (c) that interactions between the economically rich and the poor should be carried out in a spirit of sharing.

### **Part III: Christian Perspectives on Development**

In the concluding section of this article, an attempt is made to put together some perspectives that should characterize any development process.

#### **I. *An Attitude of Sharing***

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10/29-37) remains as the enduring paradigm of the close relationship that human persons share with one another in this world. In choosing to go to the aid of the person who is in need, the Samaritan shows that he recognizes his neighbour as his other self. In the case of developed nations helping other developing nations, the message of this parable is surely pertinent. The vitiating factor in helping developing nations is

supplying them aid “with strings”. A Christian way of sharing is to give to another what one deems necessary for oneself, no less.

To act as a Christian is think of the good of the other. In all development activity, the other’s culture, beliefs and way of life must be respected. Exclusion on the basis of creed, code or cult must be eschewed. Collaborative efforts are justified because of the human dignity that is shared by persons of different faith persuasions.

## **2. *Working for the Common Good***

The common good is predicated of all the individuals who make up a community. The world is seen as a global village from certain angles. However, power blocks and elite interests—globalization tends to foster selfish interests—which are present in developing as well as developed countries in the world often succeed in hijacking agendas meant to benefit the common good. The invasion of Iraq seems to be a clear example of selfish interests causing much distress and destruction to the people living in the Middle East.

Collective action derives from democratic values that are practised by peoples and nations. Such action is not the imposition of the rule of the majority—read “developed countries”—but offers all sections of society a chance to be heard and listened to. Development that will benefit all peoples and nations must be carried out in a democratic context; otherwise the fruits of development could easily benefit private interests but not the general public.

## **3. *Accountability***

The success that development efforts are supposed to bring must be checked out. A case in point is the Sardar Sarovar Project. Mr. Dilip D’souza comments insightfully on the roles of persons like Medha Patkar and her associates in their struggles:

Over the years, Medha Patkar and the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) have fought much more than just the construction of a dam in the Narmada river. They have fought to question this very idea of development. What is it? What has it done for us? Whose development is it? Whom has it benefited? Whom has it hurt?<sup>11</sup>

In the spirit of Matthew 25 (The Last Judgment) the true practice of religion encourages accountability to at least three constituencies: the nations that are being developed, the nations that are participating in the development process and God who as source and goal of humankind, is experienced in the different religions in the world.

## Notes

1. May 26, 1967.
2. One can think of the G-8 summits, the power blocks in the world even after the Cold War, the countries that can exercise vetoes in the UN Security Council and the unjustified and illegal occupation of land by countries possessing conventional and atomic might.
3. David Crystal: *The New Penguin Encyclopedia*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2002, "Developing Countries," p 447.
4. Robert A. Kreig: "Theological Anthropology" in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* edited by Richard P. McBrien, New York, 1995, p 64.
5. The novels of Charles Dickens (1812-1870) illustrate well the social evils in the wake of the Industrial revolution.
6. The USSR came to an end in 1991 when, after the *Glasnost* initiated by Gorbachev after 1985, the Russian Federation came into existence. 1991 was also the year in which pope John Paul II issued his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* to commemorate pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* and the beginning of many encyclicals that dwelt on the social doctrine of the Church. It is somewhat disappointing that *Centesimus Annus* in numbers 41-42 desists from honouring Marx for stirring the conscience of the world in regard to the plight of the workers.
7. Philip Land: "Social and Economic Processes of Development" in *Theology meets Progress* edited by Philip Land, Gregorian University Press, Rome, 1971, p 4.
8. See Philip Land, p 9.
9. Ivan Illich: *The Church, Change and Development*, edited by Fred Eychaner, Urban Training Center Press, (Herder and Herder), New York, 1970, p 17.
10. During the time of Constantine the Great in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, there was an understanding that he was God's chosen to exercise (monarchical) authority in the secular state. This was the foundation for judging regicide unacceptable; it was also the paradigm that Henry VIII employed when he made himself the head of the Church in England. Gradually, however, even after popes had expressed their reservation with socialist trends in society, the gospel message is understood as compatible with democratic government.
11. Dilip D'Souza: *The Narmada Dammed, An Inquiry into the Politics of Development*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2002, p xiii.

No of words: 4424

Date received: June 9, 2007; Date approved: June 17, 2007.