

III THE CHURCHES AND DEVELOPMENT

by Charles Elliott*

I

In this short note, I shall discuss three contributions the churches have made in the past and will continue to make in the future to development: the definition of development, the mobilization of opinion in the so-called developed countries in favour of development-oriented policies, and direct development assistance on a project basis. Immediately, it will be recognized that to speak of the churches is at best a shorthand which fails to distinguish the different emphases in different denominations and, perhaps more important, between the activities of the "official" church (e.g. in the Roman Catholic Church the Conferences of Bishops or the hierarchy) and those of groups of activists who are theologically the church in action. Since they have less official status, they are sometimes not recognized as such. It would be a great distortion to confine the concept of the churches merely to the official pronouncements of the hierarchy or the bishops.

Having said that, it remains true that most of the work that has gone on in the churches in attempting to define development is embodied in encyclicals, pastoral letters or conciliar publications, such as the Report of the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Uppsala in 1968 or such ecumenical publications as the Beirut Report of the Committee on Society, Development and Peace, (constituted by the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Commission Justice and Peace). The main burden of these attempts has been to try to ensure that in the process of development concern for the human is not lost. To that extent it has constituted a revolt against

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technocratic assumptions about what development is and has, therefore, stressed the distinction between economic growth, economic development and human development or humanization. The general emphasis has been that the object of policy should not be to maximize growth or even economic development, but some largely unquantifiable concept of humanization.

In recent years ecumenical thinking has been much influenced by Latin America and, therefore, in the most recent publications there is much stress on development as liberation. Theologically, this is a very appropriate theme since liberation underlies the history both of Israel from Old Testament times and the church and, therefore, makes it possible to link spiritual concepts of development (i.e. the liberation of all men from their individual and corporate egocentricity) with the political, economic and social concepts of development (i.e. the liberation of all men from their individual and corporate ignorance, disease, unemployment, dependence and domination). Implicit here is the vision of a developed society. Utopian though it may be - and Christians are not as scared of utopian ideals as Marxists - the developed society is one in which men are free of their own spiritual and psychological constraints and in which the social, economic and political environment is such as to protect that freedom.

From this conception of development it follows directly that the conventional distinction between the developing and the developed countries is not acceptable since no society on this definition is developed. Indeed, the richer countries have in recent years revealed just how undeveloped they are. This then leads us into a semantic problem, since the concept of development is thereby rendered almost useless as it can no longer serve as a differentia. It is at this point that the ecumenical debate now

seems to have got bogged down. The search is on for an adequate set of differentiae which will distinguish the materially poor countries from the materially rich, but lay adequate emphasis on all the other variables which are included in the ecumenical conception of development. Partly to get out of this bog, more stress is now put upon under-development, as characterized by many writers in Latin America and, increasingly, in South East Asia, as a condition of political, cultural and economic domination and dependence.

This focus has added substance to the strategic debate about the future relations between the rich and the poor: many "under-developmentalists" have argued that the only way out of the condition of under-development is isolation along the lines of post-Meiji Japan, post-revolutionary China or post-revolutionary Cuba. This immediately sharpens the theological debate about world community, mutual inter-dependence and mutual inter-responsibility. From a theological standpoint, most Christians would argue that the community of man implies an international political and economic community working towards the ending of dependent relationships. But this conception of international relationships obviously conflicts with those who consider that the only possible way forward for the developing countries is to sever their relationships, which are by definition dependent or dominated, with the developed countries.

A subsidiary theme within the debate about what precisely constitutes development is the less discussed but no less crucial issue of population control. The theme is less discussed primarily because, apart from a very small fringe group, there is no real divergence of opinion among those professionally competent to discuss development. Even in Latin America, the groups in the Catholic Church concerned with development are under no illusions about the need for

population control and most of these, though certainly not all, would agree that population control implies birth-control. Indeed, it was a pleasurable surprise recently to visit a birth-control clinic run by a Jesuit priest! Such research as has been done on the subject, such as that by Roger Vekemans at DESAL* in Santiago, suggests that Humanae Vitae has had virtually no effect at the grass-roots level. It has, however, had a most unfortunate effect at the national level where it has strengthened the hands of those who, for quite other reasons (political or military), have been resisting the introduction of government-sponsored birth-control programmes. It is naive to expect an official change of view by the Vatican, but recent developments in ecclesiastical organization in the Roman Catholic Church suggest that increasing authority will be left with the National Councils of Bishops. It will be up to them to impose or dilute the force of Humanae Vitae on their constituents.

While it is true that except for the Russian and Greek Orthodox Churches almost all other denominations accept the practice of birth-control, there is an increasing tide of revulsion in the churches at the insensitivity and crudity with which birth-control is separated from total family health care, in which the practice of birth control should be set. This revulsion, according well with the reaction of many developing countries, is directed primarily against some of the early attempts of the multi-lateral and bi-lateral population programmes, which gave the impression that the donor agencies regarded birth control as a cheap form of aid or a political insurance. "The Americans think they can prevent a Vietnam on their doorstep by distributing the pill", may

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be a bitter reaction, but it reflects quite faithfully the political response that has been increasingly echoed in ecumenical discussions.

II

It is in the second area, namely that of educating their constituents and all men of good will about the policy implications of development, that the churches have been much less successful. Although Christian Aid, Action for World Development, OXFAM and the other British relief and voluntary agencies have made something of an exception in the United Kingdom, taking the world view, the churches have failed to get across to the man in the pew (alias the common voter) the fact that development is ultimately a political problem which requires political solutions by the developed countries. It is a cliché that there are no votes in development and the churches have so far largely failed to change the truth of that cliché.

