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Christian Faith and its Role in Humanitarian Relief and Holistic Development

by Kurt Bangert

I.   The Role of the Christian Church

  a.   Helping people in need is at the core of the Christian Faith

    i.   Jesus served people's physical as well as spiritual needs;

    ii.   Likewise, the church is to address people's physical as well as spiritual needs;

    iii. A church that does not help people in need, fails to fulfill its mission, fails to fulfill its *raison d'ètre*.

  b.   The Church cannot extend these services everywhere at the same time by the same people and through the same institutions. The Church must divide itself into competence centers (service division):

    i.   Church service is to preach the Christian message and to address spiritual needs;

    ii.   Counselling Centers are to attend to people's emotional needs;

    iii. Social organizations (Christian NGOs) are to address people's physical needs.

II.   Types of NGOs and their relation to Faith

  a.   There are basically three or even four types of NGOs:

    i.   Secular NGOs doing humanitarian relief and development without any interest in religious or ideological persuasion (examples: *Deutsche Welthungerhilfe* (German Agro Action), Oxfam, *terre des hommes*, Plan International); however:

      1.   These NGOs may be secular, but they are by no means value-free

      2.   Many of them are based in the North/West and bring Northern/Western values to the table,

      3.   Their staff often are often religious people who bring their values and their biases to the table

      4.   Even if they are atheists or agnostics, they are not value-free and not without bias.

    ii.   Faith-based Organizations (FBO) doing relief and development *without* a missionary mandate, but which nevertheless do have a religious heritage or consider themselves an expression of their faith (examples: Brot f/d Welt, Misereor); these must be very careful in what they do and what they say they do because:

      1.   They are sometimes criticized simply for being Christian, i.e. the very fact that they profess to be Christian is used against them, and they are blamed for a hidden agenda. (I have not heard that Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim NGOs are criticized in a similar way)

2. Even if these FBO do not themselves engage in missionary activities, they may *indirectly* still strengthen their own religion by supporting the social/diaconical programs of local churches (or other indigenous religious groups).

iii. Faith-based organizations *with* a missionary mandate, which are also doing relief and/or development (examples: Missio, Adveniat, VEM, Mission EineWelt (Neuendettelsau)). Their primary purpose is to support churches and church groups in other countries, but they very often also raise funds for emergencies. Often, they jump on the bandwagon of a public disaster relief campaign. These FBOs must also take precautions:

1. They ought to be candid about their missionary mandate and purposes
2. If they engage in relief and development, they occasionally will face the criticism of doing relief & development only as a means to an end, and that criticism is sometimes well-founded

iv. There is yet another type of FBO: those NGOs claiming *not* to have a missionary mandate but still pursuing such a mandate.

1. They actually do have a hidden agenda which they deny, however, when confronted.
2. They fear criticism and loss of donors when openly pursuing missionary activities.
3. They constitute an uncouth mixture of purported piety and mischievous hypocrisy: They ought to be treated with caution.

b. What are the lessons to be learned from this?
   i. Profess to be doing only what you actually do.
   ii. Do only what you profess to be doing.
   iii. Be prepared to suffer possible negative consequences for what you profess to do and what you do.
   iv. If you want to engage in missionary activities, do not hide your intention and do not hide your motivation. Do not have a hidden agenda, ever!
   v. If you profess NOT to do missionary activities, then by all means prohibit your staff from engaging in the kind of activity that could be construed to be a missionary outreach.

III. **The Role of Christian Faith in Humanitarian Relief and Holistic Development**
   a. The Role of Faith in *Humanitarian Relief*
      i. Anybody doing relief must be careful not to mingle relief activities with religious activities.
      ii. Such mingling is prohibited by ethical values widely agreed upon by virtue of several international standards, such as:
         1. The *Code of Conduct* of the *Red Cross* which says, among other things: that need must be the only criterion for giving and receiving aid, and that any relief provided must respect human dignity, mores and cultures
         2. In Germany, major relief NGOs receiving funds from the Foreign Ministry must abide by the Foreign Ministry's *12 rules of humanitarian aid*,

among them: need as the only precondition for aid, and respect for human dignity

    3. Then we have the SPHERE standards which virtually say the same things.

    4. There is also the *Code of Good Practice* of *People in Aid.*

  iii. All these standards prohibit a mixture of giving aid and of proselytizing; they prohibit the exploitation of the recipients for the purpose of advancing an ideology or faith by abusing the situation of need on the part of the recipients by by taking advantage of the position of financial power on the part of the providers of aid. To exploit dependents is considered unethical.

b. The Role of Faith in *Holistic Development.* Here the situation is different.

  i. Why speak of *holistic* development?

