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(138) DEVELOPMENT, THE BIBLE AND THE ROLE OF THE AFRICAN CHURCH[1]

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Introduction

This chapter primarily reflects on two aspects of development, namely, its definition and biblical concepts thereof. Secondarily, it briefly outlines the role played by the African Church in development. It argues that the ambivalent role of the church in respect of development is partly caused by the church's misaligned understanding of development, and partly by the lack of a biblical concept of development. The conclusion suggests that a closer look at the practice of the African Indigenous Churches and Pentecostal Churches be undertaken in future studies as this offers a different and interesting perspective of the African Church's role in development.

It is almost four decades since the World Council of Churches identified the church as an important grassroots vehicle for development.[2] Yet Africa, which at one point was thought to be 'notoriously religious',[3] is one of the few continents that are known to be lagging behind in many aspects of development. This ironic situation may, in part, be ascribed to a misaligned definition of development which impacts on the criteria for evaluating developmental projects and, in part, to the church's lack of a biblical concept of development. The church's zeal for development seems to have been affected by a drying up of funds from the former European mission agencies while the African Indigenous Churches (AICs) and Pentecostal Churches offer an interesting perspective. Hence, for the purposes of this contribution, my broadening of the definition of the church. My primary aim is to reflect on the aspects of definition and biblical concepts while the secondary aim is to briefly reflect on the role played by the African Church in development.

Definitions of Development in Retrospect

The term 'development' is both elusive and contested. Conservative sociological definitions associate it with a 'quantum jump'[4] from the old and traditional to the modern.[5] The latter had elements of imperialism which entailed shedding one's culture in favour of western culture, exchanging traditional technology for modern technology and aspirations towards economic growth.[6] Outside its sociological context, the term defined the church's missionary activities that led to conversions and transformed individuals from a

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[1] By "African Church" is meant the African Indigenous Churches and the Pentecostal Churches operating in Africa. "Church" here refers to the churches that have been established by the missionaries and are often referred to as the "mainline churches".

[2] This is reflected in the booklets commissioned and published between 1981 and 1993 which I came across in Geneva, Switzerland in 1994. A much earlier book which was also among the collection of the WCC was by Peter Sartorius (1975), *Churches and rural development: guidelines for action*, Geneva: Commission on the Church's participation in development, WCC. It also placed similar confidence in the church.

[3] Mbiti 1990. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Port Harcourt: Heinemann, 1

[4] Jolly, R 1977:22 "Changing views on development". In Nossin, JJ (ed). *Surveys for development: a multidisciplinary approach,* Amsterdam, Elsevier, 19-48.

[5] Coetzee, JK. 1989, *Development is for people*. Johannesburg: Southern Books.

[6] Ibid. 20-22

'heathen' to a 'Christian' status as development.[7] This was based on the jump of the 'heathen' – voluntarily or by coercion, from the traditional (African) to the western way of life, this being regarded as 'civilisation' or, in the Xhosa language of South Africa, *ukugqobhoka*.[8] Interestingly, the term in Mndende means 'the one with a hole'. In other words, it refers to an 'empty shell'. This is how some traditional Africans view western forms of religion.

In the aftermath of World War II (1948), 'development aid' was introduced in terms of the Marshall Plan,[9] ostensibly to assist nations who had suffered economic losses as a result of the war. Critics of the manner in which such aid was administered, who were initially based in Latin America, responded with a 'dependency theory' whose analysis revealed that 'aid' was, in fact, leading to dependency.[10] The Alternative Theory of Development (ATD) which focused on the power of the people and transformation of socio-economic structures, evolved out of this (Korten 1990, initially confined to People-Centred Development).[11] It basically emphasized the power within individuals and communities which could be utilised to bargain for improvements and transformation of living conditions.[12] More importantly, it portrayed the focus on economic growth which manifested in the form of 'community development' or 'self-help schemes' as they were known, as being 'reductionist'.[13] It was upon this that the Asset-based Approach to development built its case,[14] taking the potential of the community further to an auditing and listing of assets.[15] For a while, this was thought to be the ultimate radical approach. The School of Theology and Religion at the University of KwaZulu Natal, for example, under the leadership of Steve de Gruchy (RIP), embraced the Asset-based Approach, offering a postgraduate course on it which, from 2003, was co-ordinated by Clint Le Bruyns. Some educationists at the University of Pretoria saw it as a potential approach for nurturing the young.[16] A very important contribution of this approach was the exposure of the fact that the previous approaches (no matter how well-intentioned), started from a point of deficiency.[17] However, this has not led to a paradigm change. Nor was it sustainable in underdeveloped communities.

