

# Christian Theology on Setting Goals for International Development<sup>1</sup>

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In June 2010 staff from the Methodist Relief and Development Fund visited a small village in the African country of Togo to evaluate the work of a local partner organization. The village had an unusual means of purifying water to drink. Seasonal rain is kept in large communal storage tanks where it quickly becomes infested with insects and covered with algae. To clean it, the water is strained through cotton to remove most of the visible impurities. Then the villagers add sizeable quantities of bleach to kill bacteria. The effects upon the health of those who drink it are not good but it is still safer than drinking water without bleach in it.

The village in Togo is in a particularly poor area of a particularly poor country in the poorest of the world's continents, but the poverty of these Togolese villagers is far from unique. According to the United Nations 60–80 per cent of the population of Togo live on less than \$1 a day. The UN further estimates<sup>3</sup> that one in seven of the world's population, roughly 1 billion people, live on less than \$1 a day. Poverty is not a new phenomenon in human history: as Jesus remarked: 'the poor you have with you always'. But since international efforts to reconstruct Europe at the end of the Second World War two ideas have gained currency that have resulted in poverty being viewed in a new way. The first is that poverty is unjust and the second is that the world has the means, if only it had the will, to eliminate poverty. The relatively modern idea that governments and international agencies both can and should seek to make poverty history has coincided with, and shaped the globalization of the world economy and has led to what we may term the international development industry. The amount of aid given by developed to developing countries is rising year on year, in spite of global recession. In 2008/9 official aid given by the UK Government as part of its bilateral international relationships, or through multilateral agencies such as the United Nations and the European Union, totalled around £1.2 billion. Add to that development giving through charitable agencies, and development giving by the UK alone comes to around £1.5 billion a year. Compared with the money disbursed by the UK Government to keep the banking industry afloat in the current recession, this is a small sum; but by most other standards it makes the 'development industry' big business. What is all that expenditure aiming to achieve?

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What is the end at which development aims? What *good* is development?

For most of the last 60 years these questions have been answered in purely economic terms. Development has meant, quite simply, economic development, measurable in terms of a rise – or sadly, just as often a fall – in Gross National Product, or by rises and falls in individual average income. But in recent decades purely economic approaches to development have been increasingly challenged by development theorists<sup>4</sup> and now the policies of multinational and national governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations have begun to incorporate broader, richer or ‘thicker’ accounts of the goods at which development aims. Development theorists and economists are showing increasing interest in political and moral philosophical questions about what constitutes a good human life.

The main type of philosophically-alert development theory has been a human rights-based approach that links rights denial, vulnerability and conflict to impoverishment. A rights-based approach conceives development as a *process* aiming at the achievement of human *well-being* rather than as a *means to economic growth*. Rights-based development is rooted in the conviction that particular universal rights are intrinsic to individuals and to communities, and are not at the discretion of organizations or governments in the developed world graciously to give when it suits them. Rights-based approaches to development have been taken up, e.g. by DFID and UNICEF as well as by several NGOs such as Oxfam; but they have also been embraced by some faith-based organizations, such as Christian Aid.

The Indian Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has been particularly influential in the rise of these more human-centred approaches to development. Sen has proposed the expansion of freedom ‘as the primary end and principal means of development’ and understands development therefore as ‘the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency’<sup>5</sup>, an approach he terms *capability theory*. In Sen’s most recent book, *The Idea of Justice*, he acknowledges that ‘any substantive theory of ethics and political philosophy, particularly any theory of justice, has to choose an informational focus, that is, it has to decide which features of the world we should concentrate on in judging a society and in assessing justice and injustice’. This involves assessing an individual’s advantage which, in capability theory, ‘is judged by a person’s capability to do things he or she has reason to value’.<sup>6</sup> Among questions raised by such an approach for Sen is ‘how does capability link with the well-being of a person?’<sup>7</sup> Must the expansion of

capability invariably result in the enhancement of human well-being? Sen is cautious in answering, firstly because a moral agent may well have goals other than her own well-being; and secondly because he distinguishes the achievement of well-being from the *freedom* to achieve well-being.

Yet though Sen's thinking on development has helped shift debate from simply economic approaches towards more complexly human-centred development, his philosophical anthropology and his corresponding account of human flourishing are relatively thin. As one commentator puts it:

Like many economists and philosophers, [Sen] provides a theory of *well-being* on the basis of relatively little explicit discussion of simply being, or of good lives – in his case more, it is true, than in mainstream economics but still very incomplete compared to studies of what brings people satisfaction.<sup>8</sup>

For Christians engaged with international development one might suppose that thinking through what makes for a good life would be essential, but this is rarely the case and attention to anthropology in the growing theological literature on international development is typically scant relative to reflection upon justice and the nature of poverty.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the goals set by many Church-based relief and development agencies are shaped by an international standard for development agencies published by the Red Cross that also shapes most secular aid agencies, with the result that development work undertaken by many Church-based agencies is sometimes practically indistinguishable – aside from a few rhetorical decorations – from that undertaken by secular development agencies.

