

The Churches and Third World Development

Today, the phrase "preferential option for the poor" is common parlance in many Christian circles. That Christians ought to be especially committed to "the least of these" is a deeply-rooted scriptural principle. In fact, concern for the poor is so self-evidently part of a Christian's task that one may wonder why "opting for the poor" is viewed as a novelty. The real question is not *whether* Christians are called to take up the cause of the poor, but *how* best to advance that cause. On this important question of means, debate in oldline church circles has shown a sadly one-track mind. Recent studies on economic development suggest that the oldline's version of "solidarity with the poor" may do little to help the people it champions.

Let us examine, for instance, four representative oldline documents: *Christian Faith and Economic Life* (United Church of Christ, 1987); "Resolution on Economic Justice" (United Methodist Church, 1988); *Economic Justice and Christian Conscience* (Episcopal Urban Bishops' Coalition, 1987); and *Christian Faith and Economic Justice* (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1984).

The oldline's policy recommendations for Third World development rely heavily on a set of increasingly disreputable economic assumptions. Foremost is "dependency theory," which asserts that poverty in the underdeveloped countries of the "South" is caused by economic oppression inflicted by the industrialized "North." The United Church of Christ statement notes that "in its extreme form dependency theory asserts that in order for the rich to remain rich, the poor countries must stay poor." It goes on to give this theory a favorable review, asserting that "many thoughtful Third World Christians subscribe to dependency theory" and that "some of the claims of dependency theorists can be substantiated."

Oldline economic thought is also influenced by the so-called "limits to growth" school that argues that the world is rapidly running out of resources, and that the "population explosion" requires that finite global wealth be radically redistributed so that basic needs of all people are fulfilled. The UCC pronouncement suggests that a "progressive

global tax of between one and five percent of GNP be levied on all countries with per capita income of over \$2,000 a year." The tax revenues would then be redistributed to "the two-thirds of the human family who live in the low-income and middle-income economies." This new "international Economic Order" would presumably be implemented by a new international bureaucracy.

Serious empirical challenges have been raised against both of these theories. For example, rapid and far-reaching economic growth in the "newly industrializing countries" of East Asia sheds grave doubts on

dependency theory. Trade with the "North" has benefitted, not harmed, nations such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, and has demonstrated that "win-win" relationships in the global economy are possible.

Many economists, sociologists, and demographers argue against "limits to growth" theory's dire predictions. They stress that most natural resources are not economically valuable until human creativity transforms them to a useful form. They regard the underdevelopment of human resources as a more serious impediment than the exhaustion of natural resources. As for the oldline's advancement of the New International Economic Order, those recognizing the temptations of power will readily and rightly note that any "new international organization" with the authority to redistribute global wealth stands a good chance of becoming a global tyrant.

Sadly, as the bitter experiences of Tanzania, Vietnam, and Nicaragua attest, massive government-led development schemes of the sort supported by the oldline have often worsened the plight of the poor. For example, excessive state controls on agricultural pricing have impoverished farmers and discouraged food production in many less-developed countries. Bloated state bureaucracies have established Byzantine legal structures that make it nearly impossible for would-be entrepreneurs to start their own small businesses to lift themselves out of poverty. The "North" to "South" wealth transfers advocated by the oldline have empowered and further entrenched leaders who implement these misguided economic

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Religious Liberty Alert

Sudan: Torn by an Unholy Religious War

Sudan, the largest country in Africa, is in the midst of a devastating civil war. At the root of the conflict is a centuries-old clash between two geographic and cultural sectors of the nation: the Arab north versus the black African south. Religious differences have exacerbated the conflict, as northern Sudan is largely Islamic, while animist and Christian beliefs hold sway in the south.

Indeed, the sharpest point of contention in the civil war, now in its sixth year, is a question of religious liberty. Southerners bitterly resent an attempt by the northern-majority government in Khartoum to impose Islamic law -- the *sharia* -- on the whole country. Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi, elected in 1986, presided until recently over a coalition government that included an Islamic fundamentalist party known as the National Islamic Front. It was the Front, led by Mr. Mahdi's brother-in-law, which demanded that the coalition government force the *sharia* on the non-Muslim south.

