

RELIGION & DEMOCRACY



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NCC Mission Studies: Same Old, Same Old

Messy realities too much for imposed ideology in Caribbean guide

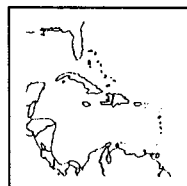
by Alan F. H. Wisdom

The Caribbean: Culture of Resistance, Spirit of Hope. From the title of this new mission study from the National Council of Churches (NCC), the reader would expect another stirring rendition of liberation theology -- this time in Caribbean accents. What we find instead is a mass of contradictions.

This set of NCC materials contains plenty of liberationist hyperventilating, be sure. The overview essay proclaims bombastically the "resistance" and "hope" to which the title refers:

The culture of resistance, characteristic of our Caribbean people for over five hundred years, has become today the spiritual factor that opens the possibility of surviving yet another imperialistic onslaught -- of overcoming the present war of total extermination waged against the impoverished people of the world by the contemporary international economic order and international political system.

But messy realities keep breaking in and contradicting the rhetoric. Some of the contradictions come unavoidably from the topic chosen. The Caribbean is not going to fit neatly into any ideological analysis. The countries spread along its island chains range from Cuba -- 700 miles long, with a population of ten million, dominated by a communist dictator, at the center of geopolitical conflicts from the 1960s through the 1980s -- to St. Kitts and Nevis, a peaceful little democratic backwater of 40,000 souls. The peoples of the Caribbean represent a mosaic of ancestries: African, European, East Indian, and Amerindian. They have experienced colonial rule by Spain, Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United States. Any
→ see *Caribbean*, page 2



The Caribbean

Global economy workbook, WCC study guide can't see path for the poor

By Fredrick P. Jones

Learning about economics can be difficult. While we make decisions as stewards every day, it often feels as though just beyond those basics lies a mysterious parallel universe of statistics, institutions, and perfect-world theories. Its comprehension seems beyond the capacity of all but a few. And those few, professional economists, seem about as good as palm readers when predicting the future.

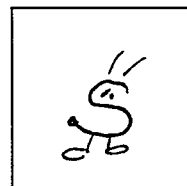
The National Council of Churches (NCC) wants to help people see global economics from a faith perspective. One of its 1993 mission studies, *Global Economics: Seeking a Christian Ethic*, by Ian McCrae, is styled as a beginner's workbook raising "new questions with

no easy answers" and helping people decide if they "want to be part of the problem or the solution."

McCrae proposes at the start a mode of discernment, first about reading the Bible and second about reaching decisions to act. Linking Bible reading (which requires distilling meaning down to broad, visionary "Biblical pointers") and contemporary issues (which require some form of response) are connecting principles called "middle axioms." These axioms are less directly theological and more like public philosophy, thus setting a framework for policy.

For example, "A middle axiom is that an economic system should not support a technology of practice that unduly pollutes the atmosphere or wastes the earth's resources." Though such connecting principles are necessary, how McCrae developed his specific axioms from the "pointers" is far from clear.

The workbook then goes on to identify economic
→ see *Economy*, page 6



NCC Mascot

The Caribbean and the global economy are this year's NCC mission studies. See page 8 for alternative resources for personal or group exploration of the same themes.

Knippers Named President of IRD

Diane L. Knippers was named in July as the new President of the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD). She succeeds Kent R. Hill, who resigned earlier this year to become the President of Eastern Nazarene College in Quincy, Massachusetts. Knippers has served on the senior staff of the Institute since 1982, most recently as its Vice President.

"Under my leadership, the IRD will remain committed to democracy, religious liberty, and to the proper role of religious institutions in public life," Knippers said. "The world situation has changed dramatically since the IRD was founded 12 years ago, and we take great satisfaction in viewing the progress of freedom around the world -- and especially in

the role that churches have played in these democratic transitions.