In what follows I want to suggest three insights concerning a Christian understanding of the good life that might help to orient an authentically Christian engagement with international development. But note that in seeking *authentically* Christian development practices I am not aiming necessarily at *distinctively* Christian practices in development, though that is one possible result. My interest, to be quite clear, is not to establish the superiority of a Christian development work, whether in comparison to e.g., humanist development work or Muslim development. Co-operation between Christians and non-Christians in development is highly desirable, and in any case, making apologetic or evangelical profit from poverty is distasteful to me. More modestly I am proceeding on the simple assumption that Christian practices arise, amongst other things, from thoughtful and attentive engagement with Christian Scripture and the tradition of the interpretation of that Scripture by Christian people.

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It may help at this point to tell a story. At an early stage of post-war development in Bosnia, I visited the offices of a large Church-based aid and development agency in Sarajevo. The Church-based agency in question was one of the largest aid agencies at work in the Balkans, specializing in reconstructing houses and resettling displaced persons. I was consequently wearing a clerical shirt and the receptionist, who I later learned had worked there for more than a year, told me I could not enter the offices dressed in clerical dress. We are, she said, ‘a non-religious agency’. It was therefore to her great surprise that I explained that the large charity logo under which she sat was based on an acronym that included the name of a Christian Church and that the agency was part, therefore, of the Church’s mission. Visiting the agency’s house building programme the same day, I found that local staff working for the agency had little idea they were working for a Church and that the ex-patriot development professionals, while aware that the agency was Church-based, were mostly indifferent to the fact or embarrassed by it.

Does it matter if those receiving aid from a Church-based agency are not aware of its Christian source? Does it matter if those working for an agency are not persons of faith? By most criteria it doesn’t matter. If I have toothache, I don’t care if my dentist is Christian – I just want him or her to sort my teeth out as painlessly as possible. Similarly, what both donors to, and recipients of, development aid most expect is efficiency, accountability and value for money. In the case of the work of the Church agency in my illustration, this means a competitive unit cost for each house built, quality of build, speed and the number of local workers employed. Such things can be measured quantitatively: they can be counted in cents and dollars, hours and minutes, and such are the units that development agencies work in. In any case, if we approach this in terms of human well-being, of the conditions necessary for a good life, then security and shelter are undoubtedly goods from a human rights perspective and, surely, they are also goods from the perspective of Christian theology? Shelter and security are necessary for a good human life, but are they sufficient goods?

To begin to answer these questions, I want to turn for assistance to David H. Kelsey’s interpretation of the Lord’s Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew in his recent and outstanding work on Christian theological anthropology.<sup>10</sup> Kelsey understands that the central block of teaching in Matthew’s Gospel on what constitutes a good life from a Christian point of view is the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5.3–11 the Gospel writer reports Jesus’ teaching on what makes for a state of what English translations call ‘beatitude’, or blessedness or, less often and more misleadingly, for ‘happiness’.

Jesus, of course, spoke Aramaic. But the Greek word ‘μακάριοι’ used by Matthew to render Jesus’ teaching had quite a bit of philosophical history. Aristotle, for example, differentiated between ‘εὐδαίμων’ – whatever life is most desirable – and ‘μακάριος’ – a rarified blessedness achievable theoretically by the gods. But by the time Matthew used the word it was used commonly both in colloquial wisdom sayings and in esoteric mystery religions. Using a series of sayings in order to contrast a wise or blessed religious life with a foolish or woeful life was not something Jesus himself invented: it is a way of speaking used, for example, in the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus/Sirach 25.8–11. What is new in Jesus’ teaching about blessedness/happiness is that this state of being is rooted in the distinctive joy an individual finds by sharing in the salvation of the kingdom of God. Jesus’ interest is not simply, therefore, in practical wisdom: he means to proclaim that the rule of God promised by the Prophets is, in his life and ministry, being enacted now on earth.

If the Sermon on the Mount may be considered the centre of the Gospel’s teaching on what makes for a good life, then the Lord’s Prayer may reasonably be said to be the centre of the Sermon’s teaching. The prayer is introduced with an instruction to ‘pray then in this way’, not, I think, a direction simply to repeat the words of the prayer that follow, but to approach all saying of prayer in a way that is modelled in Jesus’ prayer. The Lord’s Prayer is not the only prayer Christians are to say, but an example of the way Christians are to approach prayer.

