OF AGENCY, ASSETS AND APPRECIATION: SEEKING SOME COMMONALITIES BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT. 1

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ABSTRACT

This essay pursues the dialogue between theological reflection and development theory. It argues, firstly, that the Christian concern for development must be rooted in the "vocation of the poor", rather than in the compassion of the non-poor. Secondly, it explores the congruence between this theological idea and three key ideas in current development theory, namely, agency, assets and appreciation.

The call for Christians to be involved in some form of development action is perhaps best summarized by the powerful statement from James that, "just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead". (James 2:26) This reminder that the Christian faith is not just about intellectual assent, but about a life lived in compassionate service to others, especially the vulnerable, hides a key set of issues facing the Church in Africa as it seeks to be engaged in social development, namely, "whose faith and whose works are we talking about?"

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The assumption underlying much of our theologizing about development is that Christians must do good things for those who are poor, less privileged, marginalized or helpless. These poor people are in need of our good works. We, who truly believe, need to roll up our sleeves, practice what we preach, and get involved in helping those who need help.

However, I am convinced that underlying this approach is the assumption that there is a divide between Christians and the needy that reflects a divide between actors and beneficiaries, agents and clients, doctors and patients, and ultimately the subjects and objects of history. This is what leads me to ponder: "whose faith and whose works?" What about the faith of the poor, and more

1 This is a reworked version of the paper given at a colloquium in honour of John W. de Gruchy, "Fragments and connections: Theological and otherwise", University of Cape Town, June 2003.

importantly, what about their works? How is it that we have come to understand the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Sheep and Goats, and the message of James as being aimed at a class of people who can do, whereas we do not understand it as part of the message for the class of people who are perceived to be needy, to be ‘not able to do’, to be simply beneficiaries of the good deeds of others? And in making this fundamental assumption of being ‘not able to do’, are we not simply mirroring the power dynamics that lie at the heart of the experience of poverty, and hence reinforcing the very problem we think we are solving?

This approach strikes me as foolhardy for two important reasons, the second one of which is the central concern of this paper. But first, it is clear — from a purely descriptive point of view — that it is simply wrong to make the assumption that poor people are ‘not able to do’. Poor people are always engaged in strategies and struggles for survival, adaptation and freedom. The insights of James Scott and Jean and John Comaroff, three scholars who have attracted the interest of South African theologians, have drawn attention to precisely this matter of acknowledging the agency of the poor. This theme has been taken up by (South) African theologians in a range of ways, as noted in a recent article, by Tinyiko Maluleke:

I suggest that we are being called to a humble but careful observance of the struggles of Africans to be agents against great odds, not by ignoring or discounting the odds, but by confronting them. Africans have always been agents, never ‘simply victims, wallowing in self-pity’; they have always exercised their agency in struggles for survival and integrity.

However, their agency has not always been recognised let alone nurtured. Speaking from a South African perspective, my sense is that there is a new wave of awareness of the agency of ordinary, marginalized Africans. In fact, at their best and most creative, African theologies have always proceeded on some gut-feeling and almost intuitive task that helps us uncover this agency in the past (Maluleke speaks of “(a) acknowledging, (b) valorizing and (c) interpreting”) — but also to encourage it as a key element in the future (thus Maluleke adds, “(d) enhancing”).

To recover a theological vision of vocation, my sense is that we need to move beyond an isolated focus on identity, which has tended to dominate African theology in the past while, and seek to integrate issues of identity with a focus on agency. I am mindful of the fact that the theological concern with identity of the poor is deeply rooted in the struggle against the European colonial and Christianizing enterprise and, in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia, against apartheid. Against the overwhelming political, economic and ideological apparatus that was ranged against ordinary people, all of which sought to strip Africans of their identity, we can appreciate the political power of the appropriation of such simple theological truths as: “I am a child of God. I bear his image. His Son died on the cross for me. He loves me as I am.” No one made such a central theological theme in the struggle against apartheid than Desmond Tutu:

Yes, you are a God-carrier. God dwells in you. He dwells in me. That is why it is such a blasphemy for God’s children to be treated as if they were things, uprooted from their homes and dumped in arid resettlement camps... Those who are victims of injustice and oppression would not have to suffer from a slave mentality by which they despised themselves and went about apologising for their existence. They would know that they matter to God, and nothing anybody did to them could change that fundamental fact about themselves.