According to one Sudanese expert, "The southerners are less inclined than ever -- and have no good reason -- to accept Muslim law." Most are Christians or practice tribal religions, and rebel at the notion of having the practices of another faith imposed upon them. Out of this fear of religious persecution, many southerners have joined or cooperate with the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), led by John Garang. The SPLA, based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, has developed from a ragtag band into a guerrilla force that has fought the Sudanese army to a stalemate.

But the stalemate has torn the country apart. Some estimates indicate that nearly one million people have lost their lives in the war and the famine that has accompanied it. Over three million southern Sudanese have been displaced.

There have been reports by Amnesty International, Oxfam, and the Sudan Council of Churches detailing atrocities committed by both the Sudanese government forces and the SPLA. Members of the Dinka tribe, the south's largest ethnic group, have been the victims of much of the abuse, including being taken into slavery by pro-northern forces.

The SPLA, backed by Marxist Ethiopia, is not without its own serious human rights violations, including cutting off

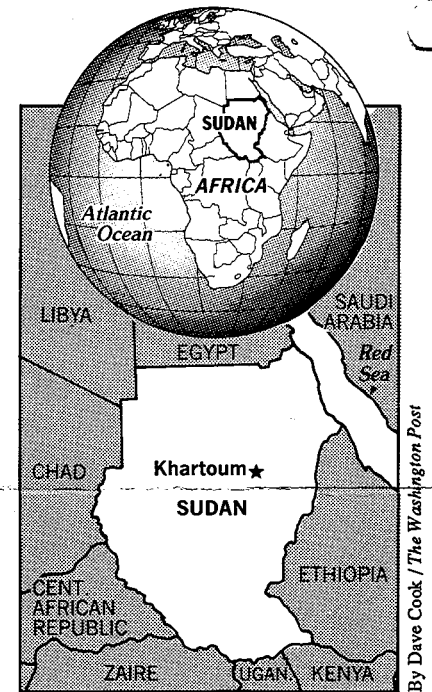
food supplies to government-held towns, as well as imprisoning individuals or forcing them into military service. It has recently been reported that Pared Taban, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Torit, a town in the south, has been held under "house arrest" by the SPLA.

Recent developments, however, give some hope for an end to the war and famine. The Sudanese government and the SPLA have agreed to allow

relief aid into the south. Food and assistance is being provided via designated air and land routes by church and government relief agencies.

In Khartoum, there has been a political shake-up, and Prime Minister Mahdi now heads a new ruling coalition that does not include the National Islamic Front. Does this mean that the Khartoum government will drop its policy of a nationwide *sharia*? Possibly. In early April the Sudanese government put forward a peace plan that includes a cease-fire and the suspension of *sharia* implementation until a national conference can be held. John Garang of the SPLA has called the new government's proposals "a step in the right direction," and has recently proposed his own conditional cease-fire.

Sudan is a case study of how religion, rather than acting as a unifying or reconciling force, can make an existing conflict more explosive. Like most deep-seated hostilities, the Sudanese civil war is not likely to end quickly or simply. Certainly, the scars of the war will take years to heal. In the meantime, Christians in the West can continue to provide humanitarian assistance to all factions in Sudan. And we can encourage all parties, through negotiations, to find ways to respect and tolerate one another's religious convictions.



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policies. Moreover, big government in the less-developed countries has often meant corrupt government: foreign aid from the First to the Third World has frequently fattened the coffers of government elites instead of feeding hungry children.

Why does the oldline stubbornly promote big centralized, government-led development schemes and international wealth redistribution strategies, when evidence is so clear that they do not best assist the poor. The answer lies in theo-

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logical and ideological selectivity. The oldline misinterprets biblical passages enjoining believers to give *voluntarily* as if they were a mandate for government policies (like increased taxation) that *compel* redistribution. The oldline's theology also overlooks important biblical themes that bear on economic matters, such as the prudence of limited forms of government in a world inhabited by sinners. Moreover, the oldline advocates redistribution because it believes biblical "justice" requires an "equality of outcomes." But as Michael Novak has commented, "The Jewish and Christian views show that God is not committed to equality of results. One steward differs from another in his performance; some virgins are wise, some foolish." In sum, the biblical principles the oldline extracts lead it into an ethical cul-de-sac where capitalism must be abandoned, and some form of socialism seems the only route out.