"Nevertheless," she continued,



Photo by Miriam Kilmer

Diane L. Knippers

"serious threats to democracy remain and are indeed growing. Not the least of these is the cultural situation of the United States. Democracy requires a virtuous citizenry, committed to the pursuit of the common good and defense of individual liberties. Yet contemporary American culture increasingly emphasizes autonomous and individualistic rights over social and civic responsibility, celebrates

immorality, violence, and license, and evidences increasing hostility toward vital religious faith.

"A primary audience for the IRD's work," she continued, "is the Church. We believe that the Church has a central and essential role to play in sustaining democracy, while we believe that democracies best nurture and protect religious freedom."

Knippers is a long-time church activist and commentator on U.S. church and ecumenical bodies. Before coming to IRD, she was the Associate Executive Secretary of Good News, an evangelical United Methodist renewal movement. Knippers received a Master's degree in the Sociology of Religion from the University of Tennessee in 1974, and is a 1972 graduate of Asbury College. She is a member of the Vestry of Truro Episcopal Church, Fairfax, Virginia.

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generalization about a region so diverse becomes risky.

Another source of contradiction is the variety of the NCC's materials themselves. Three sections of the main study book represent the pro-Castro pieties of Cuban ecumenical officials. But three other sections come from the more cautious pen of Dale Bisnauth, the Guyanese Minister of Education. In addition, two sections consist of statements by Caribbean ecumenical meetings at Kingston and Verdun -- often glib in their "prophetic" denunciations of outside imperialism, but also frank in their confessions of shortcomings by Caribbean peoples themselves.

All the NCC authors apparently accept the ideological vision of "impoverished people" joined in "resistance" to "imperialism." Some proceed more recklessly to generalize from that vision, while others subtly undercut the generalizations as they note inconvenient facts. It turns out, for example, that "resistance" has not been a strong characteristic of Caribbean peoples. On the contrary, since before Columbus the inhabitants of this crossroads region have been remarkable for their cultural adaptability. The Verdun Proclamation speaks of the Caribbean genius in fashioning a "conglomerate heritage" out of "the dynamic cross-fertilization of all the world's major races." It would therefore seem futile to insist, as many NCC authors do, that cross-fertilization must cease and that the new "onslaught" of U.S. and European influences must be rejected totally.

An alert reader also notices that the "war of total extermination" by liberal democratic capitalism turns out to be rather less nasty than it sounds. The "Caribbean scrapbook" contains a chart revealing that most Caribbean nations are not starving. On the contrary, they fall somewhere in the middle range of world incomes: nowhere near as wealthy as the major industrial powers, but several times richer than many Asian and African countries. And the Caribbean economies are currently growing -- with the exceptions of Cuba's and Haiti's, which are the most isolated from the "international economic system."

Politically, too, many Caribbean peoples have some blessings to count. Of course, there is much ugliness in their past: the often brutal subjugation of indigenous peoples by the European imperial powers, the subsequent enslavement of Africans on the sugar plantations, and later bloody struggles for independence. Nevertheless, democracy has emerged more recently in most Caribbean nations. The former British colonies have inherited a democratic tradition, and the movement toward democracy throughout Latin America now affects the Caribbean as well. (Cuba and Haiti are, again, the principal exceptions.)

The Verdun Proclamation notes with gratitude that "political independence has been achieved in the majority of the Caribbean countries and political power is in the hands of the people." Yet none of the NCC authors draws the obvious conclusion that liberal democratic capitalism

may have benefits for the Caribbean. Perhaps the goal for Caribbean society should not be some kind of semi-socialist autonomy, as the NCC study suggests, but a dynamic interdependence within the community of Western democracies.

Christian Mission Reduced to "Development"

The NCC materials present a striking paradox: They are produced by a church council that bears the name of Jesus Christ, and they are intended for people who are called Christian. But Jesus Christ figures hardly at all in the



Cuban President Fidel Castro, still apparently revered in NCC circles, shown as he arrives at the Ibero-American summit in El Salvador last month. Gregg Newton, RNS/REUTER

study materials. This is true despite the fact that millions of Caribbean Christians show a vibrant faith in an active God who intervenes in history and in their lives.