Today, this kind of faith conviction may provide a powerful bulwark against the dehumanizing experiences of domestic violence, HIV infection, homophobia and unemployment.

The Vocation of the Poor

This conviction is of course absolutely true, but it is not the whole truth. One of the inherent problems embedded in it, rather ironically in the face of the colonial

8 Maluleke, “The Rediscovery of the agency of Africans”, 22.
It is important to recognize that in both creation accounts in Genesis, from which the affirmation of identity is traditionally drawn, the truth of being made in the image of God (1:27) or being filled with God's own breath of life (2:7) is immediately coupled with the theme of vocation, the calling to be responsible actors in this world newly created by God (1:28; 2:15). This understanding of vocation is at the heart of the theological understanding of labour as a constitutive part of what it means to be truly human, in the use of our gifts and talents to be co-workers with God in the world. From this is drawn the critique of alienated labour under slavery, feudalism, capitalism and communism, and the vision of human beings working in harmony with God and the earth to create a better life characterized by justice and peace.  

Drawing from these same roots, and standing in this same trajectory, James Myers reminds us that faith without works is dead. Thus any vision of Christian involvement in social development cannot have as its assumption, as so much of it unfortunately does, the faith and works of Christians and the Church over and against those who are poor and needy; but has to affirm, enhance and appreciate the faith works of the poor themselves. This is the message of the Gospel for the poor, that they are both made in the image of God and called to be actors in the drama of creation and salvation itself. They are not, and cannot be, simply passive objects of history, but are invited to be the subjects of their own history.

One of the most influential attempts to move this kind of concern for the vocation of the poor from a purely descriptive level to a prescriptive programme for action is the work of the Brazilian educationist, Paulo Freire, as captured in his book concerning adult education, The Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Deeply influenced by his Roman Catholic faith and his partnership with the World Council of Churches, Freire promotes humanization as the good to which society should struggle, indeed as ‘the people’s vocation’. 13 Dehumanization is the process in which people are treated as ‘things’, as objects in other people’s worlds, and because there is a fundamental relationship between ends and means, the struggle for humanization must itself be humanizing. As he warns us, ‘to discourse on humanism and to negate people is a lie’ 14:

The oppressed have been destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things. In order to regain their humanity they must cease to be things and fight as men and women. This is a radical requirement. They cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become human beings. 15

What makes us ‘human beings’, for Freire, is that we communicate, we have a word. “Dialogue imposes itself as the way by which [people] achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity”. 16 Thus the deepest act of dehumanization, of treating people as things, is to strip them of their word, to censor, to refuse to communicate, to shun dialogue. Anti-dialogical action is the antithesis of liberating praxis 17 and needs to be replaced with Dialogical action, for “dialogue, the encounter among men and women to name the world, is a fundamental precondition for their humanization.” 18 Dialogical action implies that the ‘oppressed’ (an admittedly wide and contested term for Freire) cannot be passengers on the journey, but find their own sense of freedom via their agency in the struggle for freedom. And because this is dialogical action, this agency is not simply expressed through action, in some sort of politburo-led, revolutionary cannon-fodder way, but also through reflection. For Freire it is crucial that the insights, perspectives, rituals and symbols of the poor contribute to the very vision of the future that is being sought. Action and theory thus find expression in liberating praxis:

It is when the majorities are denied their right to participate in history as Subjects that they become dominated and alienated. Thus, to supersede their condition as objects by the status of Subjects – the objective of any true revolution – requires that the people act, as well as reflect, upon the reality to be transformed. 19

10 Bryant Myers, Walking with the Poor (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 76. Italics added for emphasis.
14 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 72
15 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 50
16 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 69
17 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 119-148
18 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 118
19 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 111
Freire's concept of dialogical action is not without the problems inherent in moving from a descriptive theory to a prescriptive programme. He is, after all, wanting to be a teacher rather than a journalist, and that implies a likely conflict around just what is taught, and how it is taught. The vocation of the teacher and the vocation of the poor are not necessarily in harmony! His pedagogical method works hard at these issues, seeking to get beyond the reality of hegewomy and ideology; but any concept of 'dialogue' has to be extremely sensitive to be adequate enough to deal with all the implications of power represented in the teacher-pupil relationship, even (especially!) when these pupils are adults. Scott's notion of hidden transcripts, referred to above, reminds us that the authentic voice of the poor is not readily accessible simply through correct pedagogy. It is not even easily accessible through nuanced, and committed scholarship as pointed out by Gayatri Spivak's in her torturous but classic essay, "Can the subaltern speak?" In the face of precisely these concerns, Gerald West has sought to develop such a sensitive and programmatic notion of dialogue for Christians in his book, The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible.