The oldline retains its bias toward socialism by keeping uninformed of (or stubbornly resistant to) the devastating critiques levied by economists, sociologists, demographers, historians, and development practitioners against it. Indeed, the oldline has dismissed not only the critiques circulated in the United States by such notables as Nicholas Eberstadt, Robert Benne, Peter Berger, and Michael Novak, but has also closed its ears to voices from the Third World demanding an end to socialism and encouraging the development of free markets: people like George B.N. Ayittey of Ghana, Hernando de Soto and Mario Vargas Llosa of Peru, Octavio Paz of Mexico, and Pablo Antonio Cuadra of Nicaragua. Put in simplest terms, throughout the developing world socialism has been tried and found wanting; capitalism has been tried and found largely successful -- albeit in differing degrees. To date, the oldline seems to have ignored that message.

Fortunately for the poor, the oldline's perspective on development is not the only one available to Christians concerned about the poor. A group of Evangelical Christian theologians, economists, and development specialists recently formulated the "Villars Statement on Relief and Development," which offers guidelines for development efforts and lists concerns about present approaches. Among

those concerns were several that struck at the oldline's development philosophy. The Villars statement criticized:

- The attempt to synthesize Marxist categories and Christian concepts, to equate economic liberation with salvation;
- The emphasis on redistribution of wealth as the answer to poverty and deprivation without recognizing the value of incentive, opportunity, creativity, and economic and political freedom;
- The attraction to centrally controlled economies and coercive solutions despite the failures of such economies and their consistent violation of the rights of the poor.

The Villars participants argued that the best development approaches will emphasize the role of the market, respect for private property rights, limitation of state involvement, respect of family rights, and evangelical proclamation and discipleship. They encouraged Christian development ministries to address *internal* causes of poverty -- such as destructive cultural patterns and values -- in addition to external causes of poverty, such as oppressive political or economic regimes. In *Freedom, Justice, and Hope: Toward a Strategy for the Poor and Oppressed*, a book resulting from the Villars gathering, Herbert Schlossberg lamented that church statements have too often neglected personal values such as attitudes toward work, family, the future, respect for private property, savings, investment, risk, stewardship, and consumption, that significantly influence economic performance.

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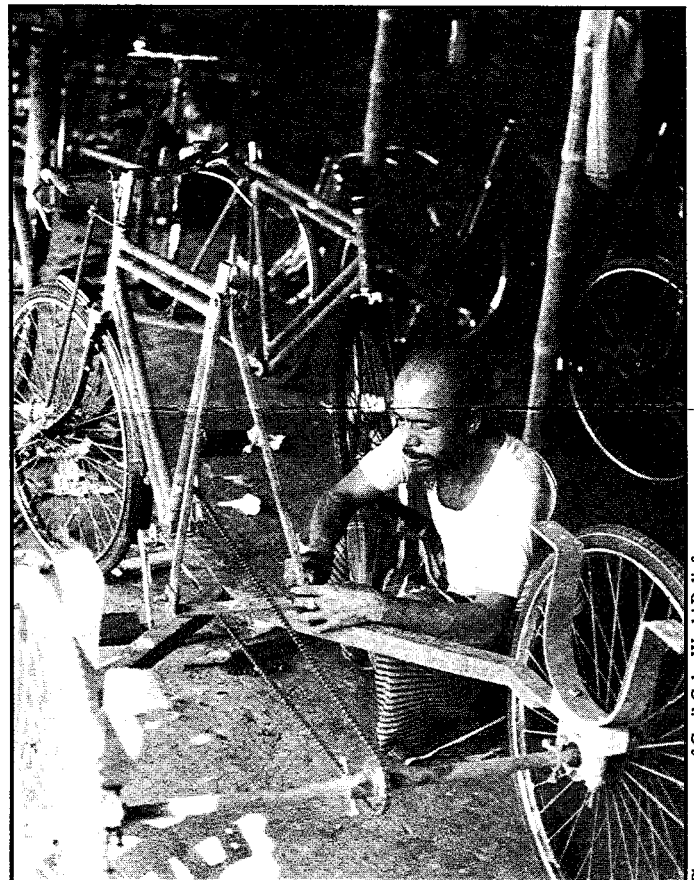


Photo courtesy of Cecil Cole, World Relief

An entrepreneur in Bangladesh builds rickshaws as part of a cooperative development project between Transformation International and World Relief.