While the church had not consciously embraced the Alternative Theory, its practice had been ambivalent. On the one hand, it organised and administered funds for 'self-help' schemes while on the other, it preached a 'pie in the sky theology'.[18] This is in contrast to what the World Council of Churches

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[7] Mndende, N. 2014. "African Traditional Religion". In: Lewis, C. & Sherbok, D. (eds) 2014. *Sensible Religion.* Surrey: Ashgate; Pato 1997 Pato, LL. 1997. "Being fully human from the perspective of African culture and spirituality". *JTSA* 97:53-61, Evans, BF. 1979. Campaign for Human Development: church involvement in social change. *Review of Religious Research*, 20(3):264-278.

[8] Mndende, ibid. 182.

[9] Rositter 1985:15-16, cited in Speckman, MT. 2007. *A biblical vision for Africa's development?* Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 3-4.

[10] Ekins, P. 1992. *A new world order: grassroots movements for global change*. New York: Routledge; Cardoso, FH. 1979. *Dependency and development in Latin America*. Berkeley: University of California.

[11] Korten (1990) Korten, DC. 1990. *Getting to the 21st century: voluntary action and the global agenda*. West Hartford: Kumaria Press, later developed his own model which was based on four phases: relief (1950s -1960s), community development (1970s-1980s), policy analysis (1980s-1990s) and People Centred Development (1990s to the 21st century).

[12] Korten, ibid., Desroches, J. & George, J. 1984. *A People Centred Development*. New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers.

[13] Speckman, ibid., 25.

[14] Speckman, ibid. cf Kretzman, JP & McKnight, JL 1993 *Building communities from Inside Out: a path toward finding and mobilising a community's assets.* Chicago: ACTA.

[15] Eloff, I and Ebersohn, L. 2001: 150, "The implications of an asset-based approach to early intervention", *Perspectives in Education*, 19(3): 147-157.

[16] Eloff & Ebersohn, ibid.

[17] Kretzman & McKnight, ibid., 1-2, Eloff & Ebersohn, ibid. 149-150.

[18] In the course of his research, the Church Historian, H. Mogashoa, stumbled over documents of the Baptist missionaries in South Africa which taught people not to bother about earthly riches while they prepared for heavenly

meant by 'sustainable development'. It also misses the point made by Pope John Paul VI (1979) who defined development as enabling the 'release of a God-given potential' in each individual while not totally excluding economic growth. Instead of reflecting on how to facilitate the release of potential and the extent to which the church's structures and teaching free the individual to participate in a transformed life, the church preoccupies itself with polemical clauses such as 'triumphalist theology' or 'prosperity gospel', while criticising other churches' approaches to a 'holistic' ministry.

Plausible as the ATD approaches might be, they have not, in recent decades, demonstrated corresponding success at grassroots level. Instead, they seem to almost exclusively appeal to a limited audience, the academics. The model is difficult to implement as it offers nothing to the majority who need immediate material benefits. Even in countries such as India where the concept advocated by Latin American intellectuals initially bore much fruit and generated refined definitions of development,[19] attention currently seems to be turning to a robust industrialisation.[20] Despite India being one of the leading Third World countries in development, parts of it are like the former East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) – modest to substandard infrastructure and visible poverty which contrasted sharply with a high sense of ethical values, intellectual prowess and responsible citizenship. On African soil, the *Ujamaa* system of Tanzania (1967-1985), fashioned along similar lines, produced similar results during the presidency of Nyerere which was in time reversed by reality on the ground. The latter two situations are not directly linked to the Christian faith or church doctrine but they illustrate what is to be expected in a context where there is no dialogue between ideology and reality.

While there may be some truth in the statement that Jesus called on his disciples to sacrifice,[21] it is only partially so. The church lacks a balance between, for example, the words appropriated by Jesus in Luke 4:16-20, sometimes known as his 'Liberation Manifesto' and other statements ascribed to him, for example, '… that they might have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10 NIV) on which some churches base their prosperity gospel. The missionaries who established churches (and themselves) in Africa led a self-sufficient life, sponsored by overseas missionary agencies, such as the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (USPG), in the big compounds they owned, often in the midst of dispossessed and poor communities. There are Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, etc. mission stations throughout Africa, most of which have become defunct since the withdrawal of funding for overseas missions. It has to be mentioned however, that despite some of the mission stations being run like manors by some missionaries, they remained the centre of life where people received education and some technical skills. It would seem that the ambivalence is caused by the church's misaligned definition of development, if it ever had one.