The NCC study does contain some discussion of religion as one aspect of Caribbean society. There are hymns in the supplemental books, as well as Bible verses to illustrate liberationist themes. But the stress does not fall upon the story of Christ or Caribbean peoples' faith in that story.

Instead the main interest is directed toward an agenda of social and economic change. Bisnauth speaks of "development" becoming "the new name for mission" in both the U.S.-based NCC and the Caribbean Council of Churches. This new focus, he implies, is far superior to old-fashioned "pietism." The new "Caribbean Theology" favored by the NCC is defined in entirely de-supernaturalized terms: "Caribbean theology aims at producing a new Caribbean person with a more healthy self-concept. This Caribbean person will have a more positive approach to self-development and community development...."

The Kingston ecumenical declaration even implies a subordination of the church to leftist political movements: "Recognizing that the churches do not play the dominant role in building a new society, we support the role of people's organizations and other groups which join in the struggle for human dignity and vital social change." How could the Church forget that it is called to be the first fruits of the Kingdom of God?

When the NCC materials do look at Christianity, they are often surprisingly hostile. Early missionaries are condemned for preaching "a gospel of submission" to slavery and colonialism. More recent Caribbean Christians are criticized for being insufficiently revolutionary, as well as overly receptive to U.S. religious influences.

By contrast, the treatment of non-Christian religions is

remarkably favorable. The Rastafarians, who still worship the late Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, are praised for their "spiritual genius." That Rastafarian teachings are false, and that they mislead multitudes of poor people, does not seem to matter to the NCC authors. What matters to them is that Rastafarians take a politically-correct stance in favor of "reversal of the present social order."

Eloisa Thanks God for "the Revolution"

Although the NCC authors are quite clear about the social order that they oppose, they are much less clear about what sort of social order they advocate. The Verdun Proclamation speaks of a utopian "economic democracy" in which individualism and greed are eliminated. This appears to be a form of socialism, modified by a "small-is-beautiful" philosophy. It has one major disadvantage: it has never been practiced successfully in the Caribbean (or elsewhere).

Among existing regimes in the Caribbean, Fidel Castro's Cuba comes out looking by far the best. A children's story takes NCC pro-Castro advocacy to a new and disturbing level. The story tells of a Cuban girl named Eloisa who tries to reconcile her Christian faith with her support for the many good works of "the Revolution." The tension comes from the fact that the teacher and other students "do not like Christians" and harass Eloisa. (The story does not hint that this widespread dislike of Christians might be the result of a deliberate policy of the communist government.)

Eventually, however, the teacher and students realize that "Christians just want to help people and that is the same as the Revolution." (The story does not mention that the Lordship of Christ is not the same as Castro's dictatorship.) Eloisa is elected as the president of her class, and all problems seem to be solved. (No mention is made that Christians still face restrictions and discrimination in Cuba.) Our young Christian socialist then closes with a touching prayer: "Dear God, thank you for my school because many poor children before the Revolution did not have schools. Thank you for my classmates who respect me. Thank you for my church, and thank you for my parents."

A rational observer might ask: Why does the NCC publish this nonsense? Why does it persist in these tired, simplistic evocations of the evils of imperialism and the glories of "the Revolution" and the need for a "new theology" to build "the new society"? Why does it persist when its more honest authors contradict themselves by citing facts that undermine the whole ideological construct?

Perhaps the most painful contradictions lie not in the Caribbean but in the NCC. Perhaps it still indulges its habit of liberationist rhetoric because it knows no other way to satisfy its deepest urge. The NCC is desperate to play the "prophet." Only the radical leftist rap has the requisite hard edge; theological orthodoxy and responsible social criticism seem dull by comparison. So the NCC continues to sing the same old tune even as it grows ever more off-key. Let us pray that our ecumenical leaders soon learn a new tune.

Mexican Protestants Appeal to Stop Persecution

Local threats counter national trend

By Alan F. H. Wisdom

On May 26, some 500 Protestants (or evangelicals) marched through the streets of the town of San Cristobal de las Casas, in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. On their shoulders they carried the coffin of Vicente Mendez Velazquez, whose body was discovered the previous day dumped in a cave. He was murdered as a result of inter-religious strife.