The prayer that follows has a deliberate symmetry: its first three petitions are addressed to God: ‘*your name*’, ‘*your kingdom*’, ‘*your will*’. The next three petitions have to do with human creatures: ‘*our bread*’, ‘*our debts*’, do not bring *us* to the time of trial’. This symmetrical balance between an address to God in prayer, and an address to human creatures in action, reflects a balance evident in the Sermon as a whole. The first three petitions addressed to God are distinct from the next three petitions, but they are also inseparable from them. Putting this simply love of God is not reducible to love of neighbour and love of neighbour is not reducible to love of God. A Christian life, a life in blessing or beatitude, is a life lived *both* in loving response to God *and* in loving response to one’s fellow human creatures.

The first two petitions addressed to God (Matt. 6.9–10) are that God’s name be made holy and that God’s will be done on earth in the same way as it is done in heaven. Making sense of the two petitions is difficult because the Greek verbs used do not indicate clearly whether it is God who makes his own name holy and his own will come on earth, or whether

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human beings make God's name holy and bring about his will on earth as in heaven. But perhaps the ambiguity is intended: the ambiguity suggests that human beings participate as active agents in bringing about the coming kingdom or rule of God. If that is what is meant, again, it fits with the teaching of the Sermon as a whole. Human deeds, human actions in the world can be acts of co-operation with God so long as it is recognized that these acts respond to God's own initiative. Alone, human agents cannot and do not build the kingdom: God's rule is established by God with or without human co-operation.

The first of the three petitions (Matt. 6.11) oriented towards fellow human creatures is an unashamedly material prayer – a prayer for bread. Bread stands here for the nourishment needed to sustain human life – but not, I suspect, for a broader set of physical or material needs: it means the things needed to meet my daily need, and not for iPhones or designer clothes.

The next petition (Matt. 6.12) is concerned with human community, with inter-personal relationships. In this petition, the Christian prays for God to forgive her own sins as she has forgiven those who have sinned against her. Reconciliation between me and my fellow human creatures is to reflect the reconciliation between me and God that is already coming about in the ministry of Jesus. Note, here, the balance between the material prayer for bread and the prayer for restored or reconciled relationship – neither having priority over the other.

The final petition has, once again, some ambiguity reflected in the several ways it may be translated: does verse 13 pray for deliverance from particular temptations or from temptation in general? Does it pray for deliverance from temptation or more generally from affliction? What are we to make of the prayer for delivery from evil? As before, I think that the important point to note here is that this petition assumes that God's action in preserving the one who prays from temptation requires the one who prays herself to respond to God's gracious action by avoiding temptation.

There are, I am suggesting, reasons why this text is particularly useful for our purposes. Beyond the advantages of its brevity, accessibility and familiarity, the Lord's Prayer focuses some key themes in the Sermon on the Mount concerning what makes up a good, blessed or happy life. The Lord's Prayer offers a condensed vision of appropriate ways of being in relationship to God and to fellow human creatures in response to which God promises particular blessings in the Sermon on the Mount taken as a whole. In a moment I will try to isolate three points on which to invite reflection. Before doing so, however, it is important to be clear that I am

not for one moment suggesting that appropriate or authentically Christian approaches to international development can be read off the text of the Bible – even from the Sermon on the Mount – as if the Bible were a simple set of instructions capable of being understood without any interpretation. The ways in which the Bible shapes Christian moral theology or Christian ethics are both more complex and more richly beautiful than the analogy of the Bible as instruction book allows for. But it is equally clear that the search for an authentically Christian account of a good human life would need strong reasons for neglecting the Sermon – which makes it all the more puzzling that much Christian writing encouraging engagement in international development has paid the Sermon little attention, turning instead either to themes of liberation in the book of Exodus, or to the Minor Prophets’ brief sayings calling for defence of widows and orphans in preference to cultic sacrifice.

So, first some preliminary observations. The world as it is assumed to be in the Sermon as a whole and in the Lord’s Prayer in particular is not a world in which people do not suffer. It is, rather, a world in which hunger is a daily possibility, a world in which people are estranged from God and from each other and need to forgive and seek forgiveness, a world in which unspecified temptation or affliction is a daily reality one prays to avoid. There is no question in the Sermon of the possibility of escaping this kind of world or of seeking to escape it. Rather, this world is simply assumed to be the context in which human life takes place. Yet this proximate context of day-to-day reality is not the only context: there is, further, the context of God, an ultimate context. These two contexts of a good life – the proximate context of day-to-day human life, and the ultimate context of relationship to God – are closely related and one may not, from the point of view of the Sermon, chose to live in one and not the other context.