Given the above, I define development as the facilitation of 'a process of releasing an individual's potential (Pope John Paul XVI 1979) so as to enable him/her to contribute to the welfare of the *politeia*/city'.[22] It should be noted that this definition goes beyond Pope John Paul VI's and that it captures the spirit of the Alternative Theory, the Bible and Vatican II (on the common good) and the recognition of the fact that an individual's welfare is integrally tied to that of the city and vice versa. The difference between this and traditional understandings is that it creates a link between the spiritual and material needs which seemingly is what attracts African Christians to the Pentecostal and African Indigenous Churches.

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riches. Same documents appealed for second-hand clothing from overseas churches.

[19] cf Desroches & George, ibid.

[20] See the industrialisation policies of 1977 and subsequent years. May's (2006:10) optimism based on a link between work, assets and markets changes nothing as none of these belong to the poor either.

[21] Bonhoeffer, D 1963 Bonhoeffer, D. 1963. *The cost of discipleship*. New York. Macmillan cf Matt. 8:19-20, Luke 14:26-27).

[22] Winter, WB. 1994. *Seek the welfare of the city: Christians as benefactors and citizens*. Michigan: Eerdmans cf Jeremiah, 29:7.

Biblical Concepts of Development

It has to be stated at the outset that 'development' is not a biblical term.[23] However, this does not mean that the Bible is devoid of any concept of development. Depending on the tools used, it is possible to find concepts in the following clusters: i) miracle narratives in the gospels and Acts ii) teaching in the gospels, Acts and Pauline letters, namely, Romans, 1 Corinthians and 2 Thessalonians iii) preaching in the gospels and Acts.

I have argued elsewhere[24] that some biblical texts function well in a context of development. That was based on results obtained through the employment of the contextual-developmental approach which I had devised for the reading of Acts 3:1-10. The employment of the same approach in the reading of John 5:1-10 produced comparable results.[25] In terms of these, a few things define development in the *modus operandi* of Jesus and the early church. These include i) psychological emancipation ii) physical transformation iii) response by taking a step forward and iv) taking advantage of the new-found independence. Each of these manifests in a different way in different contexts, for example, in 1 Corinthians 12, the sudden realisation that each member has a role to play in the body is psychological emancipation; a shedding of whatever inhibits one from playing that role may be both physical and psychological and doing something about it equals both a step forward and taking advantage of the new-found independence.

The gospels almost invariably portray a Jesus who frees individuals from the power of sin, sickness and disability (Matt. 8:3, 16; Mark 1:41-42; 8:23-25; Luke 6:10) so they may tend for themselves and their families. This is deduced from the stories found in the non-Jewish religious background of the time (Luck 1986) which provide a *topos* for the interpretation of biblical narratives. The Acts of the Apostles has both the freeing of the individual for the same purpose (Acts 3, 16) and the teaching of Paul about the need for the healthy to work so they may earn (Acts 20:16). Romans (12:1-2) refers to the need for a transformed mind, an encouragement for a psychological emancipation which echoes John 5:1-10, the transformation of the man who had been lying at Bethsaida for 38 years, waiting for someone to help him into the healing water. 1 Corinthians contains teaching on the role of each individual in the Body (1 Cor. 12:12-40). 2 Thessalonians, on the other hand, contains an admonishment of the healthy and idle who are dependent on others for food and everything (2 Thess. 3:6-10). When these are read against the Graeco-Roman background albeit of Aristocratic prejudices, according to some experts in Roman social history (e.g. Saddington), a sharp contrast between the Jewish practice of almsgiving and well-motivated warnings against giving to beggars in the City States, becomes glaring.[26] The latter attitude resonates with the approaches of the Alternative Theory of Development.