Mendez, a Presbyterian elder, disappeared on April 2 when he returned to his native village of Joxojomcacal. Along with some 580 other evangelicals, Mendez had been expelled from the Tzotzil Indian community in 1989. The tribal elders had demanded that the evangelicals return to Catholicism or else leave town. When the evangelicals refused, they were forced to flee to a refugee camp near San Cristobal. As a compromise, they were eventually permitted to sell their lands back to the municipal authorities. Mendez had gone back to collect money due to him for his land. He never returned to his wife and nine children.

Mendez is not the only evangelical to die in this manner. Another Presbyterian elder and Tzotzil, Martin Sanchez Vazquez, disappeared under similar circumstances last December 18. He, too, is presumed to have been

murdered. In June 1992, Presbyterian lay preacher Melecio Gomez was martyred in another Chiapas village. His attackers shot him and then hacked his body with machetes, as two of Gomez's children

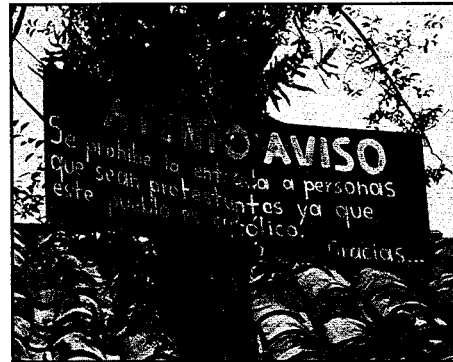
watched. The killers have yet to be arrested.

The evangelicals marching in San Cristobal were protesting against more than just a few isolated incidents. There has been a decades-long pattern of persecution -- especially in the Indian communities of southern Mexico. Since the 1960s, over 20,000 evangelicals have been driven from their homes. They have become permanent refugees in new all-evangelical resettlement communities.

In many cases, the evangelicals' flight was precipitated by mob attacks. Under the influence of local officials, the inflamed crowds of Catholic Indians would burn the Protestants' churches, destroy their homes, beat them, and chase them out of town. In June, some 20 evangelicals were jailed in San Juan Chamula, Chiapas.

The new element in this situation is that Mexican evangelicals are beginning to protest publicly against the abuses. For many years they were so few in number, and the Mexican government at all levels was so unresponsive to either domestic or international pressure on human rights issues, that evangelical leaders figured that they would only get themselves in more trouble if they complained.

But the evangelicals have been emboldened by a change in the religious climate in Mexico. In 1991 the Mexican Constitution was amended to remove longstanding anti-religious provisions. For the first time since 1917,



Sign outside a village in Mexico's Puebla State: "... Protestants are prohibited from entering, as this is a Catholic village. Thank you." An evangelical church there has been destroyed three times over several years. New Network International/C. Woehr.

Mexican churches were recognized as legal entities, with the right to own property, to run religious schools, to have access to the media, and to conduct charitable activities. The new constitutional provisions guaranteeing religious freedom now offer firmer grounds for making a legal defense of persons suffering on account of their faith.

Simultaneously, the rising number of evangelicals -- they claim now to comprise up to ten percent of the Mexican population, and as much as 50 percent in Chiapas -- gives them additional political leverage. Mexican government officials, including President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, are now more willing to meet publicly with evangelical leaders.

The Protestants' problem, therefore, lies not so much with the national government as with its local affiliates. Particularly in Indian communities, the officials are attempting to maintain a social cohesion based on religious uniformity. Community obligations are frequently tied to local Catholic traditions, such as fraternities and festivals devoted to the saints and the Virgin. When evangelicals refuse to participate in such customs, they are often seen as anti-social. The conflicts that arise harken back to the period of the Protestant Reformation in Europe.

Mexican evangelicals are now publicly appealing above the heads of the abusive local officials. The National Presbyterian Church of Mexico supports a legal defense office in Chiapas. Under lawyer Abdias Tovilla, the office petitions the state government to protect evangelicals' land rights and to prosecute those who attack them physically.