Having laid out the contours of a theological vision of the vocation of the poor, therefore, what I propose to do here is to build on this project by engaging with three key themes that are on the cutting edge of 'secular' development theory, and that engage with this vision. It is clear to me that much of the writing on poverty, famine, economics and development over the past two decades to a tendency that moves from a descriptive theory to a prescriptive programme. He is, after all, wanting to be a teacher rather than a journalist, and that implies a likely conflict around just what is taught, and how it is taught. The vocation of the teacher and the vocation of the poor are not necessarily in harmony! His pedagogical method works hard at these issues, seeking to get beyond the reality of hegewomy and ideology; but any concept of 'dialogue' has to be extremely sensitive to be adequate enough to deal with all the implications of power represented in the teacher-pupil relationship, even (especially!) when these pupils are adults. Scott's notion of hidden transcripts, referred to above, reminds us that the authentic voice of the poor is not readily accessible simply through correct pedagogy. It is not even easily accessible through nuanced, and committed scholarship as pointed out by Gayatri Spivak's in her torturous but classic essay, "Can the subaltern speak?" In the face of precisely these concerns, Gerald West has sought to develop such a sensitive and programmatic notion of dialogue for Christians in his book, The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible.

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attention, and (iii) have a constructive role ‘in the conceptualization of needs’, including economic needs. This third reason has echoes of Freire’s understanding of praxis. Here Sen argues that freedom creates the space in which dialogue can occur so that people can be agents in shaping not only the struggle for development, but the very vision of what that ‘development’ might be:

Political and civil rights, especially those related to the guaranteeing of open discussion, debate, criticisms and dissent, are central to the process of generating informed and reflected choices. These processes are crucial to the formation of values and priorities, and we cannot, in general take preferences as given independently of public discussion, that is, irrespective of whether open debates and interchanges are permitted or not. Sen recognizes like Freire that if agency means anything, then it is not just a question of mindless action, but also of a contribution at the level of theory to ‘values and priorities’, so that the preferences for political, social and economic life can be shaped by all the citizens, including the poor, and not just the dominant elites: “The reach and effectiveness of open dialogue are often underestimated in assessing social and political problems.”

Sen illustrates and advances these insights when he considers the particular agency of women in social change. He is concerned that a focus simply on the sufferings and deprivations of women which society must somehow correct misses the point that what is at stake here is the agency of women. This agency has a role to play in dealing with the “iniquities that depress the well-being of women”, but more importantly, “the limited role of women’s active agency seriously afflicts the lives of all people – men as well as women, children as well as adults”.Sen provides economic data to underscore his claim that the enhanced agency of women increases their own life expectancy, through claims within the household to better nutrition and healthcare, raises the mortality rates of children as well as fertility rates through the influence that comes with education and literacy, and relates directly to a reduction in violence crimes in a given society. He writes:

The changing agency of women is one of the major mediators of economic and social change, and its determination as well as consequences closely relate to many of the central features of the development process...

Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women. This is indeed a crucial aspect of ‘development as freedom’.

David Korten of the People Centred Development Forum shares many of the concerns of Amartya Sen in his important book, Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda, especially the priority of political over economic concerns on the development agenda, and the agency of the poor. For Korten, like Sen, these two are intrinsically linked. He is convinced that the dominant development paradigm, with its growth at any cost approach, has exacerbated the three major crises of the end of the twentieth century, namely, poverty, environmental stress, and communal violence. This dominant development paradigm “equates human progress with growth in the market value of economic output and subordinates both human and environmental considerations to that goal”. Against this, a new vision of transformation is needed, one that is shaped by the concerns of justice, sustainability and inclusiveness. For Korten, this is the agenda of a people-centred development vision, which sees development as a “people’s movement more than as a foreign-funded government project.”