This leads neatly to the three points I want to make:

1. A life shaped by the Sermon on the Mount, and by the Lord’s Prayer in particular, is likely to be a life oriented not towards oneself but oriented beyond oneself towards the good of one’s fellow creatures and to God. In David Kelsey’s phrase, the Christian life is *an eccentric existence* – that is an existence directed outwards from the self towards God and the other. The promise of a good life, of a blessed life, is found in the community of God and humankind found in worship and in corresponding patterns of reconciled and nourished human community. It is a way of being that is characterized by giving and receiving. Such a way of being with and for God and with and for one’s fellow human

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creatures need not preclude the pursuit of outcomes that look very like human rights, but they will involve quite distinct motivating attitudes.

2. The second point I want to draw out from the Lord's Prayer in relation to the good life is that love of God and love of one's fellow human creatures, and the practices that characterize these loves, are distinct and are not reducible one to the other. Thus, love of God and the practices characteristic of the love of God such as worship and prayer cannot substitute for love of fellow human creatures and the practices expressive of that love. Similarly, a life of love directed towards one's fellow human creatures cannot substitute for love directed to God and practices expressive of that love. Simply put, from the perspective of the Sermon on the Mount, a good life, a blessed life, will be a life in which love of God and love of the fellow human are *both* appropriately expressed.
3. A third and final point on which I want to invite reflection is that the petitions 'your kingdom come' and 'give us this day', or 'give us today the bread we need for tomorrow' suggest that a certain fragility is an inevitable part of the human condition. This is certainly not an insight that would permit any complacency – the Beatitudes call for a tireless and very active hunger and thirst for righteousness, for example. Yet the coming kingdom is nonetheless a matter of *God's* promise. The gift exchanges, of nourishment, of forgiveness and so on, are not part of a totalizing programme of change, for example of making poverty history. Forgiveness, bread, the giving of a cup of water: these are perhaps best *not* thought of as steps on the way to some programme to transform unjust social structures (which may, nonetheless be a result of them). Rather, they are to be considered in the same way as the celebration of the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist is considered: as a first taste of a state of fulfilled or consummated created existence, a sign and instance in the present of something that is promised. Again borrowing a phrase from David Kelsey, they are *ad hoc* 'parables' of the in-breaking of God's rule on earth as it is in heaven.

My earlier illustration of a Church-based agency in Sarajevo that made little of its Christian origins on the ground raised some of broad issues facing Church-based development agencies. My reading of the Lord's Prayer prompts several questions in response:

- To what extent does Church-based work international development work diminish the sense of relationship and of gift exchange in relationship by professionalizing the delivery of aid?

- To what extent does Church-based development work separate love of God and love of neighbour in ways that distort the inseparable relationship between them?
- To what extent do Church-based development agencies help those supporting their work, those benefitting from their work, and those undertaking their work, to see and understand that work as an ad hoc parable of the inbreaking of God's rule on earth as it is in heaven?

In conclusion it is helpful to recall Dietrich Bonhoeffer's distinction between ultimate things and penultimate things.<sup>11</sup> The penultimate and the ultimate are, he wrote, intimately connected – since the penultimate always prepares the way for the ultimate, which cannot indeed come about without the penultimate. Nonetheless they are not to be conflated or confused. Bonhoeffer's illustration for this returns us to the theme of water with which I opened my article. There is little point, he said, proclaiming the ultimate word of forgiveness to a thirsty man until one has given him a glass of water to drink. However, the glass of water is not itself the ultimate word of the gospel but a penultimate word.

A committed, efficient, accountable and imaginative response to the scandal of world poverty is, I want to claim, something God wills for Christians to make; but God wills that this be done in ways that make real in the world the intimate connection between love of God and love of neighbour.

### FURTHER READING

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### NOTES

- 1 This paper is a shortened version of a paper given at the University of Flensburg, 7 July 2010.
- 2 Stephen Plant is Robert Runcie Fellow and Dean of Trinity Hall and an Affiliated Lecturer at the University of Cambridge.
- 3 See <http://heartsandminds.org/poverty/hungerfacts.htm> consulted 5 July 2010.
- 4 For example, Easterly, William, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good* (Oxford: OUP, 2007); Moyo, Dambiso, *Dead Aid: Why Aid is not working and how there is another way for Africa* (London: Allen Lane Press, 2009); Riddell, Roger C., *Does Foreign Aid Really Work* (Oxford: OUP 2007).
- 5 Sen, Amartya, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: OUP, 1999) p. xii.
- 6 Sen, Amartya, *The Idea of Justice* (London: Allen Lane Press, 2009) p. 231.
- 7 Sen, Amartya, *The Idea of Justice*, p. 286.
- 8 Gasper, Des, *The Ethics of Development* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) p. 179.
- 9 See, e.g., White, Sarah and Tiongco, Romy, *Doing Theology and Development* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew's Press, 1997).
- 10 Kelsey, David H., *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville KN: WJK, 2009 in two volumes) volume 2, pp. 738–827).
- 11 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) pp. 147–70.