    1. Holistic Development is understood as development in the fullest sense, considering not only financial, material, and physical development but also mental, emotional, cultural and even spiritual development

    2. Development that is not holistic, cannot be sustainable because sustainable development requires the involvement of the whole person and the whole society in of all their facets

    3. To make it concrete, holistic development means: food security and agricultural development; water development (reservoirs, irrigation, potable water supply), sanitation and hygiene; health services and nutrition instruction; early intervention and life skills development; preschool, primary, secondary and adult education; small enterprise development and micro credit schemes; infrastructure development (roads, communications, power supply, sewage system etc.); empowerment and participation; development of civil society, democracy, jurisdiction, tax system); freedom of speech and religion; etc.

  ii. The influence of faith on development is *not* as clearly prohibited as in humanitarian relief:

    1. No such standards which exist for humanitarian relief are available for long-term development.

    2. On the contrary, it is recognized that FBOs exert great influence on their constituents (believers) and hence FBOs are expected to combine spiritual instructions with instructions relative to health, hygiene, HIV/AIDS, education etc.

    3. At least for Christian churches, the mandate has always been twofold: spiritual nurturing as well as physical and mental healing.

    4. The kingdom of God is not confined to the spiritual realm but must include the societal and political realm: Justice is both a spiritual as well as a political/societal value.

    5. Having said all this we must, however, take into account the basic principle of prohibiting the exploitation of dependents by mingling aid with ideology. This principle must be applied not only to relief programs but also to development programs.

IV. World Vision

a. Who is World Vision?

   i. WV is a global, international NGO Partnership with mostly independent national entities, conjoined through common values, standards, and organizational systems.

   ii. WV has a threefold mandate: short-term relief, long-term development, and developmental advocacy to combat the causes of poverty and injustice.

   iii. WV is Christian, but interdenominational: Lutherans, Anglicans, Catholics, Orthodox, Baptists, Methodists, Mennonites etc; but:

   iv. WV has no theology of its own except to follow Jesus in reaching out to the poor, the needy, the marginalized and the suppressed.

b. Missionary mandate or not?

   i. Originally, the early founders felt they had a clear missionary mandate

   ii. However: WV was founded in order to address the enormous physical needs encountered by those founders (notably the many orphans during and after the Korean war)

   iii. Most WV offices have abandoned the missionary mandate and are concentrating on the three pillars: relief, development and advocacy (while retaining their Christian motivation based on the example of Jesus).

   iv. WV USA, however, because of its traditionally conservative Christian constituency, still considers itself as having at least a remnant of a missionary mandate. That again and again creates discomfort and disquietness within the WV Partnership

   v. The World Vision Partnership has an explicit policy of prohibiting proselytizing.

   vi. World Vision Germany has a policy of prohibiting the use of donated funds for programs whose primary objective is the advancement of the Christian faith. I quote from that policy:

   > "As a matter of principle, we do not support measures whose primary objective is the advancement of the Christian faith, as this is not counted amongst our key activities for which we receive donations. Our donors entrust us their funds to help children in need, not to spread the gospel...
   > ...We do not consider it compatible with our basic principles when staff of our organization will, within the framework of their work, attempt to evangelize or proselytize to other people. However, we approve of an attitude by which World Vision staff will bear witness to the transforming love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ through the kind of exemplary life they live."

c. World Vision and holistic development

   i. In the field where we engage in holistic development, spiritual development is part and parcel of our developmental efforts (spiritual development cannot be excluded any more than we can exclude mental development)

   ii. Holistic development for children encompasses WV's Child Well-Being Aspirations (CWBA), namely:

       1. Nutrition and Health
       2. Early Intervention and Education
       3. Spirituality and Responsibility
       4. Child Protection and Child Participation

iii. Spiritual well-being in a *Christian* setting will have a different character than in a *Non-Christian* setting: it does not necessarily mean turning Buddhists, Hindus or Muslims into Christian, but it may mean making them better Buddhists, Hindus or Muslims.

iv. It is as yet very ambiguous what is actually meant by "spiritual well-being"; different authors give different definitions. In my view, spiritual well-being must be defined to include the following:

1. Religious embedment. (Note: one cannot rate or measure religion or religious experience; one can only measure religious affiliation or embedment)

2. Relationships (to oneself, to family, peers, neighbors, God)

3. Beliefs (about worldviews, meaning of life, purpose of life etc.)

4. Values about behavior, priorities, needs etc.)

5. Sense of responsibility (with regard to family, neighborhood, nation and the world)

d. "Hope Initiative": World Vision co-operating with communities and churches to combat HIV and AIDS:

i. Relative to HIV and AIDS, World Vision has a three-track approach:

1. *Prevention*: helping to reduce the risk and vulnerability to new HIV infections

2. *Care*: helping to protect and improve the well-being of children affected by HIV (orphaned and other vulnerable children)

3. *Advocacy*: promote policies and practices that reduce stigma and discrimination

ii. World Vision has developed three core project models to address children and others affected by HIV and AIDS in high-prevalence countries:

1. *Community Care Coalitions* (CCC): Building on the capacities of communities to identify, monitor, assist and protect orphans and vulnerable children (orphaned and made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS);

2. *Peer Education*: HIV prevention and life skills training of girls and boys through peers: promoting a non-risky life style among youth aged 5-24 ("windows of hope") that is age-appropriate, values-based through teachers, faith leaders, and, above all, peer educators;

3. "Channels of Hope" (CoH) process: mobilizing churches and other faith communities towars positive action on HIV and AIDS. This involves mostly identifying religious leaders in the communities to conduct 3-day CoH workshops that aim at reducing risks, improving services and advocating for those affected by HIV and AIDS. Contents of such workshops are, among others:

   a. Exploring attitudes and stigma relative to HIV and AIDS and to people living with HIV

   b. Encouraging debate on difficult theological and ethical issues relative to HIV and AIDS

   c. Sharing information on transmission, prevention, care and treatment

d. Enabling people living with, or affected by, HIV to share their experiences, challenges and hopes

e. Discovering the spiritual, emotional and physical needs of children affected by and adults living with HIV and AIDS

f. Exploring the complex interplay of individual behavior with social, cultural, and religious practices and contexts which increase vulnerability of children and women

g. Developing an understanding of the limitations of simplistic prevention programs and the adoption of an integrated, multi-faceted approach to prevention

h. Assessing the HIV/AIDS-related needs of communities and congregations

i. Identifying responses already underway by churches, faith communities and other groups in the community; sharing successes and failures

j. Working with religious leaders to develop action plans for response to HIV and AIDS that are integrated, utilizing already existing structures and programmes.

V. Ethical rules in managing values

Both, development *and* faith have much to do with values. Hence, it is good to be *value conscious*. What does it mean to be value-conscious?

i. *Development means change*. Change not only in infrastructure and facilities, but – above all – of people's minds: their expectations, ideas, and values. Development is as much about abolishing certain values as it is about adopting new ones.

ii. *Development change can have unforeseen consequences*. Because the whole is more than the sum of its parts, change in one small area can and will affect the whole.

iii. *Development practitioners must be aware of the holistic nature of a culture*. Holism refers to lifestyles, customs, cultural values, traditions, and religion. Religious spirituality often has an all-pervasive power on the whole culture.

iv. *Development practitioners ought to be candid about their own spirituality*. Many Westerners have relegated God and their own spirituality to the private realm. Whether they are Christian or not, they are often hiding their religiosity and spirituality. Indigenous people in the development world are always religious and are therefore suspicious of people who pretend not to be religious.

v. *Development practitioners must recognize that there can be no value-free development*. Neither the practitioners are value-free nor the developmental goals which they are trying to attain.

vi. *Sometimes, religious world-views and cultural attitudes perpetuate poverty and powerlessness (cf. Hindu cast system).* In such cases, traditional values may and must be challenged – albeit with great caution.

vii. *Developing communities must be empowered to be guardians of their own value system.* Sustainable development will be possible only if people develop

themselves and their values. People must themselves determine which values are to be preserved, altered, or newly adopted.

VI.   Conclusion

The big question, however, to be asked nowadays, in light of the current global challenges of climate change, nuclear threat, and financial crisis, is this: Have we defined "development" in such a way that Mother Earth cannot possibly bear any more what we are trying to achieve with our developmental endeavors? That question must be left to another conference.