If Jesus and the subsequent leaders of 'The Way' had not intended the above, his interaction with the beggars would have been characterised by charity and more charity, as there were many that looked up to him.[27] The miracle narratives instead invariably convey the message that a transformation of the mind and body create capacity for self-sufficiency. I have made the point elsewhere that this was the intended

[23] Speckman, MT 2001 "For Nolan's sake, let us move on: a plea for a developmental approach in contextual theology". In Speckman, MT & Kaufmann, LT (eds) 2001, *An agenda for contextual theology in South Africa: Essay in honour of Albert Nolan.* Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.
[24] Speckman, ibid., p. xxviii.
[25] Speckman, ibid. 221.
[26] Speckman, MT 1997, Beggars and Gospel in Luke-Acts: some emerging trends in the light of theories of human development in SA. Neotestamentica 32(2):309-337; Speckman, MT 2007.
[27] In Plautus we read: "To give to a beggar is to do him an ill-service" (*Trinnimus* 339) because giving once leads to having to give daily. In other words, the beggar will never be able to fend for himself/herself.

message of the miracle narratives as it was the case in the pleas of those who approached the healers and sages of the first century in the Common Era.[28]

The New Testament thus offers various concepts of development, most of which are based on the respective approaches of Jesus, the early church and Paul.[29] According to the narratives, Jesus transformed body and mind as a way of removing the obstacles to development. Paul, not being always able to do the same, focused on a psychological emancipation in the hope of freeing the body for action. In between, Peter, John and others emulated Jesus with healing miracles and economic redistribution (Acts 2:42-47; 3:1-10; 4:32-35; 14:8-10).

Development in the African Church

It would be incorrect to claim that the church in Africa is not involved in development work. The literature produced by donors and young African scholars affirms this.[30] In some cases, it is even involved in spite of itself. However, much of what it is doing differs from what I have stated above as my understanding of development. Hence I described its position as being ambivalent. The mainline churches often serve as conduits for income-generating community development projects on the one hand while on the other, they preach that Christians should not worry about the riches of this world and that they should look up to the 'birds of the air' which are provided for by the unseen Father (Matt 6:26-32). Either the original authors of the verses quoted were limited by their contexts which they could not transform, or the church today needs to urgently find an appropriate model of development.

The African Church on the other hand, appears to be offering something different although it may not be based on any developmental theory. As already stated above, it sees no tension between the spiritual and the material. On the contrary, anecdotal evidence from the African Indigenous Churches and Pentecostal Churches indicates that the latter is perceived as an outflow or a spinoff of the former. Africans, always wishing to appease the spirits so they may be blessed, find a natural home in the spiritual churches although, in order for them to be seen as 'civilised' people, they retain membership of the mainline churches. The discourse on enculturation between African theologians and the mainline churches (1970s-1990s) revealed that some people were 'devout Christians by day and African traditionalists by night'[31] in pursuit of a combination of needs. Some, especially professionals, choose Pentecostal churches because they offer both the spiritual and the material needs without them having to fall back on 'heathen' practices. There are numerous records of healings performed, successful prayers for employment, prayers for fertility, and in one case, a 'dead' person being raised back to life.[32] I tried to show above that the ministries of Jesus and the early church had a similar effect.

Despite the above, it would appear that the mainline churches seem not to be in a theological space to reflect on why their younger counter-parts are having a competitive edge ahead of them. They have not, for example, provided a credible reason why an African believer who worships in a Pentecostal Church should not interpret John 10:10 as meaning that life in its fullness incorporates their daily bread, money for electricity, monthly bond for their house and happiness at home… and that all these things have to be prayed for, followed by hard work – either as a self-employed person or someone else's employee. It

[28] Speckman, MT 2007: 134-35.
[29] A limited number of miracles by Peter and his companions in the Acts of the Apostles resembles those of Jesus. In addition, Acts 4 shows that the miracle in Acts 3:1-10 led to the challenge of the social structures and authorities.
[30] Kabuaya, B. 2013, *Transforming Africa: The role of the church in developing political leaders*. PhD thesis. Unisa. http://hdl.handle.net/10500/11871; Chu, IS. 2014, *The Church and development in Africa.* USA: Pickwick Publications.
[31] Dwane, S 1980 Lecture notes on African and Black Theologies. Fedsem.
[32] Speckman, MT 2007:97-99.

appears, instead, that they are stuck in the past where a limited form of development (community development) only took place with funding received from Europe.

Conclusion

The definitions as well as biblical concepts of development provided above shed light on what development is about and the extent to which the concept is undergirded by the scriptures. However, it has also become clear in the above reflection that the mainline churches have been slowed down in their developmental programmes by the erosion of overseas funds. African Indigenous and Pentecostal churches, on the other hand, need no external funding but seem to have a manner of drawing out the inner energy of believers, as did Jesus, to generate income and finance themselves as well as the church. The spirits are invoked in the process in order to connect the individual with the supernatural world, thus 'claiming' the material benefits awaiting them. This is a perspective future research in development and religion in Africa should explore.

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