One of the upshots of this growing recognition is the emerging development role of civil society. But this is itself problematic. Korten surveys the plethora of organisations that make up civil society, and notes how many so-called development NGOs are serving agendas that do not promote people-centred development. One of the fundamental problems with civil society organisations is that they are at heart ‘third-party organisations’, i.e. they exist to meet the needs of people other than themselves. People’s Organisations (POs), on the other hand, are ‘first-party organisations’ and it is they who do and must play the central role in people-centred development. Self-reliant cooperatives, landless associations, irrigator associations, burial associations, credit clubs, labour unions,

30 Sen, Development as Freedom, 153
31 Sen, Development as Freedom, 153
32 Sen, Development as Freedom, 191
33 Sen, Development as Freedom, 193ff.
34 Sen, Development as Freedom, 195ff., 198f.
35 Sen, Development as Freedom, 200f.
36 Sen, Development as Freedom, 202f.
38 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, 3
39 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, 5
40 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, 95
41 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, 96
trade associations and political interest groups are among some of the collectives that may be POs. 42

One of the crucial elements that they bring to the fore is that of citizen’s voluntary action, a central part of Korten’s vision as the title of his book suggests.

If transformation is to come, it must come as a consequence of voluntary action, an act of human commitment to collective survival driven by a vision that transcends the behaviours conditioned by existing institutions and culture. We must look to peoples’ movements as the key to transformational change in the current era. 43

Korten does not use the term, agent or agency, but much of his insights into voluntarism and citizen’s action parallels the thinking of Freire and Sen around this concept, for it is in embracing such action that people become agents in their own development struggles. This agency aspect becomes clearer in Korten’s well-known typology of ‘four generations of voluntary development action’ 44 in which he charts a movement from (1) relief and welfare; through (2) small-scale, self-reliant local development; and (3) sustainable systems development; to (4) the fourth generation, namely, people’s movements. Thus, for Korten, fourth generation strategies look beyond those of the first three. “Their goal is to energize a critical mass of independent, decentralized initiatives in support of a social vision.” 45

Of Assets

Sen and Korten, each in their own way and drawing on their own experiences and insights, have provided a framework for understanding the agency of the poor in development, and have thus rooted our theological vision of vocation within a wider discourse. Their thinking on this theme has enriched our understanding of development by providing ways in which we can understand and interpret development theory and praxis congruent with our faith. As we acknowledge the importance of the agency of the poor in development, so we must look to peoples’ movements as the key to transformational change in the current era. 46

Korten and McKnight resonate with much of what we have noted above, when they point out that a key challenge in the task of development is to avoid building a dependency syndrome between poor needy people with lots of problems, and non-poor providers of services with lots of solutions. This kind of relationship leads to less and less confidence, dignity and empowerment for those who are on the margins of society, and so works counter to any real development of people and communities. They call this kind of approach, a ‘needs-driven dead end’, and propose in its stead the alternative path of ‘capacity-focused development.’ The traditional solution, or needs-driven approach sees communities as simply full of problems. Here we are confronted with images of needy, problematic and deficient people living in needy, problematic and deficient; villages, slums or neighbourhoods. There is clearly some truth in this picture, but the traditional approach takes this to be the whole truth.

Many poor people come to accept this image of themselves, as needy people whose well-being depends upon being a client of service providers. They become consumers of welfare help, rather than producers of their own solutions. Their agency is undermined. The whole approach is guaranteed to create dependency, weaken the internal resources of a community, and lead to helplessness and despair. Problems in a community are not seen as symptoms of a deeper problem – the inability of a community to solve its problems. The more outsiders try to deal with the symptoms the more the real problem is made worse!

The simple truth that Kretzmann and McKnight identify is that you cannot build a community on what people do not have. Successful community development grows out of policies and activities based on the capacities, skills and assets of poor people and their neighbourhoods. It is important to clarify at the start that this does not mean that these communities do not need additional resources, or that they are ‘best left alone’ in some kind of warped understanding of ‘self-help’. What it does mean is that outside resources will be much more effective if local people are themselves investing and mobilizing their own resources, and are able to set the agenda for outside help on the basis of their strengths rather than weaknesses. The assets of poor communities “are absolutely necessary, but usually not sufficient” to meet the challenges of development.47

There are three kinds of assets in a village or neighbourhood, namely, individuals (their skills, gifts and financial resources), associations (the resources represented by churches, clubs, and local organisations, etc.) and institutions (libraries, schools, police stations, etc.). For Kretzmann and McKnight the task of a community builder is to map these assets, and then to seek ways to build relationships among and between them, so as to strengthen the community’s own capacity to enhance its well-being. Thus the ‘three simple, interrelated

42 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, 100
43 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, 105
44 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, Chapter 10, “From relief to people’s movement” 112ff.
45 Korten, Getting to the 21st Century, 127
47 Kretzmann and McKnight, Building communities from the inside out, 8