There are signs, however, not only in the UK but also in Germany, Holland, Scandinavia, Canada and, though to a much less extent, in the United States, that this could change. Since Uppsala, the Protestant churches have become much less wary of political involvement and the idea that Christian obedience might well entail the organization of political lobbies is no longer the way-out doctrine that it would have seemed only five years ago. On the Roman Catholic side, the picture is a good deal more complicated, particularly in predominantly Catholic countries such as France and Italy; but the political impact of such pro-development encyclicals as Populorum Progressio can be easily underestimated.

The fact remains, however, that there is still a vast educational job to do. The churches are only just beginning to gear themselves to tackle it. And, indeed, there are many churches, the more traditional, fundamentalist and pietistic, which have so far failed to see the connection between theology and politics. The immensity of the task is not adequately measured in terms of materials to be produced, hours to be put into lectures, discussions, study courses, or yards of filmstrip to be shown. The real problem goes much deeper than the administrative. In David Paton's phrase, the fact is that one is trying to sell basically left-wing ideas to a basically right-wing constituency. The fact that one still gets Colonel Blimp-ish remarks in Church Assembly, such as, "Why should we support an increase in foreign aid when the recipients are rude to us at the United Nations" (sic), reveals that the churches, at least in their official representation, are still more Throne-and-Altar Tories than international radicals - or even, and here lies the real core of the problem, sensitive and imaginative interpreters of the Gospel they claim to believe.

As I emphasized in the first section, one has to look beyond the official church to see radical reinterpretation of traditional theology resulting in radical social action on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, the marginados, of the world at large. And it is precisely in such groups, whether technically Christian or not, as Action for World Development, that one finds it. It is to the activities of these groups rather than to the voice of ecclesiastical officialdom that politicians can be made to respond. And, as I have already stressed, the signs are that the politicians are becoming aware that the churches can deliver a political punch. Judith Hart was recently told by a group of Labour M.Ps that, "The churches have put the

ball at your feet", and Bernard Braine in his C.P.C. pamphlet, Overseas Development, singles out the churches as the major political force demanding a more generous attitude to aid issues.

III

I have already mentioned the activities of the churches in raising and dispensing money for relief and development projects. It is exceedingly difficult to quantify this flow of finance even for one country and totally impossible for the world at large. The Division of Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service of the World Council of Churches, for instance, receives around \$13 million a year for its project list (currently including about 600 projects, of which roughly half will be taken up in any one year) and the needs of the refugee programme. But that \$13 million represents only a small fraction of all that is raised by the churches and spent in the developing countries - namely, that fraction which the individual churches choose to spend ecumenically. To it must be added the total amount given by churches and mission boards directly for the support of projects of all kinds and by the sixteen church-related service agencies, which put only a proportion of their total receipts through the Division of Inter-Church Aid of the World Council of Churches. That this scale of giving will increase is as certain as anything can be in the unpredictable field of aid. At a recent conference of the World Council of Churches, the member churches, comprising nearly all major Protestant and Orthodox Churches, were urged to give 2 per cent of gross church revenues to an Ecumenical Development Fund, the significance of which will be discussed below. On the Roman Catholic side, the establishment last year of the Bishops'

Synod Fund suggests that development finance from the Roman Catholic Church will rise substantially over the next three or four years.

Much more important than the quantity of aid mobilized by the churches, however, is its quality. It is here that the churches have something significant to contribute to the total development effort and if they start from a very weak position, the evidence is that they are rapidly gearing themselves up to meet the challenge. The base is weak precisely because the churches have traditionally thought of overseas giving as being the financing of capital projects of a fairly narrow variety, e.g. churches, hospitals, schools, trade schools, limited agricultural extension and some few social service projects. Now that the churches increasingly realize both the importance of development and its indivisibility from the church's true mission, they find themselves embarrassed by claims from their traditional forms of expenditure and by the urgency of development needs in the poor countries. So there is already underway a structural shift in the pattern of the churches' spending overseas from the traditional outlets to more development-oriented projects.

It is here that the churches' independence and international character give them significant advantages. They can afford to take risks; they can afford failure; they can afford to experiment with new forms of cooperation, new forms of development, new forms of community organization. They can use their independence vis-à-vis government both to supplement national development plans or to make good politically motivated lacunae in the patterns of expenditure of the host government. Examples of the former would be a bore-hole drilling project in the Northern Province of Malawi, and, of the latter,

the education of Indians in Brazil and Ecuador. This is not to suggest that all, or even most, church giving agencies are yet activated by this adventurous spirit of experimentation. It is merely to suggest that this is the way in which the more progressive elements are thinking and the goal to which they are working. The establishment of the Ecumenical Development Fund in January of this year suggests that the mainstream churches at least are convinced of its necessity.

The final feature that needs emphasis relates directly to the modus operandi of the Ecumenical Development Fund. The churches in the poor countries have become increasingly critical of the ecclesiastical aid relationship. It is no secret that the Division of Inter-Church Aid of the World Council of Churches, for instance, has been criticized as a donors' club. The Ecumenical Development Fund, therefore, seeks to establish new forms of aid relationship, and current thinking, not yet accepted as policy, is that the Fund will accept finance from any source that is prepared to make it available and transfer it in sizeable untied blocks to regional committees on which the donor's voice would be at best muted. In other words, this marks the end of the project list approach and a major shift in responsibility from the donors to the recipients.