The Mexican Presbyterian Church has also asked its foreign church partners to put pressure on the national government. "Since the political situation in Mexico makes it very unlikely that the government will confront the tribal mafias with law enforcement at this time, the only pressure that we believe can be effective is international pressure," said a statement by Presbyterian leaders. Mexican Methodist Bishop Raul Ruiz has been especially vocal in denouncing the persecution to international bodies.

U.S. church response to these appeals has just begun to

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mount. At the urging of IRD-affiliated Presbyterians for Democracy and Religious Freedom, the 1993 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) passed a resolution promising to intercede on behalf of harassed Protestants. Earlier, the PCUSA had sent \$10,000 for the relief of the evangelical refugees in Chiapas. In January, the World Methodist Council sent two top officials to visit in solidarity with Mexican Methodists. Some Catholic bishops in southern Mexico are working on a joint commission with Protestants to resolve the inter-religious disputes.

Observers of the Mexican situation make the point that this may be a particularly opportune moment at which to exert pressure on the Mexican government. President Salinas is very eager to see the North American Free Trade Agreement passed by the U.S. Congress before his term expires in 1994. Consequently, Salinas' administration is quite sensitive to pressures on matters such as human rights.

IRD members concerned about evangelicals in parts of Mexico may contact the Mexican ambassador: The Honorable Jorgè Montano, 1911 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20006

Human Rights Ideas Challenged

Vienna Hosts Olympic-like Meeting

By Habib C. Malik

An important milestone may have been reached in June to solidify the global advance of the human rights movement. The World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), succeeded in upholding the central principle of "universality" for human rights in the face of a well-organized opposition block led by China. Defenders of universality based their arguments on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted on December 10, 1948, and is arguably the 20th century's most significant international document.

An impressive group of official delegations representing every government member of the United Nations gathered in Vienna. Present also was an assortment of non-governmental national and international organizations (NGOs) involved in defense of human rights. Women's organizations were plentiful, as were indigenous peoples groups such as Guatemalan Indians, Middle Eastern Kurds, Tibetan Monks, and Kashmiri Sikhs, to name a few. Many were clad in their traditional dress as they passed out leaflets, held up posters, performed native dances, and chanted firey slogans. The World Council of Churches and a group of international Christian NGOs also participated and lobbied to preserve the status of religious freedom as a universal, fundamental human right.

It was truly the olympics of human rights. It has been 25 years since the last world conference was held in Tehran, and the fanfare then was considerably understated in comparison with Vienna.

From the start the battle lines were clearly drawn. Supporting the 1948 Declaration's universally applicable protections for individual rights was an imposing array of countries, prominent among which were the Western democracies led by the United States. Many Asian, African, and Latin American states were solidly part of the universality camp, as were nearly all the NGOs and the women's organizations. Standing in opposition to universality and arguing in favor of particularity and the relative nature of human rights were 12 main states comprising the world's remaining dictatorships and theocratic regimes: China, Syria, North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Pakistan, Vietnam, Cuba, and Burma.

After the Chinese lobbied to prevent the Dalai Lama of Tibet from attending the conference (Amnesty International hosted him instead for a speech in a tent near the convention center), came the insistence by the China group that NGOs be barred from the process of formulating the final communique of the conference; such work, it said, should be done only by government delegations in closed sessions. At this point the American delegation, led by former Senator Tim Worth and John Shattuck, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights, declared its full support of NGO participation in an open debate that led to a comprehensive statement of principles that would affirm universality. The U.S. delegation held daily briefings for the NGOs to try and enhance their involvement in the inter-governmental discussions underway regarding a draft statement.

In response to China's stalling tactics -- and its work to bracket all language in the communique making any reference to universality -- the United States on day five announced that if the China group wished to leave the conference, "that's fine with us." No one left, and henceforth the China group became more subdued and appeared satisfied to register mild dissension.