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Some Christian development ministries patterned on the Villars philosophy are already in place. For example, Transformation International, a Washington, D.C.-based ministry, works through Christian "partner" agencies in the less-developed countries to establish revolving loan funds that assist poor people in beginning their own small, income-generating enterprises. Church-related organizations administer the funds and provide supportive services and training to the new entrepreneurs. The poor are given the opportunity to provide for themselves and their families and are responsible to pay back their loans over time to provide capital for new families. This approach -- emphasizing individual responsibility coupled with a commitment to the local community, putting decision-making power in the hands of the local church people, emphasizing stewardship, honesty,

hard work, and prudent investment -- conforms to biblical principles and is lifting individuals and families out of poverty, enabling them to become self- and church-supporting.

Jesus once commented that we would always have the poor with us, and American Christians will certainly continue to confront desperate needs throughout the Third World. Our response must be biblically motivated as well as empirically informed. We must encourage those economic arrangements which have proven most effective in caring for the poor. Our Christian faith calls us to do no less.

-- Amy L. Sherman

Miss Sherman is the Program Officer at the James Madison Foundation. For an extended exploration of these themes, see the author's forthcoming essay, "Christians and Development" in *This World: A Journal of Religion and Public Life* (Fall 1989).

From the Director's Desk

It is with great pleasure that the Institute on Religion and Democracy announces the new Director of its Episcopal Committee on Religion and Freedom -- Dr. Lawrence Adams. Dr. Adams joined the IRD staff as an International Affairs and Economics Associate in mid-April.

Dr. Adams most recently served as an analyst for the minority staff of the U.S. House of Representatives Budget Committee, with responsibilities in the areas of international affairs, defense and education policy.

He received his M.A. in 1984, and his Ph.D. in 1987, from the University of Virginia, with a dissertation on "European Security Negotiations and National Strategies: U.S.-Soviet Negotiating Patterns Toward a European Security Regime." While a student, he taught courses on foreign policy and political theory. His B.A. in Political Science is from the University of Richmond (1975).

Dr. Adams is a member of the Falls Church (Episcopal) in Falls Church, Virginia. From 1976 to 1982 he served on the staff of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, and was Area Director for Virginia for the latter three years. He and his wife, Beth, live with their three children in northern Virginia. The Adams have a warm Christian commitment and are very excited about joining the IRD for this important work in the Episcopal Church.

-- Kent R. Hill

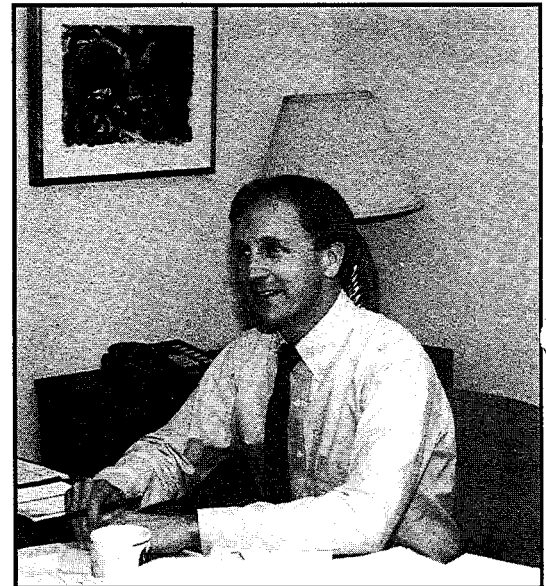


Photo by Stan DeBee

Dr. Lawrence Adams, the new director of IRD's Episcopal Committee on Religion and Freedom.

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