Delegates favoring the universality of rights put up a sustained fight on behalf of the principle that, without a comprehensive and binding set of standards for all, talk of human rights violations and all proposed actions to redress them would become meaningless.

Central to the universality perspective is the understanding that people are human before they are American, Chinese, or Russian; Christian, Muslim, or atheist; black, white, or yellow; male or female; eastern or western; rich or poor; developed, developing, or underdeveloped; European, Asian, or African; and so on down the list of secondary differences. Their inherent, shared humanity unites them in a common set of rights and duties, privileges and obligations, which transcend all subsequent contin-

gencies, particularities, and relativities.

The pro-universality majority rejected the China group's argument that universality is a veiled form of neo-cultural imperialism by the West, and that it violated the principle of sovereignty, thus creating a pretext for interference in the internal affairs of other states. The China group was successful, however, at blunting efforts to create new enforcement mechanisms for redressing rights abuses.

Shattuck of the U.S. delegation told *The Washington Post* that the final communique, while "constructive" and "forward-looking," was plagued at points by vagueness. It includes a paragraph qualifying the universality principle in saying that "the significance of national and regional particularities" along with cultural and religious factors had to be "borne in mind." Shattuck said the United States remained concerned about several things in the communique, including language that subjected free media to "the framework of national law."

The conference communique also affirmed a broader range of rights than previous U.S. administrations have been willing to support, including economic rights (often articulated as the right to development). Secretary of State Warren Christopher's address to the Vienna gathering left questions about whether the Clinton administration would encourage the Senate to ratify four UN treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Such treaties expand previous notions of rights to include what Jacob Weisberg of *The New Republic* called "social goods" that "are not inalienable rights in the Jeffersonian sense that they exist even when they are denied by governments and positive law."

What was interesting in Vienna was the China bloc's inability to rally a large number of the underdeveloped countries of the Third World to its cause. Although the issue of the relationship between development and human rights was hotly debated at the conference, it did not lead to a wholesale migration of developing nations toward the Chinese position. Also noteworthy was the outspoken support that universality received from women's groups -- including many from Islamic countries -- despite the fears of some that this might jeopardize the upcoming world women's conference to be held in 1995 in Beijing.

The intense networking that NGOs conducted throughout the conference foreshadowed increased international and cross-cultural cooperation in the future on matters of human rights. This in turn will strengthen the global human rights movement and bring further pressure on violator regimes. Suggestions have been made to hold the next world conference on human rights in 1998 on the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration.

Habib Malik is IRD's Middle East Associate. His father, Charles Malik, played an important role in creating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Fredrick P. Jones contributed to this report.

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concepts, systems, and issues. At the system level, McCrae does something typical of ecumenical writings: he makes arguments for both "command" (socialist/communist) and "market" economies, while saying that both are inadequate -- meaning that in practice they fall short of ideals.

Such an approach, while sounding fair (McCrae actually gives more credit to markets than usual in church publications), hides more than it reveals. Both command and market systems cannot be defined narrowly as economic; rather, they exist as *political economy*, sustained by a host of cultural norms and institutions. Such a picture could have led McCrae to contrast the bigger picture of life in command and market societies. The latter, in most cases, are far less oppressive and often create greater equity as they mature (not to mention pressure for more democracy). Plus, when markets are shaped democratically (as most of them eventually become) they have more incentives to confront environmental problems than do command systems. McCrae makes it sound as though people in command societies suffer primarily from lost incentive pay and mobility at work. In fact, they lose a great deal more.

McCrae should be credited for raising many necessary questions about what is required to shape open market exchanges in a just manner -- locally, nationally, internationally. The challenge here is great, since limited, democratic governments and their increasingly fluid societies are always playing catch-up to change: in organization, technology, values, etc. As McCrae and others keep telling us in different ways, Christians should not settle for a closed, blind faith in a neatly harmonizing "invisible hand." At the same time, keeping one "visible hand," the government, properly (justly) limited and accountable for its role also calls for a realistic faith -- which anti-capitalists in the church often have difficulty grasping.

On the international scene, McCrae represents fairly a free-trade perspective, along with arguments for protectionism. He raises the question evaded by many anti-capitalists and anti-free traders about whether the plight of the poor can be improved without creating real conditions for economic growth. The study rightly points out the hypocrisy of protectionist measures in the developed world (where gains from free trade have been great) that impede the path to development by poorer countries.

Yet what this path toward development might look like is not really explored in the workbook. The changes required, politically and economically, are not adequately addressed, despite the fact that there are abundant experiments in progress, including the changes in the formerly communist world: the shift from neomercantilism to capitalism, for example, in much of Latin America; and the distinct brands of state developmental capitalism in Asia.

Lessons from the world's market-oriented transformat-

Things are harder to see if one is preoccupied primarily with such pictures of disparities between rich and poor. From such a perspective it is easy to assert an injustice and start searching for causes (usually individualism and greed).

This process is more fully developed by a recent World Council of Churches (WCC) study booklet, *Christian Faith and the World Economy Today*. This work began through the Advisory Group on Economic Matters in 1988, and is presented, with study questions, as a work still in process.

Early on, the booklet traces the history of ecumenical thinking on political economy, which moved beyond calls

... the WCC cannot bring itself to recognize as good the limited role of government in shaping a country's economic life

for a "responsible society" to "a preferential option for the poor" to more recent notions of "sustainability" (development at a rate allowing for the renewal of physical resources). The booklet emphasizes the need to reform market economies, and strongly laments the way the Cold War supposedly "suppressed" the development of third-way alternatives to Marxism-Leninism and laissez-faire capitalism (experiments such as Czechoslovakia's socialism with a human face and Sandinista designs in Nicaragua).

The omissions and confusions in the WCC document are more striking than those in the NCC's workbook. For example, while the booklet also denounces protectionism in the developed world that restricts key developing-world exports, the document fails to discuss adequately the progress made in creating a free-trade regime through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Standing behind the GATT apparently is out of the question.

In the WCC study, poverty is first understood in relative terms, as in the unequal distribution of wealth around the world and within countries, and in larger trends that suggest inequality is deepening. The explanation for poverty is found structurally in the world economy, as rooted in "the unequal distribution of power which reinforces the gaps."

But other relevant trends also could be cited. For example, while the absolute numbers of people in poverty have risen, the proportion of people in poverty has *fallen*. While certain regions (Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Latin America) struggled badly in the 1980s, the overall trend of progress in poverty reduction over three decades continues.

The WCC study is little interested in positive trends. Mostly, it is happy merely to assert, using the same neo-Marxist, dependency-type thinking of years past: "... unless 'free trade' takes place between partners of comparable economic power it will inevitably increase the disparities of wealth and power between them. Left to itself, the market

can tear a society apart." If that is true, as the WCC argues, then its response makes sense: create an international framework to regulate nation-states, for without countervailing power the weaker will be dominated by the stronger.

But what if it is not the whole truth? By looking almost exclusively at what is said to harm the poor in the short run, the document fails to grasp what might help the poor in the long run. Basically, the WCC cannot bring itself to recognize as good the *limited* role of government in shaping a country's economic life, or the success of market-oriented, private sector development and open trade (within a framework, but not as a large regulatory system) -- even in raising living standards for the poor. Since the WCC can only see power plays and win-lose exchanges when countries are not at the same income/production levels, its bias is always away from economic freedom, despite the never-mentioned costs of such an approach.

The limitations of seeing the economy *only* through the eyes of the poor is clear in the relentless criticism of "structural adjustment" programs, the negotiations around which are conducted in tandem by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. These programs attempt to support macroeconomic and sectoral reforms, most often with the goals of reducing inflation, stabilizing the currency, and encouraging the opening and decentralizing of the economy. Reductions in some public expenditures are required, which affect most directly those employed in the public sector and those who are affected by program cuts. The WCC document, therefore, blames structural adjustment for deepening poverty, and usually describes the efforts of the IMF and World Bank as coercive, undemocratic, and working in the interest of developed-world financial institutions.

There is some important truth to the criticisms. Institutions such as the IMF and The World Bank are slow to learn and need to listen better to those affected by their negotiations with governments. But they are not as slow to learn as the WCC, which also ought to listen better -- or perhaps listen to more than liberationist voices of singular ideology.

The WCC booklet fails to note that the World Bank, for example, has lent funds for poverty reduction in connection with structural adjustment lending, especially in support of safety nets for the poor. Worse, the document fails to face the question of whether the poor can be really helped without structural adjustment. While poverty levels have risen in many places during the 1980s, it is far from clear that blame can be laid at the feet of structural adjustment. Further, the poor in countries that have maintained adjustment programs have fared better than those countries that have not (the exception being the poorest of poor cases).

The other tiresome point of neglect by the WCC is its targeting of capitalism as the source of all difficulty for the

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poor -- as if the struggle of the poor began in the capitalist era, and as if capitalist experiments were by any measure the worst ones for the poor in comparison with other systems now or in the past.

When capitalism's origins are noted, the WCC booklet rightly gives Adam Smith credit for seeing market exchange shaped toward mutually beneficial ends by a larger moral-cultural-political system. Yet later the booklet essentially blames markets for failing to account for a variety of social needs, and they are attacked for destroying the fabric of society. There are legitimate questions about the "marketization" of all things. But there are parallel questions about the weakness of other social forces and institutions necessary to shape the economy beyond the limited things that government can and should do. Perhaps the WCC ought to point the finger toward itself. Despite its romance with traditional cultures outside the West, the ecumenical church often seems like the foremost meeting ground of those who have sold out their moral and theological traditions in favor of modernity and postmodernity -- thus also undermining the ties Smith said were necessary to shape free exchanges into a win-win situation.

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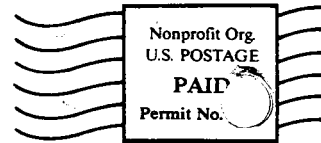
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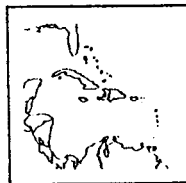


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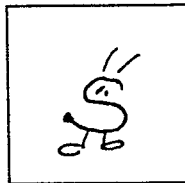
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Resources to use along with NCC Mission Studies:



- *The Caribbean*. For a more balanced view of the Caribbean, readers might try an excellent standard history: Franklin W. Knight, *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism* (2nd edition, Oxford University Press, 1990). Knight is neglectful of religious life, and he, like the NCC, gives too much credence to the claims of the Castro revolution. Nevertheless, Knight conveys far more nuance than the NCC authors even suspect. A challenging reflection on Christianity and society in the larger Latin American context is: Emilio A. Nunez C. and William D. Taylor, *Crisis in Latin America: An Evangelical Perspective* (Moody Press, 1989). Regarding human rights conditions in Cuba and Haiti, The Puebla Institute, 1319 18th St., NW, Washington, DC 20036, is an excellent source of information.



- *The Global Economy*. Readers can purchase from IRD the following two books: one, to get a handle on definitions of terminology used about economics and politics in the media and the classroom, is *Reading the World: An Integrated Reference Guide to International Affairs*, edited by Fredrick P. Jones (\$9.50, IRD, 1992); and, second, to get a picture of what development strategies best empower the poor is Amy L. Sherman's *Preferential Option: A Christian and Neoliberal Strategy for Latin American's Poor* (\$17.95, co-published by IRD and the William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992). For a general, highly readable account of economic ideas, a good choice to read is *New Ideas from Dead Economists: An Introduction to Modern Economic Thought* (Plume, 1990), by Todd G. Buchholz. Also, group study materials (program release #3) on responses to poverty are available from RENEW, the educational resource arm of the Evangelical Coalition of United Methodist Women. Write IRD for more information.
- *Reviews of previous NCC Mission Studies*. In past years, IRD has reviewed NCC studies on the Philippines, Japan, and Central America. These are available upon request.